

Frente de Trabalho

A series of counterpoints and semantic dualities arise in the first few elaborations on [Ícaro Lira's](#) *Frente de Trabalho* (“Labor Front”) exhibition (Jaqueline Martins gallery), starting with the ambiguous reading contained in the title. The term, used for an emergency measure created by the Brazilian government to aid groups of unemployed people, takes on an almost opposite meaning here. The notion of work remains central, but collective mobilizations depart from places and groups that are almost always on the margins of public policy. If by its original meaning the practice is sold as a solution – in the style of mottos like “Don’t talk about crisis, get to work” – in this case its conditions may indicate the cause of structural problems that such a dictate aims to combat.

A good way to visualize these layers of reading begins with a search for the hashtag #frentedetrabalho. Although most of the posts were made by the artist himself, it is interesting to start out with a term that puts images with such disparate concepts side-by-side. For example, an aerial photo of the Trans-Amazonian Highway (1968-1974), a controversial project that decimated thousands of indigenous people and exposed its approximately 4,000 workers to all kinds of diseases, which was posted by Lira next to the announcement of people selected for a Frente de Trabalho workforce by a municipal government in the interior of São Paulo. Or another image of a town councilman announcing that he has requested the program for his municipality. “We need to create more opportunities for the less fortunate, the unemployed and those in situations of high social vulnerability,” says the caption. Despite the propagandist tone of these pieces, seeing them next to the images inserted by the artist creates an interesting amount of noise. Instead of optimistic discourse, they involuntarily reveal the precariousness of working conditions as a strategy to combat the crisis – precisely the opposite of what they aim to defend.

The example of the hashtag to introduce the *Frente de Trabalho* exhibition is not at all by chance, taking into account Ícaro Lira’s artistic performance, which is almost always developed from collaborative practices and action across networks. Limiting analysis to the object materialized in the exhibition space, or to the very concept of a solo show, seems inadequate in view of a body of work whose process matters more than the final result, particularly shortly after the completion of a project like “Museu do Estrangeiro” (“Foreigners Museum”), at the recent 20th Sesc_Videobrasil Festival, in which he decided to forgo production as author of the works exhibited there, instead taking on the role of interlocutor and legitimating a group of immigrant artists, excluded from that institutional space by so many layers.

Although this show does not present works signed by other artists, the idea of a work-in-process is clear in the installation, which transforms the gallery space into a “production site”, as Gabriel Bogossian described it in the curatorial text. Pieces of plywood used on construction sites are brought in to make up one of the axes, while objects and images collected from within their movements give indications of their various possible actions in exchange for subsistence – from fish nets to piano movers. The notion of a living archive, another proposal inserted in Lira’s research, also takes on strength in the small library mounted on another axis, mixing the artist’s

publications with reference books, some of them indicating the origin of other works present there.

Among the various readings on the idea of work suggested here, there is room for interference in the view of how this activity is treated on the art circuit. One subtle example appears in a dismantled milk carton, where in Italian it reads “prodotto non commerciabile” – an item collected from donations for the disadvantaged. The text on the box brings some noise to the object no longer marketed in its original function, as the message alerts, but now as an art object.

If some of these works may sometimes appear disconnected from Lira’s practice when viewed in isolation, two videos play a fundamental role in contextualizing it more broadly, particularly FILME FRENTE (“FRONT FILM”), created with Isadora Brant and Fernanda Taddei. The work presents a sensitive portrait of squatters at the Hotel Cambridge, in downtown São Paulo, where Lira was one of the participants of the Cambridge Artist Residency in 2016. In documentary format, the characters appear in videotapes shot in frontal view, facing or looking away from the camera, almost always in silence. Pauses are broken by subtle gestures or very private comments about each one’s identity – such as the Paraguayan woman who speaks a few words in Guarani to her daughter, claiming that this is her official language.

The theme of the work also appears in the words spoken by two residents who talk about their activities almost as something essential. One of them presents himself by saying “I work as a carpenter from Monday to Saturday”. Another says he is responsible for maintaining the building and providing services to the city government “from seven to four in the afternoon”. In the midst of this quasi-etymological series from this practice assembled by Lira, the two statements give a precise account of the temporal dimension of the work and micro-entities that form and dissolve at the punch of the time clock.

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Translated from Portuguese by Zoë Perry.