

Luiz Camillo Osorio in conversation with Jaime Lauriano

1 – What was your education like? At what point did you realize that there was no turning back and that art was your destiny?

I started to become interested in art, at least this concept of contemporary art, when I was in my early 20s. When I was a kid and a teenager, I was interested in thinking about the world through numbers. Perhaps through the influence of my grandfather, who was a mechanic and tram operator, or else, by understanding that a career in the field of the exact sciences would provide me with a quicker entry into the jobs market, and as a result I would be able to start helping to support the family finances as quickly as possible, because my parents split up when I was very young and the situation at home became very difficult for my mother to deal with on her own. So I went to study at a technical college specializing in electronics. And so my first formal jobs, from 16 to 20 years of age, were as an assistant and electronic technician in communications and computer companies.

My entry into the field of arts happened in a kind of funny way, almost by fate. I was very frustrated with the direction my life was taking. I had just been fired in very unpleasant circumstances, and I decided it was time to look for other fields of action and ended up going to an NGO that ran extracurricular courses for children and adolescents on the outskirts of Barueri. As I lived near this NGO and there was a vacancy for a teacher that combined the plastic arts and technology, I started giving classes there. I worked at this NGO for 1 year and the whole process was very turbulent, because I had no control and no experience with the plastic arts, let alone pedagogy.

That's when I decided it would be interesting to study some of these fields in greater depth. As the University Center of Fine Arts of São Paulo had a really special offer for the remaining places on its entrance course, I decided to enroll on the visual arts course and see if that field interested me. Initially I didn't think I would stay long, and that the next semester I would study economics at USP. But in the second semester of the course I realized that I really wanted to work with art, and I stayed there for over 5 years (between comings and goings).

During this period, I had a very intense training, which included some very good classes, and endless discussions with classmates from different classes. Both my professors and classmates are still influential interlocutors in my work today, either criticizing the process and pointing out inconsistencies, or directly participating in the construction of the works.

2 – What were your main influences and what was the most difficult aspect of this process of insertion into the art circuit?

It is difficult for me to list the main influences, because I am continually building this constellation that guides me in this world of things that I decided to embrace. Sometimes a certain artist or subject becomes very important to me for a few years, and after a period of time they stop being so, or rather, they take on another significance in the light of other research. And in other situations, something, or someone, that bothered me a lot provokes me and I have to respond. But I'll try to focus here on the initial people, and situations, that influenced me at the start of my entry into the art world.

As I said in the previous response, my initial influences to persist with the difficult mission of inserting my research, and productions, into the art world were certain professors and college classmates. The teachers provided a means for getting to know the works of Brazilian artists, whose greatest concern, like mine, was Brazil. It was during this period that I discovered the work of Hélio Oiticica, of Lygia Clark and Cildo Meireles, who during the first years were the orientors of my research. Other teachers also introduced me to the Soviet cinema and to French cinema, specifically Dziga Vertov and Jean-Luc Godard, who appear periodically in my videographic work. My college classmates, who have largely become my friends, encouraged me to pursue ways of using elements outside of the art world. Since college, we formed a group of friends, who were largely educated in hip-hop culture, especially rap and graffiti. So, we always discuss how music and images produced within rap, dialog with the problems of the society that produces that music.

In the interaction between these two places of learning and the production of knowledge, I was building my desires to try to formalize the problems of Brazilian society, especially those that I perceived and felt within my body.

There were several difficulties at this moment of insertion into the art world, from not having many funds to produce my works, to the difficulty of gaining access to the various agents that compose the art world. However, at the start of my career, these difficulties served as a stimulus for the creation of strategies that challenged this world itself. Together with a group of friends, we created an independent art space, here in the city of São Paulo, called the Art Alley. It had several incarnations and addresses, but its function was to open up spaces for our work and the work of other young artists. This initiative has been very valuable for a generation of artists who were still at college or were recent graduates. We promoted everything from exhibitions, to cycles of performances and music. Everything was very experimental and there we would learn to work in all the fields of the art world. In addition to this, we were really shameless and invited other artists, critics, curators and gallerists to see the space and the works we exhibited there. It was a very important period, because I expanded my network of interlocutors and I had access to people that I didn't have before.

This youthful daring of ours, in creating and managing an art space, made the other agents from the art world start looking at other ways of promoting art. So, I believe that that initial difficulty motivated us to show that art did not exist only in established spaces. Without fully understanding it, we were not just working with an independent art space, we were building a work of institutional criticism. Since then, I have been working on identifying the difficulties/loopholes in the art world to create situations, and works, which expose the segregations and perversities of this world.

3 – Many of your works deal with the margins of history, with those who are left out, those who are excluded from the hegemonic accounts. Giving them a voice and visibility is more an ethical than an aesthetic principle. This premise is fundamental, but what makes this process specific to the field of art? How can you liberate poetry against the grain of information?

That's the big question I've been working on for the past few years and which I've been trying to answer with every new work. And I confess that I have not yet succeeded, and may never succeed, in reaching an answer that satisfies me completely. However, in the last 2 years I have been dedicating myself to studying aspects of Brazilian historiography and how it is intrinsically connected to colonialism and neocolonialism. This subject has permeated many of my current

works, because since I realized that I wanted to understand *Brazil* as a nation subject, I decided that I would focus my research on images produced by this subject. Or rather, I would focus my efforts on understanding the way this subject produced these images. However, as it was necessary to focus further on my research, I chose the period of slavery (and post-slavery) and the Brazilian military dictatorship, as key moments for understanding how the images produced by Brazil, the nation subject, affected the construction of Brazilian society.

So, I started to study the production of images that portrayed slavery in Brazil and how their diffusion occurred through Brazilian contemporary society. This research began when I came across some labels of products that reproduced images, in particular, by Debret and Rugendas, that showed black people working in situations of slavery, but without any contextualization of the violence of that form of work. The normalization of slavery that this form of circulation produced was very violent. This troubled me a lot and decided that I should reprocess and return these images to the field of art, so as to stimulate the circulation itself of these images at exhibitions which also did not contextualize the violence contained in the slave labor.

Finally, to try to respond more objectively, I believe that what makes this procedure, and others that I use, specific to the field of art is the fact that I use the history of Brazilian art to question how the production of images, or rather the circulation and diffusion of these images, can reify the segregations and violence contained in Brazilian society.

4 – I really like the work where you place the plaque "History ends in me" at the top of the staircase of the Vila Anglo Brasileira in São Paulo. It is a phrase that is both simple and enigmatic, a monument to the invisible, undervalued heroes of our daily lives with all their inequality. How was this work process and what led you to it?

It's very interesting to return to this work which dates from 2013. It was produced during a residence that I regard as a turning point in my work. The residence took place in an independent art space in the city of São Paulo, which before being occupied by art studios had several other uses, including as a hospital and a primary school. These multiple layers of histories, accumulated during the reformulations of the space, in addition to the geographic location of the residence, were points of departure for the construction of the work "History ends in me."

The building of the residence is located in the Vila Anglo Brasileira, a neighborhood that occupies a very specific geographic context, because the houses and small shops that occupy the neighborhood were built in a sort of gulley between the neighboring districts, Vila Romana and Pompei, which are today undergoing a profound process of real estate speculation. This very specific occupation of the urban fabric makes the Vila Anglo seem virtually invisible, even for some residents of the neighboring districts. The tense relationship between invisibility and the privileged location, make the future of the Vila Anglo uncertain.

For two months, I lived with this geographic context, with the residents and visitors to the neighborhood. In this almost daily coexistence, I began to understand the social dynamics that this uncertain future and the near isolation of the neighborhood brought to the lives of the people and to the new ways of occupying the neighborhood that began to emerge. This atmosphere motivated me to think that the Vila Anglo could embody a crossroads for history.

So, I decided to construct a bronze plaque like the plaques of historic monuments scattered across different cities in Brazil. However, rather than writing the names of political figures, war

combatants and other characters that the winners elect to be exalted as "heroes", I chose to engrave the phrase that gives the work its title: History ends in me. As you yourself mentioned in your question, the phrase is both simple and enigmatic, because we can interpret the word "ends", as the end of a certain situation, in this case, history; or, alternatively, we can read the word "end" as a place that holds/stores something, in this case, again, history. This multiplicity of meanings led me to choose this phrase as a way to elevate the whole Vila Anglo Brasileira as an urban monument that reveals the inequality that characterizes Brazilian cities. Because, every day the residents of the neighborhood experience the violence contained in the uncertainty of the continuity of their homes, because when they go to the neighboring districts they observe the frequent expansion of real estate speculation, which has already expelled many former residents from these neighborhoods.

That's why I chose the top of the staircase as the place to install the plaque. Because the long, steep staircase of the Rua Bica de Pedra, which connects it with Rua Pedro Soares de Almeida, in the neighborhood of Pompei, gives form to an urban reference full of stories, emotions and divergences.

5 – Another work that I would like to comment on is "Concrete experience". I'm interested in the way you appropriate a decisive reference from the history of Brazilian art and seek another materiality to reveal the concrete dimension of the experience – the dialog of hands, something so poetic and elusive in the image of Lygia Clark, becomes in your other references the silence of handcuffs and the bonds of exclusion. I see not a relationship of opposition between them, but facets of the same complex and ambivalent story, where libertarian gestures are mixed with gestures of oppression. How do you analyze your work?

The series of works "Concrete experience" comes out of research for the production of another series of works entitled "Calimba". During the years 2014 and 2015 I was researching newspaper articles that reported cases of public lynchings in several cities of Brazil. To my amazement, I came across a study conducted at USP, which warned of the fact that in Brazil there is, on average, 1 case of lynching per day. In their vast majority, these lynchings are recorded on photos and videos by passers-by who witness these acts of violence. So, in addition to filing the headlines of the articles, the initial object of my research, I also saved the images that illustrated the reports and the comments that the readers left at the end of the texts. Even though I didn't know why I was storing this information, I found myself cataloging comments and images in accordance with certain criteria, such as types of materials used to tie people to posts. This interest arose because, in certain cases, the improvised nature of the situation was evident in the use of T-shirts, bits of cord, ropes, to tie the hands of the "suspects"; but in other cases the tools (bicycle locks, plastic clamps, masking tape) that held the hands, revealed the premeditated nature of the acts. This difference in the construction of the instruments of domination/oppression also revealed the class differences present in the neighborhoods where the lynchings happened.

Some years later, and involved in other research, I again came across works by artists belonging to the Brazilian concrete and neo-concrete movement. When I once again saw the work "Dialogue of Hands" by Lygia Clark, I had an urge to revisit the file I had assembled with the images of the lynchings. And just as you observed in your question, even in showing two tied hands, the image constructed by Lygia reminds us of the freedom of a harmonious dialogue. However, on analyzing that image and the images from the file of lynchings, I realized that both produced a dialog, but the dialog between the hands of the "lynchers" and the

people undergoing the lynching, was not liberating. On the contrary, the relationship condensed in that image was one of oppression and perversity.

So, I decided to assemble a work that juxtaposed both dialogs, so as to bring to light how some everyday procedures, such as tying hands to form the symbol of the infinite, can be present both in works of art that seek to elucidate the possibility of building freedom out of dialog, and in images of violence that record the non-possibility of peaceful coexistence between different elements.

6 – What interests you most in your poetics – the construction of identity or the production of difference?

Wow, what a tough question. To answer you directly, I'm interested in moving between these two fields, to ultimately show how both are alike and antagonistic, and how they are so problematic and, at times, exclusive.

To illustrate this, I would like to cite a video that I produced in 2014. Its title is *Brazil*. In this video I studied the official propaganda of the Brazilian military dictatorship, especially the developments between the years 1969 and 1974 (not, uncoincidentally, the years of the hardline AI-5 decree). In these videos, what interested me was how the notion of the construction of identity, so strongly associated at that time with nationalism, was molded to show a Brazilian that was simultaneously multicultural and unified. The propaganda proclaimed a Brazil that had finally made peace with its history and roots, a country that had achieved the project of racial democracy. Together with this, the not "so official" propaganda created an opposing feeling, where the production of difference was accentuated not by integration, but rather by the construction of an enemy and non-fraternal "other". What interested me in this conservative reading of the construction of identity and the production of difference, was how the operation of symbols was used to establish a harmonious union, at the same time that the enemy was created. I ended up deciding to edit a video that showed these two sides of the same coin, constructing antagonistic positions from the same discourse.

I decided to select this example, because for me it contains something of what we are experiencing today. Our society, mainly, but not exclusively, its conservative portion, is seeking to construct an identity through the exclusion of all and any possibility of the production of difference. But in order to achieve its project of a crystallized identity, this same increasingly conservative society needs to produce difference in order to justify the elimination of the other, now transformed into its enemy. It is once again the Brazil of love-it-or-leave-it, but with new softer, more casual clothes, but no less violent or virulent for that.

But as I said previously, this is not limited to conservative movements. We can also find this, even if on an infinitely smaller scale, in the speeches of the identarian movements and in countries that promote multicultural policies. And here I include myself because if we are not careful, we can forget that to construct the possibility of creating an identity within, it is necessary for there to be a production of difference. But often we ignore the fact that this production of difference, which is fundamental to multiculturalism, can obliterate the fact that there is a hegemonic culture to subjugate the others.

Finally, for me, my poetics lie in an attempt to understand how these two concepts mold my body and my experience in the societies where I live and move.

I hope I've been able to answer your excellent questions and to convey to our readers this intense dialogue.