

## LUIZ CAMILLO OSORIO IN CONVERSATION WITH AVAF

**Dear Eli, dear AVAF (Assume Vivid Astro Focus). I think it's interesting to start off by using these names. Tell us a bit about how AVAF came into being. Are there any works by Eli prior to the emergence of this duo? When you work on your own is it just a question of individual production instead of working in partnership? Are there poetic differences between your work and that of AVAF?**

First of all, some important information about my background related to working collectively and using a pseudonym: I studied cinema and not art (despite having taken several art courses at Parque Lage). Unfortunately I graduated at the end of the administration of President Collor. Embrafilme no longer existed and nobody was making any films. I started to get interested in photography and moved to São Paulo at the end of 1991.

In São Paulo I enrolled on a course entitled "*Fotografia e a Lucidez Irônica*" ("Photography and Ironic Lucidity") (04/05 – 29/06/1992 ) with Rubens Mano at Oficina Três Rios. Rubens became my mentor: I was a student and then became his assistance. Some time after this, I did a kind of group show with him, Everton Ballardin and José Fужocka Neto: *Panoramas da Imagem* (Panoramas of the Image) (1992-1998). Through the Panoramas we organized discussions about the idea of photography that were expanded through exhibitions ("*Novíssimos*"- "Brand New"), lectures and workshops. At that time, discussions about photography were still very much limited to the medium itself and our aim was to broaden them to the visual arts (following the example of some artists: Rosângela Rennó, Paula Trope – the two were my teachers at Parque Lage, Rubens himself, etc).

In 1997 I began giving classes on the Photography 2 course to students in the final year of the plastic arts course at FAAP (Edu Brandão ran the Photography 1 course). On my course I decided not to limit myself only to photography but to talk about the plastic arts generally. An important part of my classes was monitoring the studio work with the students and I decided to evaluate any kind of work that the students brought me – not only photographic work. I began to realize that it wasn't just me who was influencing the students in our critical conversations about their work but that there was actually an exchange taking place between us; the students also "infected" me with their ideas. I then began to think about a "collective consciousness"; about people who did not necessarily live together creatively on a day-to-day basis, but who were connected by visions of the world and common beliefs.

In early 1998, I developed a series of "false" touristy post-cards of the city of São Paulo ("*São Paulo Turística*" – "Touristy São Paulo"). And for this series of works I created my first pseudonym: Diamantino. My aim with this series of works was that the postcards were not necessarily seen as "works of art" – I inserted them covertly into newspaper stands in the city and wanted them to circulate like "normal" post-cards – and that's why I used the pseudonym at that time.

At the end of 1998 I moved to NY to “study” photography at ICP (International Center of Photography): a mere excuse to leave São Paulo. It was the time of the Internet boom and I ended up focusing my course more on the Web. I ended up landing a job as editor of a website/calendar of artistic events. This was also a time of imminent conservatism: Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky, George Bush, 09/11. In parallel to this, in the world of the art, the cult of the “art star” or celebrity artist was exploding.

When September 11th happened, I lost my job and decided to devote myself once again to a more creative practice. However, I had already become completely exhausted with photography and wanted to explore other media. I began to draw again (a practice which I hadn’t pursued since adolescence) and to visit the image section of the New York Public Library. There I selected images of different subjects. I photocopied them and traced the images using acetate sheets. These images were then scanned and manipulated using Photoshop/Illustrator. It was at this time that I embarked on a process of frequently appropriating images of flowers, architecture, design, graffiti, works of other artists, images from Pop culture, etc.

At this time I again began to think about using a pseudonym. My first intention with the pseudonym was to work with other people (always friends) under a name that encompassed us all equally. Through the pseudonym I could also question authorship (challenging the “art star” status quo of the time and supporting collective work) and copyright (since my practice at that time was focused on appropriation).

I began to develop installations which involved the spectator on a sensual level. It was important that the spectator submitted to the work and that he/she became “one” with the installation. I also began to use color as an instrument for engaging the audience: color as a device for concentrating and diffusing energy, color as a universal language, color as a mechanism for unifying people. My aim was to create an inclusive and non-exclusive space; making the spectator part of the AVAF installation. The spectator was also the centerpiece in the conception of our projects. And the use of the pseudonym is an essential tool for ensuring his participation and submission.

The name ‘ assume vivid astro focus’ emerged from this. As I said previously, I had lost my job, I returned to a more creative practice and immediately decided to use a new pseudonym. In the process of developing this new pseudonym, I went to my favorite thrift shop near my home in NY, and a person who worked in the shop approached me and asked if my name was “ Astro ”. I thought it was very curious that someone should call me this given that it was not a common name. I was also intrigued by the different “pop” associations of the name: Astroboy (Japanese manga), Astro (the name of a dog from the Jetsons), Astroturf (a brand of synthetic grass), O Astro (a Globo telenovela from the 1970s), etc.

I decided that I would use “astro” as part of this new pseudonym and that I would mix it up with other words which somehow had some significance for my artistic practice. My idea was to create a somewhat “complicated” phrase which did not make “perfect” sense, and where people could easily confuse the order of the words. I wanted to somehow demand an “effort”. My

reference was “Exploding Plastic Inevitable”, an experimental “installation” by Andy Warhol combining music, film, dance and pop art.

At this time an exhibition of record covers was taking place at Exit Art – “The LP Show”, curated by Carlo McCormick. I was fascinated by the images on the sleeves but more specifically interested in the words, the titles of the albums, the names of the bands. I decided that I would go back to the exhibition to find other words that could combine with “astro”. My aim was to create a “contagious” meaning, a “call to order”, a phrase that touched on the idea of collective work and that other people could “adopt” this “vision of the world” (the “Truisms of Jenny Holzer, maxims inserted into electronic panels in Times Square in the early 1980s, were another important inspiration). And that is how AVAF/*assume vivid astro focus* emerged (always written in lowercase letters).

At the start of AVAF I adopted the position of a “one-person collective”. I have always worked/work as a kind of curator/director: depending on the different projects I was involved in I invited different friends of mine to take part. The form of participation always varied. With some friends/collaborators I “infected” them with ideas for the exhibition/project and waited for their reactive contribution. On other occasions, I found a specific finished work that I thought would fit into the context of the project and introduced this work into the AVAF exhibition. At other times (unfortunately more rarely) we worked together on the production of a work for this project. I also had a Utopian expectation that other people would begin to develop AVAF works without any connection to me, without my even knowing: a kind of benevolent virus creatively infecting the lives of different people around the world.

AVAF never had a fixed group of artists but I wanted to give the energy of the collective to our practice (it was never very clear who was part of the “group”) – again, one of the ways of questioning authorship and celebrity.

In 2005 I began work on a partnership with Christophe Hamaide-Pierson, a great friend of mine who I met when I went to NY in 1998. Christophe had moved back to Paris (where he was born) in 2000. We only began to work together 5 years after his move – we had never lived in the same city since he left NY. We worked “together” by email – our partnership practice was always extremely solitary in the day-to-day work of the studio. And we continued to invite other artist friends to collaborate with us.

Christophe was the only other person apart from me who was involved in all aspects of AVAF between 2005 and 2016 (when we “separated”). Nowadays we rarely work together but he also exists in a more “individual” form and develops AVAF projects without my participation.

Some years ago, soon after my “separation” from Christophe, I briefly experimented with using my name as an artistic name but I was unconvinced by it. I like the idea of using a pseudonym even when I am working alone – and of confusing the audience which never knows whether the work was done by one person, two or several. The spectator’s submission to the work is also an essential characteristic of my practice and the removal of the focus from the artist’s personality

is an important conceptual weapon for ensuring that this happens. The spectator has always been and will always be part of the AVAF “collective”.

**When I began to see your work, I think the first time was some 15 years ago here at the CCBB-Rio in an exhibition about carnival curated by Alfons Hug. Thinking about this popular festival and its oblique influence on the work of AVAF was a good introduction. I say this because I see an interesting dialog between AVAF’s artistic philosophy and this symbolic space of the festival, mixing vital energy and challenging norms. Where norms also have to do with instituted good taste. How do you view this?**

I must confess that we always rejected two labels linked to AVAF: carnival and psychedelia. Two labels which I consider superficial and “prejudiced” in the perception of our work. Having lived so long abroad, the critical connection with carnival was generally related to my nationality (“Brazil=carnival=color”). This honestly never made much sense to me because AVAF always incorporated people of different nationalities, not just Brazilians.

Another delicate aspect related to this subject for me is that art criticism always connected color/vibrant color to carnival in a, I would say, “prejudiced” way, as if the use of color was always associated with popular culture and was never a conceptual strategy. To be perfectly frank, I had doubts about taking part in the exhibition that you mentioned and in fact I only agreed because it was the first time I had shown my work in Rio, the city of my birth.

A complicating factor is that we did two “carnival” projects after this exhibition at the CCBB: our first solo exhibition in Brazil at the Galeria Casa Triângulo in 2006 and our participation at the 28th São Paulo Biennale in 2008. Tired of endlessly hearing the same label, we decided to adopt it and develop our own version of it (a common practice of ours): reject and then adopt, “developing” our own version of the stereotype imposed on our work.

In a, let’s say, reverse form, there is also a prejudice in the contemporary art world regarding popular art/culture, especially carnival. Our aim in bringing this reference inside a gallery/biennale was to cause discomfort within the status quo of the arts world which frequently seeks to represent itself as liberating.

Having said all this, yes, we do use “festival” at various times as another instrument of engagement with the audience, to guarantee its submission and make it one with our installations. As a historical reference, we were specifically interested in the club/disco environments of the 1970s/80s/90s. The festival served to encourage the public to activate the exhibition space and also to proclaim it their own. We were interested in the hedonistic qualities of the festival and the political power of awakening, through it, the awareness of its own pleasure and to encourage the spectator to fight for it. Freedom of expression, thought and desire were always present in our projects and festival always played the role of igniting these freedoms and their celebration. But it is important to remember that institutional spaces where art is shown are full of rules and restrictions, and all AVAF projects always undergo very intense periods of negotiation to get as close as possible to the realization of our ideas. The “festival” for example produced many “impasses” for these institutional environments and for this reason it

worked as another important activity in our practice of destabilizing the status quo of the spaces where art is shown.

**Another aspect I wanted to comment on, following up on the previous question, is the way in which your works address issues of gender, going beyond an identity problem to a transgression of the entire order of identity. Having explored this issue in your work for two decades, how do you regard the problem of gender in the visual arts?**

I think the best way to address this subject is to talk about how we use gender issues within our own work. Since the start we have used the figure of the transgender person as a symbol of transgression, of challenging the status quo. “Trans” has become a metaphor of our own disruptive artistic practice (questioning authorship, identity, copyright, institutional space, talking about homoerotic desire and violence/prejudice against it, about what is expected of an artistic practice, etc). We relate the phallic “hyper-feminine” to this practice of disruption. At a certain moment we also began to associate transgender with the idea of demolition – the demolition of the everyday, of the expected, of the traditional, of comfort, of identity and even of the city and its neighborhoods. Indeed, “trans” has become a symbol of the demolition of AVAF itself: in the last 10 years we began to remix, to “demolish” and reconstruct our own works – transgender became an allegory of our own artistic practice. Trans: the goddess of demolition and reconstruction, a liberating abandonment of identity, sexuality and the body. I think it’s really important to bring questions of gender into the visual arts but I think the impact of this type of discussion is somewhat limited when it’s restricted to the art world. In our work we’re interested in a more metaphorical approach but which nevertheless provokes thought and discussion about this issue. Unfortunately, the impact of the arts is very limited; we need more public and more inclusive environments to address everyday issues in a more effective way. Unfortunately artists often protect themselves in the “safe” environments of galleries and museums. Either way it is always necessary to discuss issues of gender and, regardless of the environment, it is invariably positive.

**I see a very strong dialogue between your work and tropicalism – obviously passing through the queer aesthetic of a Carmen Miranda and the impacts of tropicamp . How do you analyze this dialog and what are your other principal poetic influences and dialogs?**

Tropicalism was another label that was rejected (not as much as the others I previously mentioned) and “adopted”. At a certain moment, art criticism began to connect AVAF with Tropicalia – I must admit, prior to that it wasn’t a significant reference. The Tropicalia with which I most identified was that of *Os Mutantes* – an energetic, explosive and celebratory mixture of different musical references. As happened with the “Carnival” reference, we also decided to adopt it and propose a “counter attack” (part of our project for the 1st Athens Biennale in 2007).

But clearly many aspects of tropicalism have a direct connection to our creative process. Our concept of “infection” is extremely tropicalist and anthropophagic. The disruption of the status quo is another shared characteristic. Our appropriation of different references and the violent remixing of all this together (principally in our older works) is analogous to “Panis et Circenses”.

I believe I've already said a lot about these issues in my previous answers. There is, you could say, a creative connection despite never having used this relationship more "directly".

Whenever people ask me about influences, I always give the same response: influences change all the time for me. I connect with different influences through necessity and research, generally with specific objectives in mind. Influences also have different characteristics: sometimes they are visual, sometimes conceptual, and sometimes energetic. But one recurrent influence is the Vogue balls (not the magazine but the dance competitions documented in "Paris is Burning"). Since 2000 "Vogueing" has been an "energetic" reference for our projects. Vogue balls are attended by low-income, vulnerable, marginalized and socially oppressed queer communities, largely of Afro-American and Latin origin. These communities form groups known as "Houses" (such as the "House of Extravaganza") and encourage the protection and social engagement of their members. The balls (where different "Houses" compete with each other) create a "hyper real" atmosphere, a fantastical simulacrum of reality where the aim is to achieve respect and amazement through "fantasy" – a hyper real fantasy. This need to constantly surprise creates an atmosphere of maximum climax energy – based on the celebration of freedom. This overflowing, always zenith, apex energy is the most recurrent reference in AVAF projects.

**Reading the AVAF Manifesto, I thought it was very interesting when you stated that obsession, curiosity, generosity and anxiety are central elements of the artistic projects produced. These are highly original, affective and sometimes contrasting tones which you articulate and seek to deploy. Tell us more about this, because it touches on the heart of our time and possible openings within.**

I believe these four qualities are the reflection/drivers of our everyday practices in the contemporary world. The Internet has provided us with access to an infinite sea of research and knowledge. Smartphones and social networks bombard us with an unprecedented amount of information about the world and other people. We are obsessed with endlessly sharing our experiences. We want to know about everything all the time. We have become multi-focal and multi-connected. Our intellectual development is now multi-faceted and permeated by multi-tasking processes. Constant exposure to new and different information, every second, has broadened our range of knowledge and our capacity to absorb it. Indeed I believe it's helping us to develop a less linear and more spiral consciousness. But the absurd frequency of this absorption and the constant interest in "information" has also brought us much anxiety and obsession – emotions which unsettle us but which, on the other hand, we repeatedly use as a creative *modus operandi*. I think this "universal" intra-connection is important in enabling us to leave behind our egotistical worlds. It seems to me to be an indication of a more "human", more egalitarian, more generous, less individual, more hive-like, more collective future world. At the same time, all these characteristics may be contradictory, and there is a clear possibility of our sinking into an even more egotistical world. Perhaps my positive expectation is a little Utopian in relation to the Internet of connectivity – certainly our current moment has shown us the dark side of all this.

Our installations are a reflection of this world without silence and frequent explosions. However, the result which we expected to produce in the spectator is the calm we feel when encounter something that is intrinsically “ours” and which defines us. A constant inspiration for our projects is the contemplation of nature. I see our installations as a loving and energetic reflection of a peaceful, glorious, sunny day on a deserted beach, with an intense blue cloudless sky, the heat of the sun soothing your skin, the white sand cushioning your body, the transparent refreshing sea bobbing your mind, the sound of the wind making the brilliant green leaves of the palm trees gently rustle, the sound of the waves slowly coming towards us, the parakeets ceaselessly chattering. Our more recent works have sought a little more of this radiant contemplation, a maelstrom that leads us to silence. A return to nature? Perhaps.