PAINTING AS A QUESTIONING
Carlos Zilio

Translated by Ana Carolina Azevedo

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the making process of my painting. Since the historical feeling of the crisis of modernity, painting has always meant to me a manner of comprehending the amplitude and meaning of the said crisis.

KEYWORDS: painting, crisis of modernity, contemporary art.

In the second half of the 60s, the crisis of modernity in Brazil, already predicted by the end of the Brazilian Constructive Project in its Concrete Arts and Neo-Concrete Art versions, gained its definitive expression in the movement known as the New Brazilian Figuration. The premises of this production could be summarized into some general principles: execution impersonality, which implicated the possibility of reproducibility of the work and the questioning of its authority; the interaction between work and spectator; the non-hierarchy between high and low cultures, and the connection between arts and politics. My work of art rises inside this context, marked by these questionings that therefore were already found outside the logics of an ontology based in form.

The discussion that my work lived through in this period is that of placing itself in a culture that was entering — even peripherally — the scope of consumer society. Distancing myself from the interest by autonomy of form, what had become important was the presence of the image linked to a verb, as a source open for experimentation. The important thing was the potential of communications with the public and the possibility of activating the circuits of political relations, in a way to operate a manoeuvre of social de-alienation. In a second moment, already in the 70s, this experience begins to incorporate new sources that reverberate directly in the period's production and in my work. Duchamp displaced this debate and language to a more norm-defining field on putting the radical aspect of the question of art's own nature. On the other side, if the tradition of brazilian constructive art had already suffered a rupture, the endurance of its lesson remained and this time, Minimal and Post-Minimal will also relocate questions that renew the possibilities of phenomenological investigation.

Moments of this trajectory can also be detected in my work since this period. A lunchbox that, when opened, reveals a face overwritten with the word LUTE [Fight] on its mouth (1967); a so-called “businessman” suitcase that, when opened, reveals many metal nails (1973); or wooden structures over which rock blocks are balanced in tension (1976). These are three examples of the process I've mentioned. The experience one can obtain with my production between 1966 and 1976 is that of the delusion of modernity. From this point on, to me, it was a matter of understanding the broadness and meaning of this crisis, of analyzing its premises and canons, in a way I could extract from this discussion a pertinent historic relation. To do such, I’ve chosen painting, which was in the core of the crisis of art on account of having been modern and classic art’s paragone. Not by chance, all of Greenberg’s formalism concept has painting as its core. Above all, choosing painting was a demonstration that I understand its potential as a theoretical field capable of proportionate a critical and productive point of view, because of the said discussion.

This period of new challenges necessarily has to be thought from the referential point of view of my living in Paris from 1976 to 1980. In this respect, Paulo Venancio Filho makes an interesting comment: “Would the fact of vanguardist artists and political commitments being the starting line to Paris’ mystical pictorial tradition’s discreet presence (probably the last one since Eduardo Sued) be an irony of art? To find pleasure in an overdue artistic wager, in a unimpeded terrain of modern claims which must account for itself only, is to be considered compensation, payback or political delusion? To

Author’s note. This essay is partly made up from points made on many other critic texts on my works. It is based upon a talking I gave to the Ciclo de Palestras organized by Prof. Icléia Cattan and whose theme was A Pintura em Seu Campo Específico (Painting inside its Specific Field) at Fundação Iberê Camargo in 2010. It is a part of my CNPq research.

I have been present at some of the most important exhibitions from that period, such as Opinião 66 and Nova Objetividade Brasileira in 1967, both at MAM, Rio de Janeiro.

To read my works mentioned of abridged in this essay, visit www.carloszilio.com.

recognize common iconography so as to make it excessively strange. To finish an investigation is like finishing a game match. From that point on, another match is taken, that is to say, one that deals with the re-definition of new pictorial issues to be its goal. The next match would begin by the year 1987 and its spark was to take the blank canvas as the erased board of the previous iconographic excess and the field of the plain exercise of subjectivity. Again, elements (sandpaper, nails, saws) that previously composed my repertoire in the so-called political times reappear, and now they trace lines and planes and open themselves to a more existential issue.

A third movement, another starting line, can be seen between 1992 and 2004. It was the taking of an abstract model as the basic pattern of occupation of the canvas, and from that point on, practicing to the extreme all possibilities this pattern and neutral color that I used would give me as modern repertoire’s investigation possibilities. If painting is said to have been killed by the crisis of modernity, the main issue becomes to consider once again the possibility of its re-definition. Some dialogues are inevitable: Robert Ryman and his analysis of the pictorial process; Newman and spaciality as an investigation method. When this layer of references has been used to its whole extent, both process and spaciality take us, inevitably, to once again go over this issue in the foundations of Picasso’s modernity. In the same line of thought, Giacometti and Morandi become a part of it by a different temporality than that vertiginous, generally identified as being the modern one.

As a sequence and unfolding from the year of 2000, orthogonality, dialectically, gives space to a circularity that occupies the canvas. The circular gesture’s continuity on the canvas’ surface emphasizes the presence of the body that paints and the body of the spectator. This body evoking reminds us of Rodin but, in this case, the drawer’s one more than the sculptor’s one. The line’s sinuosity and its rhythm allude to Matisse as well.

The quotes made in this essay, from excerpts of many artist’s pieces to references to my work, do not refer to a logic of influences connected to objective procedures. What is at stake here is their inducing factor, very helpful to formulate my successive approaches of painting’s investigation.

Another detachment, a new starting line, occurs around the year of 2004 and has a duration generally accepted as nowadays. If up to this moment the historical references to artworks have worked as key points to paint paintings, now it tends to mainly wrap itself close, taking its own trajectory as its own basis, although always being subjected to new stimulus from the History of Art. With special highlighting, the relation towards my paintings from 1985 to 1987 are seen once again. These are artworks of grief. Not by chance they also showed a subjective dialogue with the abyssal and obscure colors from Rothko of the series “Seagram building”. Considering, altogether, these mediations, the grief comes more as a reflection on the exercise of grief in painting than as its own existence.

This already lengthy trajectory of permanent debate over a strategy for developing complex questions, seen in painting and systematically faced, gives the whole work a unity quality characterized by fragmentation. The result is a permanent issue on the theoretical density that painting’s support brings from its long cultural and historical existence. This ploy’s sense, as I’ve procured to develop in this essay, is to investigate new possibilities of configuration of painting, to keep its cignitive value and to create a singular pictorial thinking.

Carlos Zilio, 2011