

# The End of the End of Art: The Itinerant Poetics of Paulo Nazareth

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**Guilherme Trielli Ribeiro**

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

What is certain is that there is no escape for the non-figurative artist; he must stay within his field and march towards the consequence of his art. This consequence brings us, in a future perhaps remote, towards the end of art as a thing separate of our surrounding environment, which is the actual plastic reality. But this end is at the same time a new beginning. Art will not only continue but will realize itself more and more. By the unification of architecture, sculpture and painting a new plastic reality will be created.

Painting and sculpture will not manifest themselves as separate objects, nor as “mural art” or “applied art”, but, being purely constructive, will aid the creation of a surrounding not merely utilitarian or rational, but also pure and complete in its beauty.

Mondrian<sup>1</sup>

In 2010, Paulo Nazareth completed a unique journey: he walked from Santa Luzia, near the city of Belo Horizonte, to New York City.

The trip, described by the artist as a *residence in transit*, a *residence by accident*, resulted in the work *Notícias de América* [News

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<sup>1</sup> I found this passage from Mondrian in the book *Museu é o mundo* (*Museum is the World*), organized by Cesar Oiticica Filho in 2011. The passage, an annotation made by Hélio Oiticica during Christmas in 1959, is followed by these words: “I read these prophetic Mondrian’s words” (p. 14).

*form the Americas*], composed of notes, biographical portraits, drawings, sculptures and documented performances, which were displayed in the Mendes Wood DM gallery in 2012 and partially published in that same year by Cobogó Press as *Paulo Nazareth: Contemporary Art / Ltda.* (NAZARETH, 2012) The work evokes personal and collective memories and revisits, from a very personal perspective, several issues that have historically affected the entire American continent in regards to ethics, aesthetics, politics, economics, anthropology, etc. The artist himself describes the concept of the project as follows: “proyecto: noticias de América [America news] residencia en tránsito + residency by accident = atravesar America Latina antes de llegar a los EUA: que todo el polvo del camino se quede en mis pies + viver en brooklyn y saber lo que se pasa ahí \_ go to Brooklyn, NY /USA living there and know what happens there, but before walk by Latin America: that every Latin America land to be in my foot \_”<sup>2</sup>

After the ritual of washing his feet in the waters of the Hudson River, cleaning the dirt that had accumulated in approximately thirteen months of walking, and after successfully arriving in the United States through Latin America, Paulo Nazareth headed to Florida to participate in the Art Basel Miami Beach in 2011.

*Mercado de Bananas/Mercado de Arte [Banana Market/Art Market]* is the name of the installation Nazareth presented at the famous art fair in Miami that year. The installation was assembled from material created during the *Notícias de América* trip, along with a 1978 Volkswagen van filled with bananas, with the addition of performances by the artist himself, who ended up establishing, in a chameleon fashion, unusual points of connection between some of his various personas, such as those of the artist, the farmers market vendor, the performer, the traveler, the oral narrator and the native Latin American. This article aims at guiding the reader to the artistic universe of Paulo Nazareth through a brief analysis of *Notícias de América* and *Mercado de Bananas/Mercado de Arte*.

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During the America News trip, art scholar Janaina Melo kept in touch with Paulo Nazareth via Skype and social media. It is she who,

<sup>2</sup> Refer to the project’s blog: <http://latinamericanotice.blogspot.com/>

to my knowledge, has best understood the meaning of walking for Paulo Nazareth. This passage, from her essay “Caminhos e conversas de viagem” [“Paths and travel conversations”], summarizes important aspects that are also the focus of this article:

For Paulo walking is important, because as he undertakes his journey he sees the mixed and uncertain shapes that form the basis of his cosmogony. His world is transitory and the continuous movement from “land to land” creates a non-permanent world. As he travels, he collects objects and things, meets people, and establishes relations and situations inside and outside of the so-called system. Has this system perhaps also become transitory? As his journey unfolds, he employs a certain degree of the absolute. He interweaves fragments of objects, writing and images and uses them as the grounds for narratives and situations. What matters in the process is not necessarily the outcome — the original object or work of art — but the search for the disorganization of things, people, and himself.

Paulo walks in order to disassociate himself from the idea of permanence. As he walks he seeks to understand how situations, be they common or poetic, may be ascribed a new rhythm that is capable of altering the one already given. This allows him to respond in a different way. This is retained, for this reason, just at the very instant when each moment presents itself as a new opportunity for disintegrating anything of any duration. (MELO, 2012, n.p.)

Impermanence, one of the central elements in the art of Paulo Nazareth, will serve as our guide for analyzing *Notícias de América*. The crossing, from the heart of South America to the Atlantic coast of North America, led the artist to the experience of limits, both by direct and continuous contact with different cultures and landscapes and by the natural duration of that contact, which leads us to define it as a long-term performance in the direct line of Marina Abramović.<sup>3</sup> The experience of displacement, as well as the series of objects, drawings and photographs then produced by the artist based on individual and collective experiences, also align him with the inter-subjective art of Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica.<sup>4</sup> In addition, it should be noted that *Notícias de América* is structured from a distinctly nomadic principle, whose radicalism is in line with the demiurgic talent of Arthur Bispo

<sup>3</sup> About Marina Abramović, see [Westcott \(2015\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> About Lygia Clark and Hélio Oitica, see Braga (1992), Favaretto (1992), Pedrosa (1998) and Oiticica (2011).

do Rosário and many itinerant artists who, dissatisfied with the administered world, can, as if by miracle, find and reveal territories not yet occupied by national states and found in them new worlds, alternative communities, parallel universes. When asked, during an interview, about conceptual references related to socio-economic tensions in South America present in his work, Paulo Nazareth offers us highly accurate and insightful formulations:

I have works from R \$ 0.10, but these you buy from me. I'm addicted to selling cheap. (laughs), then the art gallery says: "Let us sell because you lose money doing it your way" – he says, then considers: – The work goes beyond the gallery, the museum and the biennial, which are like an arm that is on the way, but the work is not meant for it, it is meant for another instance, the instance of life. The art object is not a tangible object, but it is the proposition, the concept, the experience that exists without the gallery, that which does not require an exhibition. What the gallery does is bring this possibility for some people to experience this place, but this is not the final goal. (FURLANETO, 2013, n.p.)

The words of the artist help us better understand the meaning of the vast displacements involved in his art. His radical nomadism does not take the museum as the last destination of art but only as "an arm that is on the way." It is marked by a subjective and irregular experience of space and time, which depends mainly on the contacts and improvisations that will be established during the journey, and which informs, for example, the posters in several languages and the performances and portraits in which he is shown holding these same posters, often alongside other people (thereby introducing an (auto)biographical element in the photographs and at the same time a politically charged communal element). Some examples: *My image of exotic man — For sale, How is the color of my skin ?, I clean your bathroom for a fair price, I am dont going to rob you, Llevo recados a los E.U.A.* (Levo recados aos E.U.A.)<sup>5</sup>

All of these messages relate directly to the communities that inhabit the *interior* (in a broad sense) of Latin America. They document the social conditions of the communities in their path and work as

<sup>5</sup> These images were published in Paulo Nazareth's blog and in *Paulo Nazareth: Arte Contemporânea Ltda.* (2012).

evidence of the artist's active resistance, which can be considered a photographic and scenic realization of the famous verse of Rimbaud, "I is another," in the context of countless dislocations. The meanings of these messages always converge upon the paradox of a subject who creates his identity from the radical fluidity of a vertiginous and endless process of deconstructing himself and reconfiguring himself in others. In this regard, Joanna Espinosa is right to affirm that:

Regarding the "I is another" game that Paulo Nazareth seems to play, and to which he adds maliciously "in which I is not quite what we believe to see," it is possible to invert the statement as "the other is me." This other that Paulo Nazareth tries to include more than suppress. As an anthropologist artist, he forces the encounter of different cultures and ways of thinking, basing it on an I that is not defined, that still needs to be determined and traced. The ambiguous identity of this body in motion that crosses borders and explodes the geographical limits creates its own space-time. From the mutation of his body to the presentation of performance, that connects himself to the country where the performance takes place, he it puts into practice Claude Lévi-Strauss's statement that "to know and understand our own culture, we must learn to see from the other's point of view." (...) This staged identity is fulfilled thanks to the friction of the body and its perception of others. All that is needed is a third-space in which the subjective and subversive identity can be expressed. This third-space becomes an imaginary dimension of his art, in which the multiplicity of points of view is possible. (ESPINOSA, 2013)

The question of identity is founded in contact with the other, which results primarily from the experience of wandering, and which implies a variety of points of view and affects. It connects the art of Paulo Nazareth to Arthur Rimbaud, with which it shares a unique visionary verve, and a radical uprooting impulse we find, for example, in the famous poem "Sensation":

On the blue summer evenings, I shall go down the paths,  
Getting pricked by the corn, crushing the short grass:  
In a dream I shall feel its coolness on my feet.  
I shall let the wind bathe my bare head.  
I shall not speak, I shall think about nothing:  
But endless love will mount in my soul;  
And I shall travel far, very far, like a gipsy,  
Through the countryside — as happy as if I were with a woman.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Translated by Oliver Bernard: *Rimbaud: The Poems a — new edition*. Manchester: Carcanet

In this poem,<sup>7</sup> there are both the element of roaming and the subjectivity that arises from the relationship with the other (even if imaginary). Such is the case of the female character mentioned in the last verse, which can be interpreted metaphorically as a figuration of community itself. The wanderer, therefore, carries within him or herself an accurate and compelling communitarian impulse, which enables him/her to produce meaning as the lyric poet: by delving into their own intimacy, they are able to bring about the most radical figurations of community.<sup>8</sup>

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As mentioned above, Paulo Nazareth exhibits his art and carries out his performances in museums and art galleries but also in alternative spaces not necessarily associated with the art world, such as farmers markets and virtual spaces (including his blog). At the farmers markets, his works are displayed alongside several other products, ranging from household items to food. Therefore, the idea of selling bananas next to (or as) art objects is not something that stands out from his practice in the Brazilian context. But the installation-performance in question — Mercado de Bananas/Mercado de Arte — points precisely, among other things, to the conceptual conversion of bananas in art objects. From a critical impulse coming from within the art itself, the ambivalence injects the principle of impermanence in the very boundaries between the art object and merchandise.

This is not, of course, a parody of Duchamp's ready-made poetics. The bananas, in the installation, play the role of ephemeral, perishable objects. They propose, once again, a reflection on time that was already present in *America News* (in this case, the path traveled by foot from Brazil to the United States, during the long performance). What happens is a *revision* of the concept of ready-made, since the object is not just dislocated from its place of origin and its usual function but also reintroduced as a scenic object, whose meaning depends on performance. It should be noted that among all the objects displayed in the installation the bananas are directly linked to the Volkswagen van (which is also used in performance) and to the artist; they transfer to the

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Press Ltd., 2012.

7 Read also Maurício Salles Vasconcelos interpretation of this poem in Vasconcelos (2000).

8 About this subject, read "On Lyric Poetry and Society," by Theodor W. Adorno.

museum context both the experience of the trip and the experience of the farmers market. The bananas and the van constitute a jarring image, due to their literal forcefulness (a metonymy of the farmers market in the art fair, which in a way makes the former a metaphor of the latter), evoking all the symbolic implications of green and yellow that are traditionally associated with Brazil. But the artist does not simply re-enact the role of the farmers market vendor because the bananas he sells do not have the same value or the same function of the bananas in a food market (at the exhibit, Paulo Nazareth autographed bananas and spoke with consumers/viewers about topics that he brought from *Notícias de América*, mixing his biography with the biography of the people he met during the trip and with the newspaper stories and the texts and drawings he created). The bananas, ephemeral fragments of the work, become, when autographed, a metaphor for the artist's critical and self-ironic perspective on art and contemporary life. In addition, bananas were not the only "commodity" marketed in the installation. The very image of the artist (itinerant-vendor-nomad, etc.), which Paulo Nazareth ironically calls "image of the exotic man," could be "acquired" in the form of photographs (another form of signature?) taken alongside members of the audience. At the fair, other objects were also for sale, such as works by the artist or collected by him during *Notícias de América*, including the van.

When a banana stand is moved to the context of an art fair, the dissonant interval between the literal and the metaphorical meanings of the image triggers associations that lead us to a long and varied artistic and cultural tradition that uses the image of a banana as an allegorical cultural sign — which, for the sake of brevity, I will not comment here — such as, for instance, the pejorative term "banana republic," or fictional and real characters including Chiquita Banana and Carmen Miranda, and the cover that Andy Warhol did for the first album of the Velvet Underground, among many others.

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In another moment during the aforementioned interview with Audrey Furlaneto, Paulo Nazareth refers to his art as an "art of conduct":

There are performances, but it is more: it is how I behave toward the world. I can decide to stay here in downtown São Paulo or I can be some other way. The

art object is in the way I decide behave myself in the world. My conduct is art, my behaviour is art, it is at the same time an extended and a dilluted performance. It is not a spectacle, it mixes with and becomes life. (FURLANETO, 2013, n.p.)

Felicitas Rohden, who writes for the Studio Visits series of the Goethe Institute blog, says she read in a press release that Paulo Nazareth embodies the idea of the artist as a kind of connector or performative decoder. During a conversation with the artist, she asked him about how he relates to this idea or approach and received the following answer:

I want to live this and stay with people. For me being an artist is like any other job. A taxi driver is also a connector, but he's not always aware of that. I don't think so much about the tradition of performance in art, but more about its condition in life. I want to open up this dialogue between art and life.

Several people, many ways... (ROHDEN, 2012)

The trip-performance and installation considered here call into question, with sophisticated irony and deep lightness, the controversial power relations rooted in the historical and economic experience of the American countries (especially the experiences of Latin American countries), as well as their own concept of art and the art market, art and life. "Several people, many ways..."

We should remember, lastly, the radical and precise questioning implied in the symbolical accumulation on dust on the artist's feet:

Mi concepto de patria todos los días se expande... nacido en Brasil soy latino americano, siendo latino americano soy también mexicano... soy parte de cada tierra por donde pisaron mis pies... no hay como separar estas tierras con una línea imaginaria llamada frontera... (Every day my concept of homeland enlarges... Born in Brazil I am Latin American, and being Latin American I'm also Mexican... I am from every land I've walked through... There is no way to divide these lands with imaginary lines called borders...) (NAZARETH, *apud* ESPINOSA, 2013)

In addition to the inquisitive way of thinking about geopolitics



from the standpoint of the blurring of borders (national and personal), his work questions the fierce struggle between the artist and art institutions (museum, gallery, school, etc.), since his long-term performances (or expanded performances) and the indeterminacy of his itineraries, objects and concepts radically refuse the stipulation of deadlines and display locations.

Examples such as *Notícias de América e Mercado de Bananas/Mercado de Arte* indicate that the work of Paulo Nazareth destabilizes the codes imposed by the art market and, more broadly, by the market itself by proposing an ethical and aesthetic project that takes into account a logic at once nomadic and lyrical. In these terms, the consequence of his art, in line with some other contemporary artists, are, as predicted by Mondrian, to show us that art is no longer a “separate thing from the environment around us.” Contemporary art, of which the art of Paulo Nazareth is a paradigmatic example, has been creating a “not merely utilitarian or rational field, but also something pure and whole in its own beauty.”



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