



Selected Texts and Press

Paulo Nimer Pjota

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I. A Meeting of Multitudes

What we witness on the streets at all times is a combination of beings, desires and activities. In the slang used by passers-by, in the posters displayed in shops and bars, in the marks that cover walls or in the structures that support makeshift constructions, there is a collective force that does not claim authorship. There is an atmosphere that is not easy to apprehend. There is, most of all, a temporality that cannot be understood homogeneously.

The work of Paulo Nimer Pjota draws on his interest in the nature of these collective phenomena. From the inventive aggressiveness of a rap concert to the exuberant passivity of luxury shop windows, his research focuses on the examination of popular images that only come about through complex processes conducted by countless hands. In this sense, we can think of his production as the representation of a plural, busy and ongoing debate, whose interests and understandings are constantly being transformed, following multiple flows of consciousness. A conference of many voices with open research channels in an undefined space and enlarged time.

Concerned with key aspects of the global production of images, his intention is to bring to the fore a cluster of references and impressions involving objects that are deeply rooted in our social collective imagery in order to conjure the mechanisms that produce, edit and disseminate these manifestations. In a time of ultra-communication - in which demands are increasingly more global and production conditions increasingly more local - the artist proposes a space of improbable conjugations that are operated by accumulations and juxtapositions that are inherently confrontational but led by the harmonic willingness of their composition. Based in rhythm, rhyme and repetition, the artist creates arrangements that index the common perceptions of a globalised planet, exposing its profound inequalities but also its potential to produce new social and political interactions based on diversity and subjective exchange.

II. Global Fables and Anachronisms

Next to white canvases Pjota places huge metal sheets - pieces that he buys from warehouses and scrap yards after a lengthy process of searching, negotiation and transport. Sometimes, large pieces of fabric sacking are added. These materials make up a board

to be filled in. However, his intention is far from creating a clean slate, as the support is fully embraced with its previous visual and spiritual marks, and is used as a place to accommodate information and versions of things which are already in circulation.

The encounter proposed in this platform is organised at the point of tension between a meticulous compositional practice and the anarchic freedom of randomness. Operating between edition and improvisation, Pjota creates global fables permeated with stories and characters that originate in each and every place. The result is vibrant scenarios, steeped in metaphors and literalities, abstractions and figurations, analogies and suggestions. This is about the reformulation of the world as we know it towards a constellation of suspended bodies in the void, moved by a piercing sense of humour and a marked state of consternation.

These patchworks - in constant metamorphosis - are generated from numerous types of torsions and distortions, producing an assemblage of radically distinct categories and eras. We see the eruption of improbable intersections and all sorts of anachronisms. Classic painting and sculpture clichés are reprogrammed next to products of mass consumption; Western culture canons intermingle with everyday banalities; and universal issues are debated in regional accents.

These ideas are sewn together by a combined movement of ironic contemplation and active consternation, capable of handling icons and indexes, shaking their pre-defined roles in the power relations that got us through history. It is clear that there is no single historical direction or linear course of facts. As centuries anchor onto each other we see the opening of huge gaps in the regimes of truth. In effect, the structure that operates the succession of things as proposed by conventional conceptions is taken apart. In place of the legitimization of historical sources we see the emergence of endless alternatives of contextualisation.

III. Greek Vases, Stickers and Fire Guns

In the field of fiction the term 'crossover' is used to designate episodes or editions that promote an event in which circumstances, scenarios or characters from different media products (films, series, comics, etc.) interact under the same narrative. A literary technique that concentrates its power in merging spheres, articulating previously impossible realities.

Pjota's montages mobilise a cosmogony that proposes the coexistence – in a single shot – of the language of peripheral zones and codes from mainstream and high culture. In this gap, the Fang mask that influenced Picasso can be placed next to fridge magnets and confessional scribbles; Greek vases shine next to super-hero stickers; guns are exhibited next to anatomy illustrations; Tibetan skulls and emojis printed on old tin are fused into totems; and the study of geometry is combined with vernacular architecture.

As the artist samples pillars of erudition and mass culture megahits, he delves deeper into the boundaries that define the ghetto and other socially fragile spaces. Pjota leaves his empirical incursions with an extensive repertoire that he then orchestrates in order to mark sensations of tumult and violence. It is as if Mickey Mouse met an AK-47. As if a library of classic books was opened in an arcade of shops that sell electronic devices and cheap gadgets. As if a Boko Haram or ISIS YouTube video was narrated by Darth Vader and disrupted by the invasion of Bugs Bunny. As if an organic market was set up in a modernist construction in ruin and completely overtaken by graffiti.

The anthropophagic voraciousness of these short stories create a terrain populated by many masks, following the advent of mass communication in its current stage of digital search engines, data sharing and social media. If a series of traumas and public catharses comes to the surface, new coexisting dynamics also quickly emerge. Leading roles previously established by official narratives are gradually dissolved. There is no easy solution; we are left with disputes and negotiations under a restless noise.

Without the limitations of experienced knowledge and the bureaucracy to which we are subjected, bodies can therefore try new forms of existence. Bodies can risk themselves far beyond of what is possible under the gravity force of known social organisations.



Long before art had a history, images produced memory.
- Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*

Sitting in front of a fire is mesmerizing. It's magical. I feel the same way about electricity. And smoke. And flickering lights.

- David Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish*

I'm an expert traveller

- Jannis Kounellis, *Man of Antiquity, Modern Artist*

Since Paulo's work imbricates "high" and "low" culture, I feel inclined (I feel I have the rare licence) to do the same, and speak about time-traveling and *Twin Peaks* whilst simultaneously quoting top contemporary academicians. Because, guess what, reality is syncretic, and Paulo is a profoundly realist painter and, therefore, a profoundly syncretic one. As he told me in a recent interview, he does not work with the unreal or surreal, but rather by re-arranging the real, approximating realities.

Paulo worked on three solo shows this year: all of them titled *The History in Repeat Mode*. This pulled me simultaneously into two distinct spirals: the spiralling vortex which appears in the sky on repeated occasions in the third season of *Twin Peaks*, and the spiralling time-space conundrum introduced in western art history by Aby Warburg - a whirlpool in which Didi-Huberman has revelled masterfully, spinning like a dervish. Like in the third season of *Twin Peaks* and in the Warburgian reading of history, there is a fair amount of repetition, but there is also movement as the spiral sucks us in or spits us out. This is not, of course, a movement "forward", but a movement from within which can indeed take us some-other-place or some-other-time.

And, since we are spiralling into the text, I cannot help but add some good old classic anthropology to the mix: Lévi-Strauss' own totemic spiral that takes us to a mythical territory. Please, do not infer any unreality or surreality here. As I have already stated, this is a strictly realist text for a strictly realist painter. In myths, like in spirals, there is a certain repetition, but there is also a sort of rolling growth. Following the movement

set in motion by Lévi-Strauss, Viveiros de Castro proposes that this spiralling movement can both roll in or out: the myth, like the spiral, is a form of perpetual imbalance. Renato Sztutman picks this up and takes it a bit further, introducing us to a series of twin mythologies, in which one of the twins tries to bring about order whilst the other one tries to bring about the return of a rather more confusing mythical time. Intertwined, these twin movements ensure the “spiralling movement of the world”, says Sztutman in his text *Ética e profética nas Mitológicas de Lévi-Strauss*.

But, as Barbara Glowczewski says in her *Totemic Becomings*, myth is not only a “matrix” for ritual, but a kind of “virtuality” (to use Guattari’s term) which may or may not be updated and embodied: incorporated. A myth is present, but it is also something ancient. It is happening now, but it also happened ages ago. In *Confronting Images*, Didi-Huberman reminds us that in front of an old image the present reconfigures itself and that, likewise, in front of a new image the past does the same. This is why the meaning of something may emerge some-other-place or some-other-time: because, as Didi-Huberman explains, the key to understanding a certain something about an image is not necessarily under its doormat, neither time-wise nor space-wise. The point is not to isolate past from present, ignoring these fluxes, but to navigate them, surf them.

The virtuality of myths allows us to travel in time: a myth is an image which we incorporate to travel in time. This is why anachronisms, says Didi-Huberman, are unavoidable: not only because we are inevitably “contaminated” by our own time, but also because anachronisms seem to be a property of images, they seem to emanate from them. Images are, in themselves, time-travellers, and it is in this way that they can be our vessel. An anachronistic reading of art history is therefore a way to express the exuberance, the over-determination of images, says Didi-Huberman. And if images are over-determined, then we should not be ashamed of being, ourselves, over-determined and exuberant too, because this is the only way will we be able to travel with them.

Paulo’s work travels in time, and, much like time-travelling in sci-fi movies, this implies risks to which, however modestly, I would like to be an accomplice of. The spiral is the figure that allows us to speak of time travel here, because it embodies repetition and, at the same time, an organic movement, a growth. It also happens to be the figure I encountered in Paulo’s studio when I interviewed him, on the only canvas that was left there. But, apart from this spiralling movement, there tends to be a certain force involved in the process of time-traveling: a flash, a zap, and then a sizzling aura that remains after the deed. This is none-other than the fire which, after that same visit to Paulo’s studio, made its way to the title of this text; although to Benjamin, Giorgione and Robert Zemeckis this energy would more likely appear as a bolt of lightning that breaks the so-called time-space continuum. Indeed, we will be required to walk with fire if we need to go-other-places-and-times.

Power is timeless, states one of Paulo’s paintings. In it, Darth Vader’s helmet mingles with two African masks and a small Captain America. Paulo tells me he is moved by the will to interact with stuff that has a certain “power”: an image-power-value. Even the fire itself, he adds nonchalantly. The fire, which has become more and more visible in his paintings to the point of framing it sometimes. The fire, which takes the specific shape of the kind of ornamental flames which, I believe, is frequently found on skateboards. This is something that had previously escaped my attention but which I obviously already knew. Actually, Paulo told me that, after seeing his paintings, it’s common for people to point out something they had previously ignored. Maybe subtle, oblique things? I enquired. Not at all, he said: evident things, but sometimes so evident that no one notices, like the colours. I myself went home and noticed a spiral sign outside my door: a

red spiral sign that marks the presence of a hose to be used in case of fire. Of course, the sign had already been there. The association between the spiral and the fire was there all along; it had simply not started stirring in me until that moment. After that, the spiral/fire combination spiralled out of control because, indeed, both elements are to be frequently found, hand-in-hand, in images associated with time travel, ever since the poster of the first filmic version of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, directed by George Pal and released in 1960 (and probably before that too). Admittedly, it is not exactly a spiral, but it is close enough...

So, in Benjamin's terms, articulating the past does not mean to recognise it exactly as it was, it means to embody a memory that lights up the whole sky momentarily, during a (probably decisive) moment of danger¹. The past is a lightning bolt, says Benjamin, or, as Alan Moore puts it in *Voice of Fire*, "history is a heat"². Very fittingly, I found two drawings by Aby Warburg in Didi-Huberman's great treatise about his work: one of the best ghost stories for grown-ups along with *Twin Peaks*. The overlapping of signifiers is almost uncanny, almost too much for this text to bear; yet it is there.

During his time with the Pueblo Indians, Warburg drew diagrams on the topic of "incorporation" and "absorption". Two diagrams embody this by representing graphically an "object" and a "subject". In the first diagram, Warburg represents the subject as a spiral (a sort of spring or electric filament, says Didi-Huberman) and the object as a square panel parted in the middle by a line. There is a progression in three steps that lead to the springy line wrapping across the straight line: subject and object are now intertwined in what looks like an electric fuse. In the second diagram, the subject and the object are represented respectively by a light bulb or a lampshade or lamp-base onto which to screw the light bulb. Images, says Didi-Huberman when analysing these diagrams, must be read in terms of con-penetration. All images, says Didi-Huberman, come from the body and return to the body, but this also implies that they travel and, I would add, allow time-travel to happen as if they were a vessel onto which we screw ourselves on and "zap" our way into past and future.

In Chris Marker's movie *La Jetée*, we find the perfect example of how both myths and images can allow us to time-travel. By myth, I mean the ultimate damnation of time-travel narratives of which this movie is the epitome, which is none-other than to bear witness or even to bring about your own demise (something which, if I may point out, also happens with the "tulpa" phenomenon in *Twin Peaks*). By image, I mean the enigmatic memories that allow the tragic hero of *La Jetée* to retain sanity whilst coming and going between past, present and future. In this movie, our time-traveller's body endures the strenuous circumstances of time-travel because it is screwed on an image of its past. Actually, it can be argued that the body can travel only because it is a support for these images.

Like in *La Jetée*, the meaning of things – says on-fire-contemporary-thinker Timothy Morton – is retroactive. Reality is not the obvious: reality is what comes afterwards, what happens in the future and comes back to transform the present, sometimes meaningfully altering it. In this sense, art is a privileged form of time travel. This is why paradox and contradiction are frequent when speaking about art: because art is, in itself, contradictory – it breaks the time-space continuum. Of course, like a certain film critic³ says about *Twin Peaks*, there is some coherence, a "spiralling coherence" in the colours added to the mix, producing all sorts of new, yet familiar, whirly shapes and shades that could have previously escaped our attention.

The analogy with painting is almost too good: it covers both the importance Paulo gives to colours and the way in which the elements that coexist in his painting have whirled

their way in. In fact, Paulo has several pieces that present themselves as “dialogues”: dialogues of “arrangements”, “constellations” and “time”. Other guests (other shades) invited to the mix are “ancient empires”, “ritual”, “geometric motifs” or “popular chromo-therapy”. Actually, his recent exhibition in Mendes Wood and Maureen Paley was based on a “synthesis between contradictory ideas” and thus titled. Much like these twin mythologies we were talking about, these “contradictory ideas” are enmeshed in the painting, emitting a soft fizzing noise. Like a song made from samples – as Paulo said in our interview – the elements resurface, repeat, but are transformed by the movement. These spiralling arrangements and re-arrangements are the shape of a being in progress, the famous Deleuzian/Guattarian “becoming”.

Paulo told me that some people are surprised that he managed to have three different solo shows this year. But everything was kind of already ready in his head, turning around. The syncretic arrangement and re-arrangement visible in his painting is also, as he pointed out, how he works. Of course some adjustments were needed, but once you are in that flux, one work starts calling out to the next. In Lynchian terms: if you like it enough, a little fish attracts another, sometimes bigger, fish... and they all end up in your net. It is whirlpool logic through and through. And let us not forget that Lynch is a painter at heart too, or that this is how it all started.

In this sense, aesthetics are not – as Timothy Morton points out in his treatise *Realist Magic* – the glue that joins together the human subject to the non-human object. The aesthetic experience has far more to do with this electric con-penetration that Aby Warburg represented in the two diagrams I mentioned. Or, as Morton himself puts it, it has more to do with a sort of demonic action at a distance that goes way beyond the realm of art, into reality. A forever-mysterious contiguity between stuff that doesn't visibly touch. Sometimes the bare eye, or the bare intellect, cannot fathom any connection: “like the connections in Bradley Mitchum's dreams, they might not entirely make sense, but they are felt. They are powerful. And they are true”⁴. Because something sizzles or lights up over-there when you meddle with this thing over-here.

So, once again, we have to stand by Alan Moore when he says: “history is a heat”. Paulo seems well aware of it.



References to urban popular culture have been a recurring feature in your work from the beginning. Can you talk about your background and first experiences with painting? To what extent has your background informed the development of your practice?

I started doing graffiti and tagging when I was around 12 years old, which put me in close contact with urban and popular culture. As I was very young, all my teenage memories are linked to that. I grew up in São José do Rio Preto, a conservative countryside town located around 500km from São Paulo. Hip-hop was my escape from a reactionary and square environment. My political awareness was shaped by 1990s' rap: Racionais, Facção Central, Public Enemy, Rzo, Espaço Rap, and others.

When I was around 15 years old I started to see painting as a profession. I managed to make some money painting t-shirts and pizzeria walls and selling canvases. This was my main focus in life at the time. In the beginning I tagged and painted throw ups (a quick and illegal graffiti style), but soon realised I was mostly interested in the conceptual thought underlying graffiti – its political, anti-system roots – and in what street painting could offer me. As I was constantly wandering the streets, I started to pay attention to drawings and scribbles left in public toilets, bus stops and schools – we painted loads of public schools in countryside towns. The aesthetic issues around this form of painting and its residual nature really appealed to me. Later I found out that Cy Twombly shared the same interest. When I moved to São Paulo I stopped painting on the streets.

So from the outset I produced a lot, and this experience from 12 to 17 years old worked as a sort of test. I was still very immature and naïve in my choices, but nonetheless it was important to experience and try out materials and places first hand. At this stage I felt totally free to experiment with painting, both on the streets and with the small things I produced at home: works that were distant from the theories and preconceived ideas that often stifle production. My experience and close contact with popular symbols allowed me to create a repertoire that has unfolded in my practice today.

Obviously the experience I had in my teenage years has informed my work and the way I think and understand the world. When I was 15, I often had my hair braided at Vila União, in the north region of Rio Preto, at Tina's house, a woman who braided the hair of everyone in the hip-hop scene. My dad took me there and collected me later, during his lunchtime. The house had a dirt floor and exposed brick walls. It is all still very fresh

in my memory. I spent hours there; drinking guaraná and having my hair braided. These experiences were a kind of parallel 'school', which helped me understand the country where I live.

At this point, were you already interested in a more institutionalised type of art, that is, were you visiting museums and galleries or studying the history of art?

Yes, I was always interested in the art lessons I had at school and the books and films I read and watched during my teens. Unfortunately small cities in Brazil don't have museums or show good exhibitions, so I only had the chance to do this when I came to São Paulo. I used to visit the capital quite frequently to see family and stay with friends.

It was when I started university and moved permanently to São Paulo at 17, that I started to better understand the history of art and the art circuit. Greek and Renaissance anatomy always appealed to me. I copied the forms and made compositions in which I included new elements. When I realised that I didn't need to paint in a traditional way, using canvas and chassis, I started to use iron sheets as support, reflecting my interest in vernacular architecture. It was also around this time that I started to incorporate objects on the floor in front of the paintings.

Are you primarily interested in what we could describe as the communication signs of popular culture?

Yes, but not only that. Brazilian history is obviously different from European history: we didn't have the Renaissance, Impressionism or other art schools that form part of a hegemonic narrative. I always looked at culture as something popular: indigenous, African, from the margins, and manifestations such as rap, funk, arts and crafts and vernacular architecture. The only museum in Rio Preto is the Art Naïf Museum. I think this is why my work deals with the 'popular' in such a natural way.

You mentioned that when you started to produce, there were more images in one single composition and that later you started to cut down the number of images in order to create more specific meanings.

Yes, I have noticed that I don't need many images to talk about a topic. For example, if I want to talk about a colonial issue, I can sum up a whole country in one image, by including an African mask or a Chinese object. Of course this is a sort of cultural pasteurisation, and my work definitely deals with that. So if in the past I used to paint ten images in order to talk about one thing, now I can talk about ten things with only one image. This is my initial premise these days.

Is this a reflection of the way your work itself has developed, that is, are the subjects you deal with today also more specific?

Yes, absolutely. It is a reflection of this development; after all I was still very young when I started to produce. My subjects now are more specific. Even though they are not single subjects, they do come from different lines of research that cross over. I'm not interested in dealing with one single thing, as this wouldn't really reflect my way of working and living. I travel for five months of the year. I can't visit five different countries and talk about only one thing, I just can't. When I am somewhere else I absorb everything that is around me. I think this is reminiscent of my experiences as a teenager when I wandered around the city looking for walls or iron gates to paint. This search has activated my gaze as a research tool. I used to walk past a street and I knew where I was because of the walls.

It is as if I created a sort of photographic map from these symbols, and this habit has made me very attentive. With time, I came to understand that this has shaped the way I look at my surroundings. Today I travel and take pictures of everything that can be potentially added to my work. I have thousands of pictures stored in my computer and mobile and I look at them everyday.

You mentioned that when you started to show your work professionally in the Brazilian art circuit you felt like an outsider. In fact, there aren't many historical parallels to your work in Brazil – both in terms of your approach to the popular and your work's formal resolutions.

The aesthetic issues I deal with are very distinct from the Brazilian painting tradition, particularly from São Paulo. When I started to exhibit, my interests weren't exactly in vogue at the time. I felt some distance between the things that I believed about reality and the things that the Brazilian art circuit believed in.

Marginal culture is a theme that has always appealed to me: crime, the aesthetics of the periphery and the conceptual and spiritual meaning of colours such as green, blue and pink – which are typically used in houses in countryside neighbourhoods and working class urban areas. For example, here in the east zone of São Paulo, there is a series of aerographs that have apparently been painted by the same person. How does this generate a cultural identity in this place? This idea attracts me and my discussion on painting is heavily based on it – particularly in relation to ghetto culture, the influence of rap and hip-hop on my formation and the socio-political issues that these experiences have added to my repertoire. Also, my mum worked for many years at a prison and brought home gifts handcrafted by the prisoners featuring my name, things like crocheted hats and toy bikes made of wire, therefore, this has always been part of my life.

When addressing ghetto culture, do you believe there is a political concern embedded in your work?

In my case, this is not only about politics but also an interest in the socio-cultural dimension. Artists often work with the utopian idea of changing the world, that their work is going to reach out to people outside the art bubble, but this rarely happens. I believe in small-scale changes, in the micro-political reach of art, and this is my main concern.

Do you see any difference in the way your work is received outside Brazil?

Yes, I think Brazil is still very conservative in terms of painting. In some other countries, audiences seem to be able to understand my work more easily. It is strange because at the start I focused on a type of aesthetics and culture that were much more Brazilian, as it was something closer to my experience. But when I showed these artworks in Brazil, the majority of people didn't understand where the references were coming from. I have a series of paintings that use specific tones of blue, green and pink that are commonly used in working-class houses, but Brazilian people didn't know where this palette was coming from. Perhaps this lack of understanding is linked to a certain lack of repertoire amongst the Brazilian middle and upper classes – groups that unfortunately still make up the majority of the art public – in relation to their own country. It was only with digital platforms like Facebook and Instagram, and a generalised political, ideological and economic crisis that Brazil was able to see things that rap and other marginal movements had been highlighting since the 1990s. Brazilian society is extremely classist.

Once a state school took their pupils to a guided tour of one of my exhibitions and one of

the kids secretly wrote his name on one of the paintings. This also happened during my show at Centro Cultural São Paulo, and after that a few other times. On another occasion, a builder who was working on the refurbishment of the building where my studio is located walked past a painting and said that the colour pink was similar to the paper used by his local bakery to wrap bread. These situations made me believe that I was in fact communicating with an audience with a different profile.

Escambo/Similitude, 2014

Acrylic on canvas and seed sack

As well as these specific elements, you also use a number of universal symbols in your work, images that circulate within a more homogenous pop culture, such as emoticons and skate stickers. Therefore, the work displays a type of information that can be easily identified by a more global audience.

My work has changed a lot, particularly by reflecting how images and symbols circulate via the Internet today. I also started to travel more and this experience started to show in my practice. Therefore, today I am not exclusively concerned with a typically Brazilian or peripheral aesthetics. From 2013, the universal symbols became more evident and started to make more sense within my research.

In your latest exhibition, you started to incorporate archaeological artefacts to your paintings and to the resin objects that had already appeared in previous works. To what extent do these artefacts relate to your interest in popular culture?

The title of my last three shows was *The History In Repeat Mode*. In one of them, I exhibited archaeological artefacts. In some way, the title evokes the idea that the archaeological or ethnographic objects that appear in my recent work also touch on issues related to popular culture or the everyday, even though they are museum pieces. History in repeat mode refers to cycles. For instance, we can compare the medieval Crusades with the current undertakings by Islamic State jihadists. Of course, the contexts are very different but I think this is a possible analogy. Both historical moments are affected by religious cultural domination, the destruction of symbols and – particularly in the actions by ISIS – an attempt to reclaim history. In the exhibition space, when I place a Greek jar next to



In his treatise *De prospectiva pingendi* ('On Perspective for Painting'), written in 1576, Piero della Francesca maintained, contrary to the myth created by Alberti, that optics plays almost no part in the construction of the painting: "Everything depends on the eye," he wrote, for "it is in the eye that things seen are presented at angles which vary according to distance." At that time the eye was fixed, and focused only on depth. But the point to remember is: it is the eye that decides and a painting is not a window.

Writing about the 1948 exhibition *Collage* that she had curated at the MoMA, Margaret Miller suggested that "Collage has been the means through which an artist incorporates reality in the picture without imitating it" (1948 REG, Exh.#385. MoMA Archives, NY). Her statement became a twentieth-century axiom. But the thing to remember is the principle of reality, which painting does not imitate.

Thirteen years later, in the 1961 exhibition of 252 works, *The Art of Assemblage*, also at the MoMA, its curator William C. Seitz established the categories and, in a way, modelled the works to the point of making them a "genre". For him, everything began, on the one hand, with the pioneers of literature, Mallarmé, Apollinaire, and Marinetti and, on the other, the inventors: Picasso, Braque, Schwitters, G. Brecht, Rauschenberg and Bruce Conner. We moved into an era of abundance, an era of continuous, linear, television pictures and FM radio. But there was little interference between the supports because we still firmly believed in the virtues of specificity (of unequivocal specialization), which we desperately tried to define in order to control it. The channel became the message but each channel was clearly identified. It was the time when Jasper Johns captured everything on the rectangle of his canvas as long as it was flat, and Warhol invented the series. In Europe, the *affichistes* Hains and Villeglé transposed the city walls onto the museums. That was *dé-collage*, the anonymous, the urban, done by the street, i.e. by Others. It was also the time when people began to ask where, in the face of Western hegemony, the centre actually lay. Was there an alternative modernity? Who is the Other in history? In relation to which centre would the West be the Other? Who would be the Other for the Other? And so on. The thing to remember is that idea of an aesthetics of generalized juxtaposition, with transparent origins and signposted destinations, and in a profusion that could still be the object of thoughts of sorts.

But the "genre" expanded and, 50 years later, collage and assemblage, taken over by computers and their hypertexts, interfaces, navigation and algorithms, finally colonised the entire territory of painting, the visual arts, cinema, literature, sound and narrative in

general, in whatever forms they might take. From that point on the Other ceased to exist, there was no more space in the parking lot. There was a generalised and abundant mixing and assemblage. But the thing to remember is that, from Piero to Pjota, the world had changed. Dramatically. From now on, we cannot ignore the idea that the most important qualities of space can no longer be defined under territorial categories and according to bases with fixed edges and identities. These properties are now determined by the constant currents and flows (of capital, men, risks, ideas, information, images), whose effects Arjun Appadurai has described and whose mechanisms he has formulated as landscapes of global flows: ethnoscaples, financescaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, ideoscaples, of indistinct origin and with unknown interlocking destinies that guide the world, structure it and change its spatial coordinates permanently.¹ For Hartmut Rosa, “The space of flows is first and foremost an organization of nodes that function in networks with no stable hierarchy” and which have the consequence of “detemporalising time (timeless time) by disordering the sequence of events and making them simultaneous.”² This is a commonplace nowadays, given the extent to which the digital world, the human sciences, the impermanence of historical models, different ways of life, the modes of existence of things and concepts, images, identity based community allegiances and their opposite, critical universalism, augmented objects with infinite edges, the globalized world and the dynamics of the social networks have altered our relationship to forms, which, in turn, have lost all stability.

And it was in this world, by dint of curiously good timing, that Paulo Nimer Pjota did his first paintings on canvas and sheet metal. Although done in the studio, they were by no means a renunciation of the street where, up till then, he had been operating. We don't seem to have said anything about his works yet, even though we haven't stopped talking about them all this time, brushing against them, almost seeing them. The thing to remember from history and from the present is what we have written about them, and then we should forget it all, because Pjota is not the repository of history, for which he has no use and which has nothing to teach him.

He is merely history's whirling echo.

Pjota is a man of the present, and everything in his work states something else. The bedrock of his freedom is the street, where the commonplace meets the strange, where impermanence intersects with truth. And if you ask him about the street, he has this to say: “The street tingles with drama, it is made of stones and tar, it is the battlefield for wars and the apotheosis of songs. ... If I become my own enemy when I am alone, I unwind in the cold dawns of the Sao Paulo streets, speaking in the alleyways and paying meticulous, visual attention to the symbols and signs. The street is probably the only place where the right to come and go is absolute. ... No city, no town, no village is without streets. There are no comings or goings without streets. There is no mountain so high or valley so deep that it cannot be reached by some road.”³

“Every perfect work is the death mask of its intuition” wrote Walter Benjamin. In Pjota's work, the colour does duty both as a toned ground and a plane, a background and an endless expanse against which the motifs stand out in all their discordant scale, whether a Mask or a Donald Duck, African statuary or Greek statuary, wherever they are from and whatever period they might belong to. Pjota's colour has a fullness and intensity that create an undefined suspense – in the literal sense of suspension –, in its apparent absence of composition: a suggestion of chance or truncated display, a paradoxical suspension of time, somewhere between hiding and showing. Intuition does not disentangle reality from fiction, any more than a dream does. It is what has to be acknowledged as the “power of metamorphosis” (Malraux). And it is the path that Pjota takes in order to move around in

what is discontinuous, incomplete and partial. Starting with his very first paintings, he unleashed a rush of signifiers and rolled out a never-ending chain of interpretations and symbols. It began as a way of expressing the violence of things, disagreement between people, the recklessness of certainties – basically, the world as it is. But it had to be done without explicit violence, tempered, made opaque, done without pathos, blithely even – with the casualness with which you walk along the streets, which, as the days go by, get transformed by anonymous hands and short-lived additions, lading themselves with narratives and history.

Benjamin also wrote that “the task is not to present works [...] in the context of their time but, rather, to give over to presentation, within that time that produced them, the time that comes to know them – that is our time.” But now time has disappeared; all that remains is the currents and the flows, the simultaneity and the impermanence of actions. This is why Pjota's images float on the surface of a space which in spite of its intense colours is undifferentiated, and why these images and spaces share the same surface. If the viewer is never at the same distance from the motifs (totems, signs, effigies, drippings, emoticons), it is because the motifs retreat from the picture plane into the fictitious depth of the coloured magma, or because the viewer moves back; for the world has never been motionless, and nowadays it is not just unstable, it is loose and has lost its bearings. And so, on the ground, to give the motif weight, matter and three-dimensionality, to give it body, as it were, while the painting is painted, that motif, be it a fruit, a ball, a shell or ceramic, is brought out of the frame. It leaves the frame because a painting is not a window. It never has been. And the motif can now share the viewer's space, as it does with paintings, although people usually perceive a painting as a window (Alberti's myth) or as the image of an absence, although in fact it is a very real presence. It is the “real”. It could perhaps just be a matter of distance, a matter of perspective, and the eye deciding for itself. An ambivalence in the image and its materiality, or an ambivalent gaze.

But even if time no longer exists, if it is no longer tangible, if there is neither sequence nor duration, history nevertheless still remains. It is in this floating, transitional space, between now and never, between what happens and what one thinks of it, between what is kept and what is reconstructed, that in his new paintings, Pjota jumbles together his icons from here and elsewhere, African and Western, ancient and modern, in order to deterritorialize them. Off-ground, history is everybody's. Anchored and rooted, it is the history of particular people and is responsible for creating the Other, a sense of those who are “not-one-of-us”, for creating identity. It begins innocently with oneself and continues quietly with culture, museums and ethnology “which sees objects as clues to ways of doing things, which are signs of ways of being. Behind the Inuit spoon, Inuit-ness; beneath the Dogon loincloth, Dogon-ness.”⁴ And the tragic upshot is Jihad and absolute sectarianism.

Edouard Glissant, who distinguishes the globalization of finance from globality, i.e. a form of archipelagic thought without hierarchy, in which cultures mix and become creolised, wrote, simply and naturally: “I can change through exchanging with the Other without losing or distorting myself.” It is this globality in pictures that Pjota creates. The signs floating in their fields of colour, free of any colonialist imprint, their kin-aesthetic incarnation on the ground, the sheet of metal or the canvas, by some curious means, produce something resembling an “image freeze”. Like a frozen moment of eternity in the rush of flows that beset us. It is what Pjota does so skilfully. It happens between zero and infinity, between the here-and-now and 10-43 seconds before the big-bang, the Planck time that will stop us learning any truth about our origins for a long time yet But it's happening today.

Vast, forbidding, and opaque, São Paulo can resemble a heavily fortified Los Angeles. Indeed, there were some intersections in the tony parts of town where I could have sworn that I was in Beverly Hills, were it not for the five-metre-high walls around the sprawling houses, and the phone booth-like guard posts sitting on the street corners, which glow with the flickering light of televisions at night. The streets are similarly strangled with traffic, and walking is not an option. But unlike LA, you can hail a handy helicopter to wing you around the city, right from an app on your phone, if you have the cash. Many, of course, don't.

What São Paulo lacks in security and helicopter traffic regulation, it makes up for in art. The touring retrospective of pioneering abstract painter Hilma af Klint, that landed at the Pinacoteca de São Paulo after a run at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, in her native Sweden, left me absolutely gobsmacked. The whole show crackled with energy and vitality: from the astonishing, titanicly-scaled series 'The Ten Largest' (1907), any one of which could go toe-to-toe with canvases by brand-name painters enshrined in the hallowed halls of art history, to the achingly delicate studies of flowering plants from her days as an art student, which put Albrecht Dürer on my mind.



Paulo Nimer Pjota, 'Medley', 2018,
installation view, Mendes Wood
DM, São Paulo. Courtesy: Mendes
Wood DM, São Paulo

My gallery crawl yielded a handful of highlights, as well as some notable duds. Mendes Wood DM offered up a bit of both. In the front gallery, a cheeky, exuberant show by Paulo Nimer Pjota consisting of roughly treated, unstretched canvases paired with collections of resonant objects (Roman theatre masks with cartoonish tongues, ancient-looking water jugs emblazoned with 'tribal' tattoo designs) both pilloried junky pop-culture artefacts with colonialist underpinnings and traced visual archetypes across cultures and timescales, from African tribal carvings to the Cartoon Network. In the back, a pious and ponderous show by Runo Lagomarsino sent me scampering for the press release, which explained, among other guiding tidbits, that the disembodied car headlight illuminating a paper work on the wall, consisting of the repeated phrase 'American Amnesia', came from a brand of car favoured by Argentinian paramilitary death squads. This cleared things up a little, but still left me underwhelmed.

An atmosphere common to collectively developed image panels—such as street walls, vernacular houses and cheap toilets—permeates the work of Paulo Nimer Pjota. Conducting a study of popular iconography that seems to be operated by multiple hands, the artist produces in the tension between randomness and a meticulous composition practice: a balance of intuition and precision. The results are vibrant scenarios made out of a painting method that emulates a multi-layered collage.

Preferring to work with large surfaces, Pjota uses canvas, sacks and metal plates—mostly found in junkyards—as supports. His pieces can expand to huge dimensions, as with the immense panel he did for the 12th Lyon Biennale, *Entre-temps... brusquement, et ensuite* (Meanwhile... Suddenly, And Then) (2013), which covered the external facade of La Sucrière. On these spaces, Pjota brings together visual narratives combining art history with the complexity of contemporary social imagery. His works highlight the clichés of figurative and landscape painting and mix them with the banal elements, symbols and logotypes of our everyday lives: stickers juxtaposed with classical still-lives, ancient Greek art with superheroes, archeological artifacts with soda cans, machine guns with medical illustration, and so on. Among these fragments of perfectly illustrated objects, there are stains, graffiti tags, scribbles and bad handwriting.

From this turbulent mass, a storytelling process rises. Pregnant with metaphors, analogies and suggestions, it absorbs and recasts the mundane as a constellation of figures hanging in the void. But if, at a superficial level, there is some disorientation, each gesture indicates a precise allegory and suggests new connections, reconfiguring our

Paulo Nimer Pjota (Brazilian, b. 1988) is an artist who lives and works in São Paulo. He is represented by Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo.

Germano Dushá is a writer, curator and cultural producer based in São Paulo. He is the co-founder of Coletor, an independent itinerant platform for contemporary art practices, and Observatório, an autonomous exhibition space for contemporary art and culture.

A solo exhibition by Paulo Nimer Pjota will open at Mendes Wood DM in February. His work is currently on view in the group exhibition "The World is Made of Stories" at Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo, through 8 May.

Between philosophy and crime part.1, detail, 2015
Courtesy of the artist and Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo

sensibilities and old tenets. Rather than linear and clear, it contains chaotic situations; rather than being tied to one fluid understanding, it circulates countless possibilities of interpretation. Among the main interests of Pjota's body of work is the conflict inherent to the peripheral areas of any urban context, as well as the shared perceptions of a globalized world. Attracted by the historical processes involving these subjects, he goes deep into the language of ghettos and mass culture, coming out with an extensive repertory that he uses to underline sensations of violence and turmoil. Above all, however, his work seems to deal with these ordinary place's own cultural formation and public catharses, thoroughly and without value judgment. In this point, if high and low culture, art and vulgar, and canons and slangs all go side by side, there is no nuclear importance in the narrative flow—only diverse voices speaking out loud in a boisterous way.

Aware of the mechanisms and contradictions of the so-called Digital Age, wherein uncountable images are generated every second while perpetuating social inequalities, Pjota objects not only to the way we formulate and propagate information, but also to the attention and affection we give it. In his cosmology of fictions, the structural relation between parts and the whole is no longer founded in a division between classes. As his global tales are flooded by insignificant phenomena and the feelings of those marginalized by the traditional representative fundamentals, new possibilities of social interactions appear. As seen in exhibitions in most continents, his works deal with everyday universal codes. Giving continuity to this peculiar exercise, his upcoming projects for 2016 include a solo show in São Paulo and exhibitions in the Netherlands, London and Miami. ☺

VIBRANT VISUAL NARRATIVES
MIX HIGH AND LOW,
ART AND VULGAR,
CANONS AND SLANGS

The nature that interests me is the nature of man, the relationship between power and survival. Life and death are the greatest revelations of nature for me, the law of the strongest, the influence that the environment has on life and customs, and how that will change history. I am interested in the cultural and social meaning present in places devoid of basic resources, such as ghettos, slums and villages, and how the nature of man forms part of these places, either through aesthetics, basic functions or the need to turn towards the environment.

The nature of man consists of the preservation of life itself, and he will use all of his resources to do it, by either benevolent or malevolent means. It's this nature that bathes me, either with blood or with sweat. It is confused, ordered and settled, feeds off air, light and water. But, if needed, one must and will grind and hustle on the concrete to feast on gold and riches. This is the nature that governs the law, the law of the strongest, the law of the warlords.

This is the history of the country in which I live: colonisation, globalisation, appropriation, war, crime, art history, a city that is called a jungle, be it asphalt and concrete or mulemba and banana trees.

The occasion generates the thief – there is no chance to dodge these occasions. What is the nature of man, but to be the thief? Such a thief, generated by a 19th-century abolitionist law of the free womb, generates another thief, a 21st-century free-womb thief, a thief with an innate disposition which will take shape in the course that the universe conspires.

I have always looked for answers to explain the reasons why a person like me, brought up by a family with a firm character, which transmitted rigid principles of honesty and respect for others, has this fascination with the world of crime. Maybe for its cold nature: it's the gun law – one must necessarily walk within the principles of honour and respect, not counting on luck since this was already denied at the time these people's situations in life were imposed without their permission. In this scenario, going forward will be positive; after all, the same hands that plant are those that touch the bread with their mouths.

Today I accept this interest as a personality trait, without worrying about moral or psychoanalytic questions; but in my adolescence, this attraction to the world of those who live in the background of the



common values that were taught to me at home grew on me in such manner that its perplexity permeated my path of transition between boy and man, initiating a combat in this inherited country.

This is the nature that permeates my work. This influences the political and social issues surround-

ing the environment of my studio, my life and my production: subjective and metaphorical nature that transforms man into a predator within a chain food wrapped in ethnic, cultural and economic conflicts.