

Tunga

fictions baroques

Twisted Cigars, Straight Smoke

interview par
NELSON AGUILAR

■ *Culturally, your position is a very privileged one. I mean, that Guignard's Léa and Maura, for which your mother and aunt were the models, is one of the finest paintings in all Brazilian art. Your father is an acclaimed novelist and your brother is an esteemed diplomat.*

Everybody has their own cultural constellation. The first of my heritages is perhaps the dust under my feet, the experience of living in Brazil, of having been raised there. That implies particular qualities, characteristics that maybe introduce diversity into one's formative traditions. What's more, my own family is very much on the intellectual and poetic side of things. As an adolescent I read a lot of



«Querido Amigo». Exposition au Museu de Arte, Caracas, en 1995. Exhibition at the Museu de Arte, Caracas



ALBERTO GUIGNARD. «Léa e Maura». 1940. Huile / toile. 110 x 130 cm. (Ph. F. Chaves). Oil on canvas



«Uma experiência de fina física sutil». Exposition à «Walk in SoHo», New York, en 1995. "An Experiment in Fine Physics" in "Walk in SoHo," New York, 1995



books, but there was something missing from my father's library—the Symbolists and the Surrealists. They were the key to my world, my personal set of references. After that, the rest of the library became interesting to me as well.

And that strange painting with your mother and your aunt?

Guignard was the compulsive sort. He painted ceilings, doors, tables... My grandfather was the person who set up the modern section at the National Salon of the Fine Arts. He told Guignard: "You must enter, it's a Salon, and the prize is a trip to Paris." Maybe that was a way of shaking Guignard up a bit, don't you think? Guignard put everything he had into painting those two women. But in fact the walls of my grandfather's house were covered with Guignards and Portinaris and other canvases. The painting did become part of my own life at a later stage, but by then my work was already something with its own existence. I used it in a slightly humorous way, when I came up with the idea of the capillary xiphophagus, the two Siamese sisters held together by their hair. If you are painting twins, all you have to do is paint half the picture.

The surrealist element in your work has to do not so much with the history of the actual movement but with the spirit of transgression and discovery, an alchemical spirit.

My formative experience came after the Surrealist movement had hardened and was riven by internal disputes and sectarian clashes. But the Surrealists did show us the way to Sade, Lautréamont, Rimbaud and Baudelaire and taught us how to read these poets. This was something very different from Brazilian culture, which, especially modernism

and postmodernism, was dominated by the issue of constructivism. Of course, Surrealism came at a moment of intense crisis in Europe. It carried a strong destructive charge. However, this tendency, this intellectual openness, was received in a different way in Brazil and took on very particular forms here. It is even said that Surrealism never existed in Brazil because it wasn't needed. The country is already so surreal as it is, in the bad sense of that word.

I was at the tenth Havana Biennale when you made Barroco de Lírios. Your work is always related to the environment for which it is produced. In Havana, you took the Cuban national product, the cigar, and reversed its usual movements, making the cigar itself into a kind of knot, a knot of cigars. When works from the Biennale were selected for exhibition in Europe, your piece was left out. The curator seemed to be worried that presenting these twisted cigars could be bad for the country's image.

That happened with that work, and perhaps other works too. Oddly enough, just after that I went to do an exhibition in New York where the curator was vehement about trying to exclude a work of mine because he thought my use of three pre-pubescent girls might, although they were clothed, pass for an invitation to sexual transgression. In the end I told him, "The last time something like this happened to me it was in Havana. It's funny that it should be happening now in New York." In fact, the Havana piece had a second part, a performance that was meant to be given in the corridors of the Castillo. A group of Blacks was going to give out cigar boxes and smoke cigars to create a kind of "smoking out-cum-incensing" at the entrance to the Biennale building. In the morning, not long before the opening, when the performance was supposed to take place, the curator came to my hotel to explain that it couldn't be done. The reasons and significance of all this were left unstated.

Today, this performance is accompanied by a poem, which I hadn't originally planned. It is an integral part of the cigar boxes and also appears in the book that bears the same title as the work, *Barroco de Lírios*. It relates the adventures of the great Brazilian mathematician, Erdos. In this book, I make up this story about him traveling to Havana to meet a cigar-roller, Efraim (he's the one who actually made the cigars for me), as if there were a kind of secret pact between the two of them. There comes a moment when they are standing outside the cathedral in Havana, which is one of the great American Baroque churches, and start smoking the twisted cigars they gave me. Then I start imagining things and I realize that the smoke from these cigars is rising vertically into the sky, without curling. This is a backhanded way of criticizing the European approach with its "cooler" kind of art which thinks in terms of destinies and ends. I think that American criticism is very full of that, and Minimal Art itself is suffused with it, as if there was this teleology, as if they were going to reach some point of arrival.



«Uma experiência de fina física sutil». Exposition à «Walk in Soho», New York, en 1995. "Walk in New York" show

And as if the universal strategy of art consisted in saying as much as possible with as little as possible.

The second approach, to which we are the heirs, consists in saying as much as possible in as little time as possible, which brings us closer to the Baroque spirit. Perhaps this is a way of fighting against the Anglo-American strategy which holds that art is directed at some end. Our combat is a homeopathic one, not an allopathic one. This culture, which is the milk of this society, adopts a more suitable strategy for rethinking the question of modernity that, for me, is still relevant. The modern strategies elaborated up to and including Constructivism and Minimalism are not as fruitful as these works that incorporate the Surrealist spirit alongside the Constructivist spirit, but do so from a different perspective, one which I think is present, for example, in my own work.



«Tesouro Besouros». Exposition au Ludwig Museum, Cologne, en 1994. *Exhibition at Ludwig Museum, Cologne*

Your works are always problematic because you create a kind of "social alchemy." Take, for example, Palindromo Incesto at the Jeu de Paume's Désordre show: the work was long hidden away in the storerooms, even though it had been warmly received by the critics.

Fortunately, artworks still have the power to surprise us. However much insight you can bring to the analysis of artworks, when you are no longer learning anything from them you may as well retire. Sometimes, what you learn may come from the street. It is this attention to art and to life that characterizes poetry. Does that mean you have to be a poet? We are all poets. But it is those who devote themselves to the discipline of trying to decipher the invisible whom society transforms into poets. I remain vigilant, and in a sense the work itself also produces this attentiveness. Yes, that work spent a long time in the store rooms, then it was taken to an exhibition in New York, a fine show called *The Contemporary*. Later Carlos Basualdo organized an exhibition covering 20 years of work that began at Bard College and went to the MoMA in Miami, then Caracas—where this



«Palindromo incesto». Installation à la Galerie nationale du Jeu de paume, Paris, 1992. (Ph. K. Ignatiadis)

piece appeared again, coming back like the return of the repressed.⁽¹⁾ Works too go through a period of repression and then return, with a strong confirmatory effect. When, ten years later, a work reappears with all its vigor intact, I think that is more interesting than the power of novelty.

It's as if it had been immured, like the character in Barril de Amontillado. This kind of forced stay in the storerooms was a way of neutralizing the effect of the work, don't you think?

More important than this time in the store rooms—which is obviously not a financial or economic question, even if the financial question is related to government cultural policies: one can observe the same lack of attention from official milieus—more important than that was what happened two days before the opening of the Jeu de Paume exhibition. The museum was occupied by demonstrating farmers because, as you know, the Jeu de Paume is a symbolically charged place which harks back to the French Revolution. Well, the farmers broke down the doors, invaded the museum and took the employees hostage, along with whomever else was there, myself included. As you might expect, these farmers had no very clear ideas about the reality of contemporary art. They were rather shocked to see that French taxpayer's money had been spent on works such as these. I remember they all went to the end of the hall, to that piece by Kiki Smith consisting of a kind of carpet of sperm and crystal. Some of them started touching it and picking it up. They were outraged. "What is this? Is this our money?" And I replied, "No, it's sperm." They put the pieces back on the floor at once. The work wasn't damaged. For me that is an even more important characteristic of an artwork than the immurement: the fact that it remains a part of life, and it survives.

Vestals and the Organ Trade

Now, about another very unusual work, your performance at Documenta. For me it was like an encounter between vestals and people who trade in human organs. It expressed something very deep-seated in you. You respect classical mythology but at the same time you see it as open, quite apart from the overly static philological side.

I often say that I prefer hermeneutics to semiotics. We approach a work more through symbols than through signs. What makes these symbols come alive is of course their mythical status. We in America, in Brazil, are good at making mythologies. We still have this capacity to construct. One day when I was in Berlin I went to see an aquarium where they had a sculpture exhibition. I went up to the second floor where the toads were. Walking through this room with the German curator, the situation suddenly struck me as weird. "Why," I asked him, "do you condemn to life imprisonment not only frogs that have killed but also frogs that may be innocent?" I was referring to the toad that killed Augusto Ruschi, a great naturalist who lived in our country and who worked at the Berlin aqua-



«Palindromo incesto». Installation à la Galerie nationale du Jeu de paume, Paris. 1992. "Incest Palindrome,"

rium. Many things are being parodied here [laughs]. I think we need to get closer to this method. It's no coincidence that fictional elements have become increasingly prominent in the approach I take in my work. What I offer is a fantasy on fantasy. The aim is to open up the work, not to close it in. In this way the artwork becomes multiple, open.

You are very open in your relation to other artists. For example, your relationship with Cabelo, a younger artist, and with Marepe, is always based on "propulsion"—as if what they are doing was an extension of the art that you make. Here again you are a transgressor, because the mentality of most artists closes them in on themselves.

Transgression implies the idea of a rule, a norm. An individual must transgress a norm. In Brazil these days, the norm to be transgressed is the one that society hides. Society tacitly downplays contemporary art in favor of other forms of cultural expression such as pop music. To transgress that norm means propelling, acting as midwife, putting the spotlight on other people's productions which come out of already existing work, such as the production of Cildo Meireles or Walmécio Caldas, or older, more historical work, that of artists who are no longer here. I see this as a political act, not a personal one. ■

Translation, C. Penwarden

(1) Tunga uses the French term "refoulé" from the Freudian term "retour du refoulé."

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"Incest Palindrome,"