

Paulo Nazareth: A Craque in the Mid-field

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The trivial, sometimes ordinary, somewhat precarious, apparently improvised and slightly aestheticized materiality that characterises the work of Paulo Nazareth relates to the life conditions of subaltern groups in Brazil, as well as in other contexts of the African diaspora and in Africa.

As with some other Afro-descendant artists in Brazil – I am thinking of Seu Gabriel (Gabriel Joaquim dos Santos), Arthur Bispo do Rosário and Nêgo (Geraldo Simplício) – Nazareth produces his works using what he finds around him: Art, just as the world, starts at his feet. However, unlike artists who are adscribed to a single place, specific materials and modes of making, Nazareth manipulates a wide range of artefacts in multiple ways and acts, apparently without spatial limitations. He moves across a territory wider than, for example, the *Casa da Flor* that Seu Gabriel built from crockery fragments, inspired by a dream, or the hospice where Arthur Bispo do Rosário built an alternative universe for himself with objects at hand, or the *Jardim do Nêgo*, that Geraldo Simplício has been modelling with earth and loam around himself. Nazareth's field of action is broad because, as it is stated in his book, he "lives and works around the globe".¹ Nevertheless, the artist seems for me similar to Seu Gabriel, to Arthur Bispo do Rosário and to Nêgo, less for the precarious material he scavenges on a global scale, and more for his poetic subjectivity, by the way he reinvents the imaginary with what he collects and manipulates, and goes off the beaten track.

Although his works seem to emerge naturally, consistently and quietly from his experience, nonetheless they are the result of artifice. As part of his everyday life, he thinks and makes them; and in making them, he lives. Certainly, there is continuity, but there are also gaps, choices, a conscious letting go of control. There are mediations and decisions. Taking advantage of how language can have sometimes an indeterminate meaning. Nazareth moves with certain ease between languages, as well as among various contemporary approaches to making and exhibiting art. He engages his own body, appropriates things that come his way and rearticulates them as images, artefacts and environments. He is a wanderer, collector and a multimedia installation artist all at once.

¹ "Biografia" (Biography), in Paulo Nazareth 2012.



Ill. 1. Paulo Nazareth, installation view, *Beyond the Black Atlantic* exhibition Hannover Kunstverein 2020. Photography by Raimund Zakowski © Kunstverein Hannover

Nazareth is not the first artist to seek ways to articulate, intertwine, and fuse art and life. Gideon Lewis-Krauss has said that, inverting most artistic practice, “what Nazareth’s performance does, ingeniously, is present itself as play disguised as work” (2019). However, just as he involves his life in such games, and involves other personalities working in the field of the visual arts, he makes this game a way of life. Indeed, his journeys from Brazil to the U.S., and Europe, en route through Africa, could be seen as actions that aim to subvert colonial hegemonies and centres. These artistic projects are, at the same time, ways of knowing and cultivating his Amerindian, African and European ancestry, and ways of intertwining personal and collective stories with the history of mankind.

When he says that his training in art began in childhood, in his family and community environment, Nazareth does not want to assert himself as a self-taught person, in contrast to how Heitor dos Prazeres, Maria Lira and Eustáquio Neves, among many other Afro-descendant artists are often described. On the contrary, he does not neglect to mention that, for him, as is the same for Agnaldo Manoel dos Santos, Abdias do Nascimento and Jorge dos Anjos although in different circumstances, dialogue with other artists was essential; in his case, the conversation with Mestre Orlando, a visual artist, and the puppeteer Tião Vieira. For Nazareth, as for artists such as Estevão Silva, Arthur Timóteo da Costa and Rubem Valentim earlier and Ayrson Heráclito, Rommulo Vieira Conceição and Rosana Paulino, institutionalised artistic education has been essential to his career, namely his time as a student of Visual Art and Linguistics at the Federal University of Minas Gerais in Belo Horizonte.² His art training occurred in different contexts –

² About Paulo Nazareth’s formative years: “Biografia” (Biography), in Paulo Nazareth, 2012, and Paulo Nazareth 2019.

in more or less formalised ways, inside, connected or outside cultural institutions – but what should be emphasised especially is the breadth and heterogeneity of his formative process and, above all, its existential dimension.

Unsurprisingly, then, Nazareth is well aware of the limits and challenges art is facing today. In one of his first works, *A History of the Americas [I will make myself a pop artist] [conceptual, (contemporary)]* from 2005, he spelled out an intervention plan within a framework of Pop Art and Conceptualism, an approach far from utopias and ingenuity. Nor is it surprising that he uses the structure and support offered by the international gallery Mendes Wood – with which he has collaborated since 2011 – as well as other institutions, for his performances. And it is just as unsurprising that he simultaneously shows a perfect understanding of the conventionality of art and confidence in the poetic moment be it intense, banal or degraded, as in the series *HERE IS ART – PAMPHLET*.

These ideas do not soften his commitment to different causes; on the contrary, they enhance his participation in the struggles against racism, colonialism and social inequality, among others.

Nazareth tackles directly the persistent attraction of the primitive exotic in the art system, the craving for potent impurities on the margins, more or less distant from the hegemonic centres. He often uses irony, as in the *Banana Market/Art Market* work that he presented in 2011 at the Art Basel Miami Beach fair. There, in front of a Volkswagen Kombi loaded with banana clusters, he exhibited himself carrying a plaque with the inscription “My image of exotic man for sale”. He also scrutinizes the profound contradictions inherent in the taste for the exotic, as when he says, in a text on Sonia Gomes, that “the eye that iz no people iz eye that refuse see the other” (Nazareth 2017: 119).

Like Antonio Obá, Jaime Lauriano and Priscila Rezende, among other Afro-descendant artists based in Brazil, Nazareth fights racism by blurring the environment, making opaque what is supposed to be transparent and even non-existent. He makes visible that racism is structural and that it contributes to the inequalities of Brazilian society and elsewhere.

In this struggle, it is notable that Nazareth goes beyond the polarisation between black and white, which is increasingly dominant in the debate. He identifies himself as black and, through his work, asserts black empowerment. Even so, his professional name associates Paulo, from his birth name, with Nazareth, a name the artist adopted from his maternal grandmother – “mestiça”, “afro-indigenous”, “a nobody”, “a woman from an indefinite place” – and he distils his experience of life “midway”, because he understands that “contemporary art is the very construction of that place” (Nazareth 2019: 20-23). He has also said: “In my ‘mestiçagem’ (being of mixed race) I make myself / I am indigenous and black / It’s incredible”.³ Moreover, he has even presented Minas Gerais, the state where he was born, as the “heartland of Brazilian racial mixture”.⁴ However, to emphasise his African ancestry as part of a multi-ethnic experience, does not mean he praises, racial

3 Paulo Nazareth in Kiki Mazzucchelli, “Sobre marfins, dentes e ossos”, 2012.

4 Paulo Nazareth, “Possíveis anedotas”, 2012.

mixture. In fact, Nazareth explores the visual, linguistic and bodily effects of racial mixture in order to question the identity markers and their adverse social consequences. In photographic images such as those in the series *What is the colour of my skin? / Qual é a cor da minha pele?*, made in 2013, Nazareth poses alongside people with darker skin tones than his own, like artists Carlos Martiel and Moisés Patrício. This allows him to reverse the many and perverse strategies of discrimination by playing with the chromatic gradations of the epidermis.

He said: "I am not black, nor Indian, nor white ... (...) too white to be black and too black to be white. This is not bad; I have been transforming myself ... remaining the same".⁵ Like the found objects he appropriates, manipulates and transposes to the world of art, he transforms himself. He does so by way of these objects and in relation to other artists as well as other actors outside the art world. Nazareth makes art games into a serious game, with which he seems to have fun and even enchant himself. He acts like a player who is aware that football is a global business nowadays, but when he enters the field, he tries to have fun while playing, even though he knows the implications at stake.

The mention of soccer makes me think of the word *craque*- crack, in English. In Portuguese, *craque* is a noun that designates someone highly skilled in what he knows or does and is a term used widely in soccer. However, *craque* is also an interjection that resonates with breaking, splitting, or breaching. Enchanting, engaging, Paulo Nazareth, like many Brazilian soccer players, is a *craque* who comes from a peripheral context, from the margins, and has reached the centre. He is also an artist who, through his work, in a calm, good-humoured, almost docile and apparently harmless manner, digs a critical break in the middle of the field.

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⁵ Paulo Nazareth in Janaina Melo, "Conversas e caminhos de viagem", 2012.