

THE PLACE OF TEXTUALITY IN ART: INTERVIEW WITH BERNARDO PINTO DE ALMEIDA

O LUGAR DA TEXTUALIDADE NA ARTE: ENTREVISTA A BERNARDO PINTO DE ALMEIDA

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Bernardo (Alberto Frey) Pinto de Almeida (Peso da Régua, 1954) is a poet and essayist with work published in Portugal and internationally. He has been engaged in poetic, theoretical, historiographical and critical activity since 1974. He is a researcher and full professor of art history and theory. From a close relationship with some of the main Portuguese artists of the second half of the twentieth century, he has developed critical approaches to their respective works in creative collaboration, thus setting his own apart from other critical discourses¹.

As I walk down the stairs towards the Serralves café-bar, next to the library, a prearranged meeting place with Bernardo Pinto de Almeida, I am surprised by the quiet, unlike the memory of my last visit when many students filled all the tables in the vicinity. It is May 11, 2022, and the afternoon, stretching from the outside, which Siza's windows allow me to enjoy, is not very bright. Being early, I start by having a slow coffee and spread the books, and my notes, over the table — besides mine, only one other is taken — to review my script. Communication and artistic mediation, the subject of the conversation I intend to promote, unfolds in multiple dimensions. I think beforehand that perhaps the discussion is not expected to be exhaustive. As my guiding principle, I take the interview as an event. A random walk for two through the meanderings of a thought unveiled by both, driven by the reference to an object which is a shared anchor that also pushes the interlocutors adrift. Anticipating Baudelaire (2006) as a mediator and common reference, drawing closer to the discourse of the interviewee, I think of the prospective conversation ahead in modern terms as a “fleeting pleasure of circumstances”, a practice of extracting the “eternal from the transitory”, an exercise in sharing knowledge and experience updated in the unfolding of a contingency.

Meanwhile, I suddenly see Bernardo Pinto de Almeida arriving. After a prelude made of memories of his time at the University of Minho, in the bygone days of the Institute of Social Sciences, we begin sewing ideas that unfold slowly, unhurriedly, and ultimately heading for a new stop, which will be the starting point for the transcription published in this context.

¹ For more information, refer to “Bernardo Pinto de Almeida” (2022).

Helena Pires (HP): In last weekend's *Expresso* magazine, I stumbled upon an article (Martins, 2022) about Warhol's painting depicting Marilyn on a blue background. It addressed the astronomical valuation the work has attained, considering the history of art, since it has exceeded even Picasso on the market. The translation of an excerpt from the article reads: "Arthur Danto saw in the Brillo boxes facsimiles of the soap boxes any American citizen could find in the supermarket that which could only be defined as art by mediation or curation" (Martins, 2022, pp. 53–55). My question — mindful of the classical notions of the loss of "aura" and the effects of "technical reproducibility" — is whether, since modern art, defined by its closeness to mundane life and the adoption of the mechanisms of that "technical reproducibility", art has yet to make room for an increased relevance of criticism or other forms of mediation to legitimise the work and the artist.

Bernardo Pinto de Almeida (BPA): Firstly, I advocate a certain historical conception of art. That is, I believe art needs a landscape, a background of *historicity* to be thought of in its successive regimes. Even contemporaneity, which in my view is a *post-historical period*, in the sense that art itself is not conceived historically — or has not been conceived historically in the last 20 or 30 years — even there art is *historically post-historical*. It does not cease to have a historical component, even in its post-historical negation.

Why do I start here? Because I argue that there is a very violent rupture between modernity and what we might call the classical period. Let us call the classical period the one that precedes Romanticism. All the art produced up to Romanticism. The matrix that cuts across the model of art production and perception of art up to Romanticism establishes continuity. From modernity onwards, this typology changes and this matrix also changes.

What changes? First of all, the regime of the discourse changes. All classical art is made on a conception in which discourse precedes doing. For example, let us look at Renaissance art and even that which precedes Renaissance art. There is a conception of art and culture that pervades the domains of philosophy, of thought. It is not structured thought like we have today. Since Vasari himself, there has been a thought of art that defines the terms by which art should be made. Hence, we might say, even if hastily, that there is a discourse that precedes the making. When Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael... the greatest names in the history of art from that period, moved towards the artistic act, they were not only anchored on technical training and a mastery of all that was known about execution, drawing and the conception of the space, among other things. They started with a perfectly structured and profound philosophy, which came from Greece, and partly through Rome. To give two or three examples: Raphael's *School of Athens* is a treatise on geometry, but also on theory and philosophical thought; we have Plato and Aristotle and several great thinkers represented, which shows the extent to which everything is a deeply structured conceptual process, ontological and theological processes, as in the Sistine Chapel, where there is a very strong ontological and theological key.

God hands the world to Adam... all of Michelangelo's work has a very strong theological dimension and a profound knowledge of the time's theology and medieval and ancient theology. The artist had an extraordinary command of all the knowledge and wisdom available up to that time. In like manner, Botticelli's *Primavera* contains 500 species of plants that have already been identified (there may even be more). In other words, Botticelli's *Primavera* is a treatise on botany, almost encyclopaedic. Classical art is an encyclopaedic art that conveys all the knowledge available in its time...

HP: That somehow synthesises...

BPA: ...and synthesises. Because there was a pedagogical dimension, particularly in the Middle Ages, in the education of the faithful... I am talking about the West.

Modernity introduced an enormous disruption into this process. Instead of relying on what has been, the notion of art can build on what is or will be. When Baudelaire, one of the greatest art thinkers ever, wrote that extraordinary text, which is the bible of all modernity, *The Painter of Modern Life*, he established that we do not all have to keep doing what the classics did. Nor do we have to keep dressing our characters, the characters that inhabit our painting, as the classics did, because we are different now. So, we must create our own model of thought and transport it to the figures that one day will make our own posterity, that is, those that one day will look at us as we look at the classics, making us examples of another time...

HP: Is it an invitation to create new references?

BPA: New references, absolutely. Take two or three examples. Manet is an extraordinary painter who introduces unprecedented violence: the whole system of modern life within space, the theatres, cabarets, the streets, the races at Longchamp, what we now call *public space*, the Tuileries Garden... in Manet, we find the painting of his own time. And here, an absolute rupture with the classical model is introduced. Consider Rodin. When he creates *The Bourgeois of Calais*, when he creates *Balzac*, he introduces a modern configuration. We no longer see classical beauty. We see a man worn out by life, deformed... that consistency of the classical and exemplary space disappears in favour of a profound tension of the real.

From then on, art will move in that direction.

HP: Towards ordinary life?

BPA: Yes, towards ordinary life. That means stepping down from the yardstick of ideal models. The biopolitics, already...

HP: Disengaging from its connection with the classical paradigms of its history and connecting with the contemporary?

BPA: All modernity is an eminently historical process and, more than classical art that engaged well with Greece and Rome, modern art wants history. History is its horizon and its desire.

HP: Should it be committed?

BPA: It should be committed. To a certain extent, modernity looks to the present as its horizon. If the “text” of classical art is the whole of one’s knowledge, the text of modernity is the newspaper. It is the knowledge of the day.

HP: The topicality.

BPA: It is the topicality, yes. However, on top of this process that modernity introduces, another one will be generated that is absolutely unexpected and that, in my opinion, is the offspring of the chain of events, especially the Industrial Revolution and World War I, which gave an enormous acceleration to time and historical time. Modernism, in my view, was born at the beginning of the 20th century, between 1905 and 1910.

On the one hand, it attends to this new *episteme* introduced by industrialisation and seeks to integrate the mechanical processes that industry has brought. The real is no longer simply that of what is lived but is also that of the machine, that of the acceleration of time and space. It is the real of mechanics. Modernism teaches us a lesson, profound attention to the new reality. Marinetti will write, in *Le Figaro*, in the “Manifesto of Futurism”, “a racing car is as beautiful as the Venus de Milo”... That means a lot. It means that, from now on, the classic has to give way to something else. Those first 20 years of modern art, from 1905 to 1925, roughly, which even follow World War I, are of an absolutely portentous acceleration never seen before.

HP: In just a few decades...

BPA: Not even two. It is a very short period. Plus it is in a very small Europe, because it is in the centre of Europe, France, England, Germany... and then it radiates, and at the same time, it has a very strong absorptive power... there is a melting pot there...

HP: ... mobility between capitals...

BPA: Even in Moscow... there is an irradiation which is simultaneously an absorption. That signals a new possibility that is no longer that of the present but that of the future. There is an inversion of the temporal paradigm.

HP: An interpretation of reality anticipating the changes that already show signs?

BPA: Exactly. That, for me, is the main point of our discussion. That is, we went from a cultural and conceptual structure that is classical art, based on what is known to what was already known — as a matter of fact, there is a very famous phrase by Saint Thomas Aquinas: “we are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants”, referring to all the knowledge of the Classical Age... —, we went from a situation based on a deep knowledge of everything that existed to a new model of knowledge, based on the present and alert to the signs of the present... because modernity lasted 40 years, from 1860 to 1900.

Very quickly, modernism changed the perception of the world, which is no longer the present or what was before but what is to come. And then, the whole horizon of the legitimacy of art becomes the destination that the future will bring forward. That is a new conception of time. Ultimately, this has very profound consequences, namely in the lack of a *text*, a pre-existing text, in the sense that we were discussing. Modernism has no text. It projects itself into a time to come and into a “text” that legitimises, at every moment, its various shifts. Modernism never is. *It will be*; modernism will be. That *will be* that almost ontological dimension of a being to come, of a becoming...

HP: ... can we now talk of Deleuze’s becoming?

BPA: Yes, it is a projection in time. The *becoming-other*, which requires the unwritten text.

HP: It calls for the text; it requires the text.

BPA: It requires the text and gives the criticism a relevance it had never had before. Because criticism was, until modernity, how a particular production belonged to a school... the new criticism projects the justification of what will be.

HP: Does it produce meaning?

BPA: It produces meaning, exactly. I will give you an example. When Duchamp sent the urinal to the Society of Independent Artists, and it was refused, he published a small scandal in *The Blind Man* magazine. It was an image of the work photographed by Alfred Stieglitz, and Apollinaire wrote an explanatory text stating that it was absurd not to consider the *art of the toilet* in the art of our time. A urinal, in the artistic tradition, made no sense at all. So, all this conceptual processing projected into the future requires a text to legitimise it constantly.

HP: Then again, the author of the text is not unknown, and the context of the publication is also legitimising.

BPA: Absolutely. This process drags on; it has a strong interlocution in World War II in which the cultural process, which seemed to ramp full steam ahead...

HP: Is curbed...

BPA: ...is curbed, and more, it is repressed. Otherwise, it would be a long conversation.

HP: In the meantime, we leap to the United States of America (USA) benchmarks in the 50s/60s...

BPA: Because there is a displacement...

HP: Is Europe no longer able to provide a space of freedom?

BPA: No longer. There is a collapse of Europe... a sinking. Europe loses the ability to give legitimacy to this art. European culture was not able to halt the massacre and the war. In fact, we are now witnessing a terrible situation from that point of view again.

HP: With an impact on art?

BPA: If we had a third war, it would be tragic.

HP: The art world is not unscathed.

BPA: It can not be. Thus, when art moved to the USA in the late 1940s, right after the war, new contexts emerged. The US had virtually no art in the classical sense...

HP: .. they did not have that heritage, that history...

BPA: So they had incomparably greater freedom for experimentation.

In the USA, art became a matter of State. It was experienced in a way unknown in Europe. Museums were built from the 1930s onwards. Extraordinary things. Guggenheim, Rockefeller... European art was accepted. In the 1930s, in 35 or 36, Picasso had his first retrospective in the USA while still gaining ground in Europe, although with great prestige. However, he already had a retrospective in the USA. The *Dadaists* had a retrospective in the USA when they were cast out of Europe.

Duchamp had enormous prestige in the USA...

HP: I am thinking of Beuys himself, who also had enormous visibility in the USA.

BPA: That was a change. They welcomed the art that they lacked. Duchamp states that in his interviews. As Duchamp would say, in '68, everything was very easy because not only did they have a huge appetite for art in the USA as they were willing to spend money on it, but they accepted practically everything because they were a bit naive. Duchamp

said that, not me, but it was obvious. Because, in fact, they opened themselves up to a very, very broad experimentation. Very much based always on the possibility of the future.

HP: At that time, how were activities like criticism doing?

BPA: It was very strong. From Greenberg to Schapiro, before him, Michael Fried, who is still alive... America introduced very early modern art criticism and history into university education. It created journals. Rauschenberg, in '66, was brought to the Venice Biennale because there was a state department for that. Rauschenberg also got a grant from the United States Information Agency, a fund today known to have belonged to the CIA. It was part of the American strategy to oppose socialism in Russia.

The strategy claimed America was so free that it made abstract art, back when the Russians were still painting panels and glorifying type figures in socialist realism.

American abstract art, since the 1950s, has been protected by the American state as a matter of free world propaganda against the Soviet Union. As American cinema was, so was dance.

On the other hand, this group, John Cage, Rauschenberg... who define the openness at the end of the 1950s to this new American landscape, is the first great legitimiser.

The Surrealists, in particular, went to the US to escape the war. And after the war was over, in the 50s/60s, Warhol said that John Cage was the most influential person in New York. Some of them came from the European Bauhaus. The Americans had made a deep assimilation of the modernist model. When Warhol emerged, he already had space to assert himself. Warhol's *ready-mades* are a continuity of Duchamp.

HP: Speaking of Warhol, and going back to the significance of the text, it is well known how strategically he managed his career and cultivated a good relationship with the critics, the gallery owners, the art dealers...

BPA: Quite a lot... some were Jewish immigrants who had settled in the US and had the capital. There is a famous interview with Warhol that's on YouTube where they ask him a question, and he says, "I don't know how to answer that, ask my gallerist".

HP: As if to say I don't own the discourse.

BPA: I don't own the discourse. One can interpret this as a consignment, a surrender to someone else's text. A text that explains what I do. Now, this passage, going back to the archaeology I undertook and the successive models, will, in fact, lead to the *postmodern condition* of art at the end of the 1970s, when Lyotard published the text *The Postmodern Condition*. Postmodernism in art is anticipated because postmodernism consists of an epistemological shift, a linguistic turn, which consists of the transition from a comprehensive model to the idea that art corresponds to a thought being constructed next door and that this will explain the very outbreak of art.

HP: So, the reliance on discursive production is accentuated.

BPA: Absolutely. I tried to address this in the last book I published. American art, influenced by Duchamp and others and by a Protestant line, is the art of the text, not the image. That is to say, while European, Catholic, art is an art of the image...

HP: Given the tradition of iconicity...

BPA: All that... American art is the art of the text. The idea of there being an explanation for the image.

HP: The perception of art changes, but so does the artist's self-perception.

BPA: The artist who creates the image, the iconographer, can suddenly create the image for a text. Take Lichtenstein. Conceptual art is based on the idea of there being a text. Everything is explanatory.

HP: The process itself?

BPA: The process itself. The first artist of postmodernist art is an art critic, Donald Judd. He changes his role from critic to artist.

In other words, American art is an eminently textual art based on a regime of discourse and ceases to be an art of the image that stood for itself, which was the European tradition. In this difference lies the fundamental basis of what we call "post-modernity", not as a sociological concept but as a transition from one paradigm to another. It is an art not of the image but of textuality.

HP: We were talking about criticism, and I was thinking that we are also witnessing a change, even in terminology, since today, we speak perhaps more of curation. Criticism used to have a more legitimising role for art and artists in this more closed world, the art world. Today, perhaps, we can observe the transition from criticism to curation also because the term is more popular nowadays and will have taken, I wonder, the place of criticism, expanding its scope. I also wonder if curation hasn't also expanded. If it hasn't opened that limit, that closed the art world, since it cares about the public and not only the art dealer, the gallery owner and hence this different strategy that tries to define how to reach the public. That is maybe why today we talk about art education, the educational service... There is no reputable gallery that does not have its educational service. All this makes us think about several changes that go beyond terminology. What is meant by curation, art education, and mediation?

BPA: I agree with everything you said. I would only add one dimension, which I believe is crucial. With the development of our democratic societies and the victory of

the neo-liberal model in the West, this conquest of an open democratic space, reliant on discourse and legitimation, no doubt, but open and experimental, is influenced by the Americans who claim it is possible to educate through art, art for people's development, taking children to museums. I remember that in the 70s, you could barely see a handful of people in the museums...

HP: Besides, today we can also talk about the commodification of art...

BPA: Besides that. However, when I visited the European museums in the late 70s, I remember the Prado Museum without big crowds. Today that's no longer the case. The public space has opened to art.

HP: And art has opened to the public space.

BPA: And art has opened to the public space. The transition from the paradigm of criticism to the paradigm of curation has to do with this. The curator is the one who does the mediation. While the critic was a figure who still sought to explain art on an academic level, the curator mediates for the public. He decodes and shows the time to time. That is as if the art of his time could coexist with other times. It changes the very nature of art.

HP: I am thinking of Jeff Koons...

BPA: It is more of a *performance art*. He is a very bright man.

HP: They are artists who capture the ethos of their time...

BPA: Absolutely. When Koons had the first retrospective in Europe, at the Georges Pompidou Centre — and this is very interesting from the point of view of the sociology of art, at least — the largest room was by Jeff Koons and the room generally attributed to artists of some importance, but smaller, was by Duchamp. Now, this shows a profound paradigm shift. Duchamp was the hero of art in contemporary times, but interestingly enough, that is now the other way around. On the opening day, Koons was asked what he thought of his exhibition alongside Duchamp, and he said, "I find it very interesting that there are two exhibitions of two artists who were interested in the ready-made". As if Duchamp hadn't invented the ready-made and he wasn't just a successor...

HP: He put himself at the same level.

BPA: He totally put himself at the same level. That is what *post-history* is all about. It is a time in which historical succession is wiped clean. Because time now is not thought of historically but is thought of circularly.

HP: Back to Koons. He has been accused of plagiarism...

BPA: He is accused all the time. He has more plagiarism lawsuits than any other contemporary artist. Besides that only made sense in the period of the historical conception, which was suspended...

HP: Even so, can we say he has his own language?

BPA: He does. He is a follower of Warhol. He takes Warhol's paradigm to exhaustion. Koons is a millionaire artist who treats his art like he treats his business.

HP: Unabashedly...

BPA: Absolutely unabashedly. Smiling all the time. He's an utterly *medial* figure. A media figure, a pop star. He's part of the world of film actresses, the world of fashion... he's a figure who blends in with the popular culture.

HP: Koons breaks the distinction between high culture and popular culture...

BPA: Absolutely. Though the distinction existed in modernism. Adorno himself bases his whole aesthetic theory on a fundamental division between the model of popular culture and the model of high culture. The Frankfurt School transposed that message, which has been completely dissolved by contemporaneity.

In modernism, the critics' interlocutors are not the general public. Rather the small art world. The curator, in this sense, is a mediation figure incomparably more suited to an open *mediation*; that is, he cannot ignore the public.

However, there is still resistance and even resentment.

HP: I was thinking about the curator's profile since they can combine multiple skills, production, mediation with the artist, mediation with the media, and the pedagogical role, but some people believe the curator today also wants to step into the almost authorial field. All the more so because discursive production is also gaining prominence. In fact, the media always highlights the reference to a given exhibition curated by...

BPA: There is a transformation between the modernist and contemporary paradigms in which post-modernity is a crossing point. Contemporaneity is characterised by the loss of an authorial dimension and the shift of the author's role to the reality of art itself.

With Matisse, there is still a dispute over recognising the role of genius. This model of distinction and mediation has evolved into another in which art exists for its own sake (in essence, a model more like that of the 18th century). One works for art and not for the world. Koons makes what is already art when you start making it; that is, he goes to the art as the worker goes to the work. He is the boss (of a team). Art is for society.

There is a shift from the figure of the individual to the figure of the collective. But the problem is *how does the public perceive what is called "art"*? The curator helps in the mediation, taking on himself the protagonism of the activity. Curators last 15 days, three weeks, two years... they don't last any longer than that. The curator is like the television anchor. He succeeds while the programme is on air.

HP: Is their protagonism temporary?

BPA: It is temporary. However, while they are the anchor, they define what is to be shown. The curator is a figure of mediation between the powers. The curator is the one who explains to the media the importance of what is exhibited. And not only explains it but translates it into a media language.

HP: And does the curator reinvent meanings?

BPA: They reinvent meanings already covered by the media. While the modernist critic spoke to God, the curator speaks to ordinary mortals. And to the media. There is no exhibition of any significance today that is not preceded by an approach to the patrons, among others, a pre-viewing... that is, there is a new sociology of art. That means the nature of art, on the one hand, the art of a collective nature, although the artistic model based on the hero figure is still very present. The artist today is just the craftsman. That inaccessible figure is over.

That is not to say that one cannot take a back seat to the other. By becoming a much more collective and collectivised thing, art participates in the ideological construction of society. That is really important. Museums are crowded, and, in fact, the purpose of putting an end to art as something accessible only to the most privileged classes has been achieved.

At the cost of losing the sovereignty of the artist, who lost his aura (of genius). And the critic, who ceased to be the one who clarified. The curator does that directly to the media. And is open to the contamination of the market. Contemporary art demands a very strong market.

There has to be a lot of money circulating. The fact that the market has grown is not a negative thing. It is an advantage for art. This new art regime clarifies art in this new mass paradigm. No society has spent as much money on art as our democratic society in the West. That means that we give art extreme value. Art democratises society. It is such a strong social mobiliser that it produces the economic and financial society... and the public. Today art holds almost the place of religion in the 15th century and art is more political today than it has ever been.

HP: Addressing a more specific question, do you believe in the role of the art educational service in the context of different organisations? Is it important to educate the public and not just open the doors of the gallery or the museum?

BPA: In the context of democratic culture, art has been created as an educator of society itself. Today art plays a fundamental role in educating societies. Why? Because art is still a place of social, political and symbolic experimentation.

When some artistic model emerges, although it no longer has the outrageous character it had in modernism (women with three eyes, etc.), art has become one of the elements of contemporary thinking.

When we visit an exhibit, we may be looking at the model of society that anticipates any future because this dimension of open dialogue between art and society is as vibrant as ever. It is not about art that projects itself into the horizon of the future, in the sense of saying they will ultimately say we are right, but it is, on the contrary, a telescoping of the future in the present.

Art has always had an anticipatory value. Only in the past did it cause scandals when it moved too far into the present. Today, as art teaches tolerance, openness, and availability to the other... we see images of the future in the present. This acceptance is a hallmark of the contemporary. Today we no longer discuss whether it is good or bad. It is there because it is to be seen. That is a profound change in societies' nature and perception of difference.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is supported by national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, I.P., under the project UIDB/00736/2020 (base funding) and UIDP/00736/2020 (programme funding).

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Submitted: 30/09/2022 | Accepted: 02/11/2022



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