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Walter Zanini and Roberto Pontual: Two Critical Commitments in Brazil

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Walter Zanini and Roberto Pontual: Two Critical Commitments in Brazil

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Cristina Freire. *Walter Zanini : escrituras críticas*, São Paulo : MAC USP : Annablume, 2013
Roberto Pontual. *Obra crítica*, Rio de Janeiro : Beco do Azougue, 2013. Sous la dir. de
Jacqueline Medeiros, Izabela Pucu

- 1 To the collections of writings by Brazilian art critics currently available in the market place (Mário Pedrosa¹, Frederico Moraes², Aracy Amaral³, Ronaldo Brito⁴, Paulo Sergio Duarte⁵) have recently been added the *critical writings* of Walter Zanini (1925-2013 ; his thesis was supervised by André Chastel) and the *critical oeuvre* of Roberto Pontual (1939-1992). The first collection, with short introductory chapters written by Cristina Freire, who is working today as an exhibition curator in the same institution as her illustrious predecessor, the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo, MAC-USP (which was directed by Walter Zanini from 1963 to 1978) is rich twice over: on the one hand in photographic reproductions attesting to major curatorial work, from the 1950s to the 1980s, and continuing with the 16th and 17th São Paulo Biennials (1981 and 1983); on the other hand in texts written by the same hand throughout his lengthy career. This publication is something more than a mere tribute. Walter Zanini took part in the project, re-read and altered some of his writings, and had interviews transcribed by his interlocutor in the book's first part. He reconstructs the museological dynamics of an important cultural institution in São Paulo. This book was lacking. Let us thank Cristina Freire for her outstanding work.
- 2 Just as needed is the collection of writings by Roberto Pontual, a poet and critic based in Rio de Janeiro, where he wrote for the press, mainly in the *Correio da Manhã*, and, between 1974 and 1980, in the *Jornal do Brasil*. He worked as an exhibition curator at the Museum of

Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro (MAM) between 1974 and 1978, and voluntarily expatriated himself to France in 1980. São Paulo, Rio: two “capitals”, two players.

- 3 The committed critical writings of Walter Zanini and Roberto Pontual summon us to a stimulating read that plunges us into the “faith” (and the doubts) of the curator/critic and critic/curator in a fruitful period of Brazilian art: the 1960s and the ensuing three decades (Roberto Pontual’s writings take us from 1959 to 1989, and those of Walter Zanini from 1964 to 2004). The critical issues of the exhibition and the exposition of criticism are broached with passion. In about 1970, Walter Zanini tried to invent novel forms of museography (“artistic introduction”, as he put it in 1964 in *Museological Problems*, p. 109). Like Roberto Pontual, he waxed eulogistic about anything that transgressed the traditional way of thinking about it, its display, and the experience of it. Walter Zanini thus often makes reference to the CIMAM conferences (ICOM), the International Committee of Museums of Modern Art, to talk about the debates arising in them and finding therein confirmation of his activity as a museum director (*Temple Museum, Forum Museum*, Brussels (1969), and the one held in Poland, in 1972, and so on). Both knew how to take part locally in an international dynamic. This is why Walter Zanini’s confidence in his work was total. He was informed by the certainty of making right choices to promote a concept of art methodically presented in the exhibitions he organized. The photographs of the exhibitions at the MAC-USP in around 1970 thus show areas for the public that were very akin to the educational and teaching infrastructure that goes hand-in-hand with so many exhibitions today. At a very early stage, Walter Zanini thought of the museum as not only an experimental place, but also as a centre of “research” and “documentation”. There is a marked contrast here with the situation of someone like Roberto Pontual, whose work at Rio de Janeiro’s MAM, in the mid-1970s, at times drew resistance from certain artists. As the director of a very determinedly voluntarist institution, Walter Zanini never mentioned any *resistance* whatsoever to his work from artists. The good ship MAC knew how to dodge storms because of its skipper’s skills. In the case of Roberto Pontual, the shift from the critic’s function to that of curator was problematic for him (“let my critical activity not [be] the self-interested mirror of my administrative activity”, he wrote in 1976, p. 326), and prompted him to tackle a certain amount of opposition, especially at the first exhibition, *Arte Agora (Art Now)*. Roberto Pontual counter-attacked in a lively, fiery style. In 1976, one particular argument made waves: as a critical statement, the manifesto of artists refusing to reply favourably to his invitation hit the headlines and ended up by turning those who signed it into an integral part of the exhibition. Difference: Walter Zanini sometimes worked at the outset with less known artists, who were more involved in collective and “anonymous” activities, than the artists invited by Roberto Pontual. In 1976 the refusal to take part in *Arte Agora I* was signed by Waltércio Caldas, Tunga, Cildo Meireles, José Resende, and Paulo Herkenhoff! This controversy represented a distinct moment in the modern inter-professional duel between artists and critics... If Walter Zanini was also implicitly in discussion with his interlocutors—namely, the public, the artist, and his own day-to-day work—the newspaper forced Roberto Pontual to express his problems and tiffs in the media. If Walter Zanini, in his summary style, seems to illustrate an undisputed institutional authority, by administrating to perfection the presentation of his critical choices, seeking to make his museology relevant in the conservative system of his country, protest and media coverage forced Roberto Pontual to choose to make issues out of the system, the art world, and the responsibility of those peopling it. If Walter Zanini was running a museum that promoted a living, experimental art (in particular the JAC exhibitions—

Young Contemporary Art—between 1967 and 1974), an art that was conceptual, technological, multi-media, and much appreciated by him, that fact remains that he was well aware of the battle to be fought against ambient cultural inertia. Walter Zanini knew how to promote his daring choices in the context of a dictatorship. Roberto Pontual, for his part, with his more lyrical temperament, his more prolific writing and his identification with an institutional function which was briefer in time, was also well aware of the challenges. In 1985, the list of uncompromising questions posed by him at the Teatro Casa Grande in Rio, during a public debate on the precarious situation of art and its system (p. 356) attested to a real critical lucidity. In its own way it echoes the robustness of Zanini-type management. But doubts would arise in the late 1970s. “Ah, being a critic...”, Roberto Pontual would proclaim in 1979!

- 4 Prior to the doubts, however, there was for both Roberto Pontual and Walter Zanini (who was overtaken by a certain disenchantment, but only towards the end of the 1980s) a great period of avant-garde “faith”: in experimental art, in the experience—and experiment—of art freed from hierarchy, in the aesthetic equality of the artist and the public (as Roberto Pontual wrote, “in this new situation, art as activity, the distance between artist and public is less each time around. In artistic activity, everyone’s paths cross”, p. 173), in the dilution of art in reality (this was the period when, on this theme, Roberto Pontual liked quoting and re-quoting Pierre Cabanne, and older utterances by Piet Mondrian), in collective and democratic “participation”, and in generalized creativity. In 1969, Walter Zanini championed the idea of the museum as “co-author, alongside the artist” (p. 112); and in 1972, Roberto Pontual advocated replacing “seeing by experiencing” (p. 164). What was involved was a dialectically paradoxical demythologization of art and artists: so when Walter Zanini ascribed ‘mail art’ to artists “hostile to the whole status quo which might seem indispensable to an artistic career” (p. 260), he still endowed them with an exemplary value through the specific ritual introduced by them. So, in spite of its libertarian accents, this utopian “doctrine” of an art freed from its boundaries and from its traditional ways of presentation did not prevent Walter Zanini from still incorporating this type of art in the institutional settings of the MAC or the Biennial, just as Roberto Pontual would subsequently run the Experimental Art section in Rio’s MAM... This was the period when art circles were questioning the relations between artists and museum, as was illustrated in 1972 by the theme of the fourth conference of the Association of Art Museums of Brazil, which they both took part in. If Walter Zanini presented in his work a museum dreamed of like an “organism concerned with the very act of creativity” (p. 115), this idea was also defended by Roberto Pontual, who made reference to the famous “creative Sundays”, organized in 1971 by his colleague Frederico Morais at the MAM in Rio, before mentioning the “Beaubourg Project” as a “kind of ‘awareness-raising centre’” (p. 173). All this culminated in the assertion of the existence of a terrain that was institutionally shifting: “The artist, the public, the critic, the curator and the dealer are forever switching positions” (p. 174). The artistic and cultural history of the slogan: “We’re all artists”, as well as a certain “social sculpture”, encountered in the ideas of those years elements which could be incorporated in the great narrative of the history of art. Brazil was very generous in this regard. The reading of those statements made in 1972 still rings out today, because a certain number of Brazilian artists, especially young ones, are currently putting this utopia back into circulation.

5 Walter Zanini and Roberto Pontual were also art historians. Their activities as curators and critics underwrote the way they drew up reports of earlier phases of modern art, Brazilian first and foremost, but not exclusively. Those pages are still relevant summaries. Involved is the *ad hoc* organization of a memory, for oneself and for the reader, an obligatory act within a context of relative historical amnesia. This trend would become ever-growing with the postmodern change of direction. This concern is interesting in a country where art history has long remained the poor relative of academe, even if Walter Zanini taught it and emphasized its importance by running the MAC in an avant-garde fashion, where the circulation of historical knowledge is still precarious, despite considerable advances made in the 2000s. Like snapshots of art history, the writings of Walter Zanini and Roberto Pontual enable an ignorant reader to quite simply learn many things, and permit a more informed reader to see how a history can be constructed 'live', within the parameters of a newspaper article or an exhibition catalogue. They illustrate an urgent need to develop a commitment to contemporary art, but with diachronic perspectives. Whence, for example, the concern with defining the museum's role with regard to the public: "Teaching them once again how to look at things, by providing them with the means to decipher and handle the links which connect tradition with contestation", wrote Roberto Pontual in 1976, in response to the demands of a radical experimental art (p. 325). Both men demonstrated a knowledge of the international scene. At times its narrative remained relatively unoriginal, presenting time-related landmarks tallying with the major themes of the avant-gardes as they were imposed within a dominant hegemonic narrative coming from the North, but as Brazil gradually emerged from the harshest years of its dictatorship (between 1969 and 1979), the horizons began to broaden: Walter Zanini's Biennials, in 1981 and 1983, ushered in the presentation of art languages by way of analogies and affinities, thanks to the (temporary) abolition of national representations. They undertook a significant investment in video and technological art, a consistent feature of Walter Zanini's exhibition curatorship from 1975 on. Once Roberto Pontual had expatriated to France, he also enlarged his analytical horizon. From 1975 on, his writings reflected the postmodern artistic and cultural change of direction, which he strove to go along with, in order to understand it. His interest in "form" and plasticity, and in what Walter Zanini, in 1983, would call "artisanal recurrences" (p. 280), offered a real contrast with the utopian and libertarian utterances made between 1967 and 1974. One such example, in 1979, was the declared refusal of the "immediate" involvement [...] of reality" (p. 479). In 1980, Mário Pedrosa's scepticism about the capacity of art to transform things seemed to him to correspond to this new orientation. In his catalogue essay for the Brazilian Pavilion at the 1980 Venice Biennale, Roberto Pontual weighed up an overall development: the avant-garde "is no longer about to explode. [...] The artist continues to be critical, but is replacing his cries by quibbles", he wrote (p. 548). He never liked Conceptualism, but seemed disillusioned before the "mythical magma" of Documenta 7, "a Noah's Ark", "a paradise where all of history has its spell and all conviviality is possible", "the reinstatement of the idea and the art object" (p. 569). In a lengthy reflection made in 1983, he paid close attention to the arguments of Jürgen Habermas and Edward Fry about postmodernism, which he heard at Beaubourg. That same year, for Walter Zanini, who was at the height of his curatorial career, it was time to set the record straight. Writing his introduction to the 17th São Paulo Biennale he justified the co-habitation of the historical avant-garde (Fluxus, Piero Manzoni, Flávio de Carvalho) and art associated with the new technologies, with sculpture and painting, "an emblematic imagination [...] re-

establishing attributions of the world of forms and colours with iconographic and stylistic criteria which have recourse as much to the information of recent or ancient art history as to the new mythologies of mass communication” (p. 280).⁶ The co-habitation of aesthetics, in 1981-83, did not prevent Walter Zanini, when he visited Documenta 8 in 1987, from taking note, like Roberto Pontual five years earlier, of “the disconcerting ambiguity of present-day language” (p. 334). The critical challenge of thinking about 21st century art thus makes the reading of these two committed players still very stimulating. Two books to be translated in order to fuel a history of art in progress.

NOTES

1. Pedrosa, Mário. *Textos Escolhidos*, São Paulo : Edusp, 1995 (3 volumes). Edited by Otilia Arantes
 2. Morais, Frederico. *Funarte, Col. pensamento crítico*, nº2, Rio de Janeiro, 2004. Edited by Silvana Seffrin
 3. Amaral, Aracy A. *Textos do Trópico do Capricórnio. Artigos e ensaios (1980-2005)*, São Paulo : Editora.34, 2006 (2 volumes)
 4. Brito, Ronaldo. *Experiência Crítica*, São Paulo : Cosacnaify, 2006. Edited by Sueli de Lima
 5. Duarte, Paulo Sergio. *A Trilha da trama e outros textos, Funarte, col. pensamento crítico*, nº1, Rio de Janeiro, 2004. Edited by Luiza Duarte
- Let us also mention the essential compilation organized by Glória Ferreira, *Critica de Arte no Brasil : Temáticas Contemporânea*, Rio de Janeiro : Funarte, 2006.
6. The interview between Achille Bonito Oliva and Roberto Pontual in 1985 (p. 267-278) also provides interesting reading.