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Luiz Ruffato's Narrative Art Installation: The Multiplicities of *Eles eram muitos cavalos*

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Abstract: This essay studies the ways in which Amazonian artist Roberto Evangelista's art installation *Ritos de Passagem* served as Brazilian author Luiz Ruffato's structural and thematic model for his revolutionary book *Eles eram muitos cavalos*. According to Ruffato's interpretation, Evangelista's installation represents a tangible, three-dimensional form that renders socioeconomic hardship and impoverishment within a consumer-ravaged society. In applying this model to Ruffato's work of fiction, this essay aims to emphasize his focus on formal and narrative innovations within what Anne Ring Petersen defines as a "multiperspectival approach." This approach allows Ruffato's text to take on three-dimensional volume and invite the participatory action of the viewer/reader.

Keywords: three-dimensional, multiperspectival, participatory, art installation, formal innovation

Luiz Ruffato's *Eles eram muitos cavalos* (translated into English as *There Were Many Horses*) is a revolutionary book. Readers, scholars and critics in many languages have devoted their attention to it, highlighting the myriad ways in which it stands out in originality and literary innovation. This essay aims to extend this exploration, as a reflective tribute to such an extraordinary and influential volume in contemporary Brazilian fiction.

In José Leonardo Tonus's essay "O discurso sobre a precariedade," he describes Ruffato's text as a "livro instalação" (Tonus 49). In his insightful analysis, Tonus explains how a particular art installation entitled *Ritos de Passagem* by Amazonian artist Roberto Evangelista influenced Ruffato. *Ritos de Passagem* was exhibited in 1996 at the 23rd Bienal Internacional de São Paulo.

Art curator and critic Paulo Herkenhoff describes Evangelista's installation as consisting of a pile of one thousand shoe boxes on one side and a pile of one thousand pairs of worn shoes on the other, separated by five paving stones composed of Lioz limestone removed from a sidewalk in Manaus. The installation was displayed in a space measuring 10 x 10 meters in dimension, a detail that supports its sculptural structure (see Figure 1). Conceived to represent—in Herkenhoff's words—a consumer landscape in ruins, Evangelista's art installation became a source of inspiration to Ruffato. According to Tonus, Ruffato interpreted Evangelista's artwork as a tangible, accumulative way, in three-dimensional form, to render socioeconomic hardship and impoverishment within a consumer-ravaged society (Tonus 50). In writing a portrait of Brazil's colossal social inequalities, Ruffato viewed Evangelista's installation as a structural and thematic model.



Figure 1: Evangelista, Roberto. *Ritos de Passagem*. 23 Bienal de São Paulo, 1996.
Credit: Fernando Chaves, Fundação da Bienal de São Paulo,
Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo.

In this essay I aim to develop further the connection between book and artform by suggesting ways in which we might consider Ruffato's *Eles eram muitos cavalos*

as a narrative installation. I propose reading the book through what Anne Ring Petersen defines as a “multiperspectival approach,” in her approximation between art and performance (14). This approach allows the reader to perceive Ruffato’s collection of narrative fragments or “scenes,” to use Petersen’s term, from different entry points. This type of approach also allows for modes of interpretation that rely on oblique—rather than straightforward—angles.

In structuring my essay, I rely on sound artist Janek Schaefer’s six elements that define an art installation, based on the correspondences he establishes between art installation and architecture. In presenting the arguments that follow, I consider Schaefer’s elements one by one, keeping in mind that, even for him, not every element need be prominent or present. These elements underscore Ruffato’s genius in creating this remarkable book, conceptually modeled on Evangelista’s installation.

Whereas *Eles eram muitos cavalos* preserves its own structure and organization as a bound book, it also allows for flexibility and openness. In this sense, the book duplicates an installation that permits, indeed depends on, multiple entry points and, as Petersen affirms, an awareness of “alternative spaces” (14). Ruffato’s narratives take on three-dimensional volume in that each fragment or sketch retains both anonymity and autonomy, at the same time that there is a sense of cogent fluidity and thematic compatibility between them.

To ponder Petersen’s arguments, Ruffato’s book becomes a series of “spatial structures” designed to engage and draw the reader into overlapping encounters (Petersen 15). Ruffato thus opens up the narrative experience to what Claire Bishop terms “the relational sphere,” in which human relations and interaction are indispensable (Bishop, *Participation* 165). Moreover, in this participatory mode the reader is never in a position to view everything at once; an installation insists on the notion that “the view is always partial” (Bishop, *Installation* 35). For Ruffato, this multiperspectival point is underscored by the plurality of partial views in Fragment #45, appropriately entitled “Vista parcial da cidade.” The scene takes place inside a city bus. The narrative lens observes the cityscape through the fractured viewpoints of several bone-tired passengers from where they happen to be located, seated, or standing. The focus pauses on a few, revealing his or her partial views restricted by fatigue, fret or fantasy: “(são paulo é o lá-fora? é o aqui-dentro?)” (Ruffato 100).

One

The first element Janek Schaefer addresses is “site-specificity.” In the case of an art installation, the goal is to situate it in, or create within its design, an environment with which it has a direct relationship. For Ruffato’s text, this site-specificity takes the form of the place represented in the book: the city of São Paulo.

It is unquestionable that Ruffato zeroed in on this city as a microcosm of Brazil. His choice of São Paulo was a pre-determined place due to the author’s own personal trajectory. Place, in this case, literally corresponds to the book’s setting. If Evangelista’s installation was meant to call into question environmental and social issues inherent to Amazonia (specifically to the city of Manaus), and transport those site-specific traits and concerns to the “Universalis” section of the Bienal, then, similarly, Ruffato’s book is meant to depict São Paulo, yet also serve to position the metropolis in dialogue with any other city with corresponding disparities.

Simply stated, the city of São Paulo provides the backdrop to Ruffato’s book. Yet it is infinitely more than this. It indicates population and volume, manifesting a diverse and heterogeneous spectrum, from the gun-exporting business executive in Fragment #28 to the indigent children cohabiting with rats in #9. Urban boundaries stretch out both horizontally and vertically: traffic in gridlock (in #40), mass transportation clogging streets (in #45), a woman wandering through the streets (in #34), and helicopters hovering overhead (in #16). It is the habitat within which its anonymous residents operate. The city conditions their movements and behaviors. It generates gain for a precious few and provokes prevailing loss for nearly all: of job, of innocence, of family, and of life. The narrative book as a visual installation takes on a distinctly urban, cutthroat form.

Specific neighborhoods and streets of São Paulo orient the book’s characters and, in some cases, help determine their actions. Whereas the urban grid is not bound to an explicit map, it nevertheless denotes sites of inclusion and exclusion. Physical spaces and movement appear in direct conflict with individual inertness and immobility affected by socioeconomic constraints. Those who are not plagued by unemployment act as if upward mobility were synonymous with misconduct. Public and private spaces overlap; proper behaviors meld with impropriety. Ruffato makes the reader conscious of the city’s chaos through acute spatial attention. Beyond merely a backdrop, the book creates the physicality of the city

through an assortment of angles, fragmentation, description, and contrast. The city is captured through sensorial variations. São Paulo is portrayed in all its complexities, ranging from a putrid city in Fragment #16—“podre, a cidade—to its personification as a mother in Fragment #41—“uma mãe para mim” (Ruffato 34, 76).

Two

The second element in Schaefer’s analysis of art installations refers to “temporality.” Schaefer uses the word to define an installation’s use of materials and physical scaffolding to function as something time-sensitive, impermanent, finite. To use Evangelista’s installation again as an example, *Ritos de Passagem* existed in its intrinsic form while on display at the 1996 Bienal. Since then, with its physical form deconstructed, it now exists in its archival incarnation. In terms of Ruffato’s book, I apply a different definition to temporality, to refer to the book’s limited timeframe, conceived as a single day in the life of the city.

Beyond designating a single day, the book defines a time-specific day: May 9, 2000. In this sense, the day is transient, provisional, confined to its twenty-four hours: Ruffato bookends the first and last fragments with pre-daybreak to dead-of-night darkness to stress this temporal point. At the same time, this space-time finiteness has long-lasting significance because it evokes the nearing of Mother’s Day and the coming of a new millennium. The former serves to unify the sketches by giving common purpose to many characters’ actions. The latter functions as an overarching goal intended by Ruffato to engender social change in a new millennium from this specific day forward.

In reflecting upon the first two elements—site-specificity and temporality—the city and the moment are clearly delineated, in contrast to a populace that is indeterminate, even in the few instances in which they are identified by first name. Ruffato uses his powers of observation to describe these inhabitants, by relying principally on physical characteristics and types of clothing to define them. The contrast repeated like identifying labels in Fragment #26 is striking between “o segurança, negro agigantado, espadaúdo, impecável dentro do terno preto” and “o negro franzino, ossudo, de camisa de malha surrada calça jeans imundo tênis de solado gasto” (57–58). In this graphic way, Ruffato transforms singular behaviors into universal traits.

Three

“Cerebral” is the third element in Schaefer’s structural definition of an art installation, referring to its emphasis on overarching idea or concept. This element attributes to the artist the role of conceptual mastermind. It stresses the “how” and “why” an artwork is made. In *Eles eram muitos cavalos*, the cerebral element takes precedence since it guides the predetermined notion of the work as a whole, prior to its production. Thus, Ruffato’s own idea or image of the book is central to its structural make-up, to its sense of purpose and its use of language. Within contemporary Brazilian fiction, the book’s cerebral constitution relies heavily on an innovative composition dependent on formal experimentation and fragmentation to portray contemporary Brazil as a human mosaic.

With the cerebral element in mind, the reader can be assured that there is an overriding reason behind the seemingly clear journey through disparate parts of the megacity, from periphery to center, from center to periphery, from one coordinate to another. It doesn’t do so overtly, allowing us to chart the coordinates on a map, so to speak, but fragments throughout the text do reference different neighborhoods and intersections, as well as points of entry and encounter.

The thrust of the narrative threads also invites the reader to explore the world beyond São Paulo’s city limits, blurring borders and spatial demarcations and creating geographical distances through the realms of memory and dream. Thus, for instance, Italy and Portugal exist as heritage countries (for example, in Fragment #40), the rural landscape of Northeast Brazil abounds in memory (in #45 or 48), and New York City is alive as a land of economic promise (in #57). In a similar manner, the book’s temporal span stretches beyond the single day to encompass other time periods, as the legacies of past generations and childhood recollections exist side-by-side with future yearnings. In short, past reminiscences and dreams for the future coexist within these precious day-long hours.

As readers, we might shape our own cerebral after-image of the book as a whole in the form of certain patterns, such as a series of concentric circles or spirals. Like an art installation meant to be circumnavigated, Ruffato’s book suggests this type of spatial preoccupation (Bishop, *Installation* 34). It is not insignificant nor incidental that the smart theatrical adaptation of *Eles eram muitos cavalos*, entitled *Mire Veja*, produced by São Paulo’s Companhia do Feijão incorporated a circular set that revolved around the actions of a central character,

Claudinor, the taxi driver from Fragment #41, entitled “Táxi” (Pires and Pessoa). Claudinor is by profession someone who circulates through various sectors of the city. His background is representative of a large portion of the city’s population, consisting of migrants from other parts of Brazil, mainly the Northeast. They arrive in the megalopolis in search of employment, and their lives consist of daily quests for survival. Despite Ruffato’s emphasis on commonplace characters, there are a few individuals, like Claudinor, who stand out. The eight-year-old girl from Fragment #38 who sings in the church choir on Sunday afternoons comes to mind, as does the nameless dog searching for his owner in #11. Crânio, the big-hearted book-nerd from #47 whose nickname appropriately fits this cerebral category, is distinctively set apart, in this merciless, dog-eat-dog city.

Ruffato’s use of non-literary texts scattered throughout the book are indicative of the whole as a conceptual construction. These texts lend it a three-dimensional framework through an accumulation of aggregate objects and registers. There is tension between a more spiritual realm and a material one, in texts that range from prayers (#31), biblical references (#38), rituals (#49) and horoscopes (#12) to lists of kitchen gadgets (#32), menus (#68), professions (#18) books on shelves (#24) and personal ads (#42 and #65). Ruffato’s reliance on everyday, ephemeral objects, and materials “embedded with cultural associations” creates layers of meaning, analogous to what the curators of the 2015 New York exhibition *Storylines: Contemporary Art at the Guggenheim* term “polyphonic” storylines (Brinson et al).

Four

Schaefer’s fourth element in defining an art installation is “interaction.” Schaefer explains that with this element the spectator serves as a catalyst and receptor, both in physical and cerebral terms. This element finds the strongest parallel in Ruffato’s text, perhaps because Ruffato’s conceptual construction depends on the fundamental role that the reader plays, relying on their participation. The reader is meant to contribute through the senses and emotions. Ruffato essentially enters into an aesthetic partnership with the reader, based on trust. This trust is dependent on the reader’s freedom to explore the fragments and formulate meaning, thereby repositioning the whole within a larger context that encompasses our 21st century realities worldwide. According to Schaefer’s concept of an art installation, the

artist conceives its structure while relying on the spectator to reorient or reinterpret it at will. In terms of *Eles eram muitos cavalos*, the reader's participation in essence gives the book a malleable elasticity (redundancy intentional), the exact opposite of an object that is static, fixed, or constricted.

Ruffato's sketches invite the reader to take in his narratives through active mental engagement. Passive readership is inadequate, as the author's formal experimentation requires the reader to reconstruct the narrative pieces, to reinvent the individual registers in order to decipher the book's breadth of humankind, with all its tribulations, small triumphs and irrepressible tumult. São Paulo is a city whose inhabitants, even the middle-class, are "acuados," under siege (Ruffato 97).

Five

"Process" is Schaefer's fifth element in his art installation diagram. Schaefer's third and fifth elements—concept and process, respectively—are closely interrelated. Concept relates to the general idea or initial cerebral kernel and its broad sweep of capacities: the how and why mentioned above. Process refers to the mechanics or articulations of the concept and how they are set in motion, as well as how the artist approaches his medium.

In Ruffato's case, this process encompasses the nitty-gritty details of how the original concept will unfold on the page. In this category, Ruffato's commitment to formal experimentation is paramount. Ruffato sculpts rather than simply writes the stories by creating a synthesis between words, punctuation, or other typographical elements and their placements on the page. These denote changes in voice and register. The narrative threads are not straightforward, and the character's voices come at you piecemeal and slantwise, often with the storyline in reverse order, such as in Fragment #23. A barrage of thoughts floods an insomniac brain (#67). A building triggers a flood of regrets (#66). The consequences besiege us before we are aware of the deeds, catching the reader off guard. The reader has to learn to read, as if practicing in a foreign language. The accumulation of words, longing, and sentiments bombard us, making us trip over changes in time and space. The city is a hustling hubbub within which we are engulfed.

Six

The final element defined by Schaefer in the formation of an art installation is what he terms the “photo-record.” Because an installation is generally impermanent and finite in its physical form and display, it then must continue to exist in archival or photographic form. In the case of Ruffato’s *Eles eram muitos cavalos*, the concrete, tangible structure of the book becomes its own photo-record. The volume’s physical form—in addition now to its other configurations, in translations into other languages, for example—persists as its archival reality. The scenes that exist inside its cover are perpetual records of our ever-changing realities.

By applying Schaefer’s art installation concepts to Ruffato’s book, the correspondences are formidable, especially in the end result: the creation of a multi-layered, ever-mutating and open-ended work of art that relies on the reader’s relational capacity to generate “a dialogue that never ends” (Bishop, *Participation* 160).

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