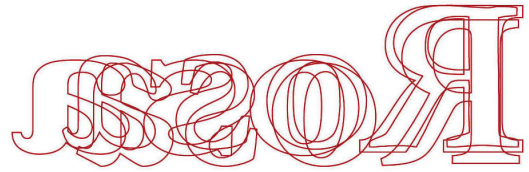


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The decanting of experience

Leandro Muniz and Renato Pera

If the etymology of the word [experience](#) refers to the “act of learning or knowing beyond borders”, *decantation* says as much about a gradual refinement, generating the separation between solids and liquids by the action of gravity, as the celebration of something. Two processes intrinsic to the type of artistic production that we are interested in discussing throughout this text. Creating intertwined relationships with their contexts, but at the same time open to indeterminacy and research with languages, Laís Amaral, Leandra Espírito Santo, Noah Purifoy and Bill Traylor, so diverse in their themes, procedures and media, operate in a key in which subject and collective, desire and criticism, analytical and inventive thinking, become inseparable from each other.



Mars in Cancer, 2019, Laís Amaral.

Relating in the same text apparently so different artists is an acknowledgment of our interests dispersed by each one, and of our resistance to totalizing narratives. What can give some unity to the analysis is, first, the desire to take artists and works in their singularities, looking at each case, avoiding generalizations; second, to observe how his works explain contingencies and decant social contradictions of his historical moment.

Authors such as Susan Sontag, in [Against Interpretation](#), or Sônia Salzstein, in scattered comments throughout her critical production, have already described how experience is elaborated in a *posteriori* art work, even creating a spatiotemporal shuffling. The work is not only the results of its context, but a critical and propositional action within and beyond its places of origin, allowing to see, retroactively, a series of social signs sedimented in this process that we are calling the “decantation of experience”.

Initially, we thought of producing a reflection that addressed the identity agenda as a rubric capable of replacing the old quarrel “autonomy x engagement”. One of the starting points could come from the argument of Theodor Adorno in favor of the politics of a

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radical autonomy of the work of art, as this would not be bent to the mere functionality of trivial language, captured as it is by the administered society of capitalism. Autonomy that would avoid producing the work as a simple support for an anachronistic authority of the author and for a dubious and individual usufruct – patrimonialist, in the worst case – of the purposes supposedly engaged. Autonomy that is also not to be confused with the superficial scheme of "art for art's sake", as it would recognize in social experience its driving force, whose emblems and internal processes would find ground for a game yet to be made, of deepening experience, far from positivism consumerist that animates everyday life. Autonomy, therefore, as immanent criticism.

Another starting point could be the [analysis](#) by Robert Kudiela on how notions of identity and diversity have become a "fiction" built in the midst of globalization. In other words, the ideological result of a process of negotiation and appeasement of differences led by the interests of capital, with the risk that the difference becomes, deep down, indifferent, or just a twitch, a superficial mark, mere appearance, or even being taken as fixed and innate. Refractory to the idea of a cultural original, the author emphasizes the need for friction and for a case-by-case review of the relationship between the particular and the general. Perhaps amplifying Adorno's concern, Kudiela seems to wonder how the notions of identity and difference, proximity and distance are assimilated in the very constitution of the work of art, in terms of language.

We could also start with [reflections](#) by Adrian Piper. The artist and philosopher recognizes the importance of identity politics that force the artistic system (read "euro-ethnic" hegemony, to use her expression) to exercise "political and social self-criticism". Piper's analysis helps us to recognize that, in this system, self-criticism has a limited scope, since it does not significantly disaggregate the structural maintenance of privileges. What the author demands, however, is the shift of interest from the artist to her work, which will inevitably be impregnated with the marks of a unique world experience. The experience of "self-expression" from which the work of art is a product carries its cultural, individual and contextual marks, and these elements must be taken rigorously in their uniqueness, in order to avoid generalizations and stereotypes.

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Although we are sensitive to the problems raised there, we understand that such a perspective would form more false oppositions, especially when applied to our more immediate context. What seems urgent is an epistemological and political review – reversal and repair that have long been postponed –, preferably far-reaching and ideally configured as public policies. The binomials described above no longer actually operate (although they have the explanatory power of some internal tensions in the field), as, throughout history, it has become clear that the work of art has already proved to be so flexible to the point of having its parameters tested and reinvented at each singular manifestation, with its different uses, manifestations of desires, proposals and criticisms.

humidify the desert

In an interview with artist Laís Amaral, she herself described her painting practice as a humidification process. The use of the term seems to be necessary for synthesizing both some of the procedures of painting and the uses of paint, its stains, dilutions, run-offs and infiltrations, as well as the interests of the artist. References to water bodies, groundwater, images of rain, among other geological events are described in the works while being completely abstract. The formal and compositional rigor at play in each of them connects aerial views, or geological cross-sections, to subjective experiences topped off by titles that evoke astrological signs and other individual narratives, in a transit between spatial and temporal scales that settle on each other.

The images of the “wet” appear in the work through languid lines, which seem to run, admit transparencies, dripping by gravity and register oscillations in the pressure and load of the materials. The more solid and coarse stains interpenetrate each other in invasive movements, and if they come to produce strata, borders, it is to be dismantled. In *Cement and Water 1/ Gamboa* (2020) and *Descansando a saudade* (2020), both paintings with vertical formats, we see a division between the top and the bottom. In the middle, there is a movement of shapes that shoot upwards and others that seem to run, mixing those topographically distinct areas. *Ants drowned in honey* (2020) seems to be a clear demonstration, in title and image, of shapes that seem to submerge or emerge in a flooded field.



Ants drowned in honey, 2020,
Laís Amaral.

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The artist's images are also related to maps — these attempts to propose fixed codes for the instability of the territory — and Amaral tries to relate the historical processes of territorial desertification and whitening of the Brazilian population, to forms of flat representation, or in profile. No wonder the use of beads, stones and other objects that denote specific social experiences and imaginations and the choice of a “media” that forces the movement between design and experimentation, action and reflection, proximity and distance, in constant transit. The experience of painting counteracts the ongoing process of experiencing the world, and the works are impregnated with a temporality of action, in which we participate as observers.

Amaral seeks to relate the historical processes of territorial desertification and whitening of the Brazilian population, to forms of flat representation, or in profile.

In 2017, Amaral started, together with other artists with whom he shared a studio in Niterói, the [National Trovoa Movement](#). Composed of racialized women artists, cis and trans, from all over the country, the group promotes projects that guarantee their visibility and circulation, maintaining the individual autonomy of each participant and each regional group in the network. He also participated in [Hoa Gallery](#) projects. Both initiatives in which gender and racial inequality in the artistic milieu is both criticized and taken as a starting point for collective actions that strengthen groups and expand the possibilities of building alternative networks, capable of provocatively interfering in the hegemonic system.