

Talk by artist Tónico L. Auad to accompany the exhibition *Espaço Aberto / Espaço Fechado: Sites for Sculpture in Modern Brazil*

22 March 2006

Tónico L. Auad

I've arrived in London seven or eight years ago under a scholarship from the Brazilian government. At the time, the government was sending small groups of artists abroad to study and develop their own work, and obviously those artists would be 'disseminating' Brazilian art and culture abroad.

After my degree show, I was invited to do a residency in Gasworks, where I stayed until today. Basically the three or four works I'm showing today are works that were done in London; it's a small group of projects related to drawing, although I don't think you're going to see any traditional drawings. They are mostly sculptures or installations, but I always address the specific interest with drawing, how the drawing migrates to these other forms of works.

The 'Banana Pieces'

We have a few examples of the drawings on bananas ('Drawings On Bananas/Voodoo', 2003/05), which was a work I developed after the carpet pieces. I made about 12 or 15 drawings of them (probably the images which were most in the press or which most people saw were the portrait and the voodoo drawing). I was playing some sort of anthropomorphic games. I was thinking of the fruit as a body and what kind of drawings could follow that logic: if you draw bones on those fruits, what kind of shapes would they take?

The voodoo drawing, for instance, is playing with these ideas: that bunch is a whole body with an equivalent for legs, arms, hands and the head, which is the skull at the back; on the side, again, it is playing with the idea of a female and a male body; and one could only see if the person had very good information about voodoo because they were specific on the male body or the female body, where the pins are. I'm not really interested in voodoo – I'm not into black magic – I was just appropriating the fact that those drawings were made with needles, through an oxidating process. I was

very interested in how they would change over time. When you made the drawings you couldn't see them so well and then they would get darker and darker and mix with the own ageing process of the bananas; all the brown spots would start eating the drawings that I'd just made, and at the last stage, the drawings would become white as a kind of print when all the skin of the fruit would be brown.

The 'Carpet Pieces'

The way I've always tried to describe the carpet piece is as a three-dimensional drawing where you have these unfinished sculptures most of the time, and here you have a lot of traces in the carpet. The idea related to drawing in my view is that when the sculpture is not completed, when you leave it at an in progress stage, you somehow expect the viewer to complete that image in their mind; you expect that there is a kind of platform established, as if you start exchanging messages on a white piece of paper, draw a map in the street or quickly try to give a message through drawing. Very often you won't finish it or complete the idea, which is what happens in the case of the carpet pieces; that's why I deliberately don't finish the sculptures or why I leave them sometimes quite abstract. I think that gives a lot of space for people to meet my ideas in a kind of in-between space, where they can imagine what that figure would be.

More recently I've been finding out that the figures in the carpet have become more and more abstract and more and more unplanned. This is another issue with this piece: it's been done quite a few times now and I was always questioning if I should keep on doing this work or not. The reason why I decided to continue for the time being is that I wanted to challenge myself not to plan what was going to happen, to leave it quite open, which was rather disheartening sometimes.

The piece usually takes about seven days to be installed and constricted. The first days are about gathering the fibre. I always have someone help and then I stay on the piece with someone (or sometimes on my own) and start playing anthropomorphic games again and doing shapes and saying, oh this looks like a head of an animal or a figure or an abstract figure. Then I start moving to other figures and relating the images to each other in the space, so in a way during the process I start creating a narrative for the piece, which obviously doesn't have to be the narrative that is on the

viewer's mind. That's why I'm talking about this open area for an exchange of messages.

For example, for this piece in ICA, I came up with the title 'Fleeting Luck', basically because the animals were related to luck in different cultures, like the rabbit's paw for the Western or the cat for the Japanese or the monkey for the Chinese. Obviously lots of those animals, like the fox or the rabbit, appear and disappear in our eyes very, very quickly, like the squirrels in the countryside or urban landscape. This was the first work I decided to give a title. For most of them, I just relate the title to the colour of the carpet.

The reason why I'm showing this particular image is because this carpet I did in Japan was the first one in an open space. It was in a really large warehouse by the sea, close to the port in Yokohama. I tried to do for the first time this huge piece of carpet in the open space, because from what I've observed in Japan, in the parks they all gather together in groups, sometimes organised by age or sex, and they have lunch together and sit around this mat and take their shoes off. I wanted to play with this idea inside of a warehouse. The placement of the sculptures would follow some kind of Japanese garden way of staging, because again, I was walking around during the week trying to gather some kind of local experience to develop that piece.

This was a second work with a title: 'Jealous of the Sea'. You've got the suggesting front, you get outside of the door and then you have the sea in front of you and the sea is a very meditative place. People stay quite a long time looking and thinking about things they wouldn't share with others. I borrowed the title from a Portuguese writer; in one part of the book there is this young woman who he would like to be with, and he tells her about being 'jealous of the sea', because only the sea knows her thoughts.

Sculpture in Conversation with Architecture and Drawing

This is a goldfish net which was also made for Yokohama. It comes all the way from the ceiling. Again, it shows someone very much interested in drawing. It is like a maze, so when you move it, it completely changes perspective, and you have this small area that is kind of a micro-architecture. I don't do it on purpose, but I guess sometimes in works like this you can see my architecture background.

There are five gold rings, they all hang from the ceiling and they have lots of chains falling from each of them. It's called 'Upside-down Flower'. The idea is, if you turned a flower pot upside down, then the chains would splash and naturally make this kind of abstract flower pattern on the floor.

Sculpture as Event

This is a reference image for my projects with gold. I was born in the North of Brazil, where we used to have one of the hugest gold mines. It's an extremely religious place as well, so gold and gold jewellery have a lot of contradictory connotations. It has the notions of both monetary value and personal affection – as in all the times in life where the family presents it. I'm not Jewish, but I've heard Jewish people say how important those things are as well.

And then I came to Britain and went to Lyme Regis for a weekend where I saw a few people search for lost gold or jewellery with a metal detector. I got interested in these people and started trying to contact them; it turned out they have meetings, and they do all these visits to the countryside or the coast, looking for gold or precious metals. I found that quite interesting, the same phenomenon exists in Brazil. Well, it was a little bit different – we have some divers who go to the beaches really early in the morning, and they actually make their living of finding lost jewellery, it's unbelievable how much money they make just diving in the sea and finding things.

So this was the idea behind all these works about the gold beach combers or gold seekers; it's a very big group of works related to the projects in Japan. Basically the project in the warehouse was an event more than anything; it just lasted for one day. The curator invited me to do a really big project, because the space is gigantic, and I have to say that I got slightly annoyed with the restriction and I decided to do something totally opposite from what was asked. I was really cheeky and decided to do something totally invisible.

So I brought about 20 to 24 pieces of jewellery which had names printed on them to make them look personal. There were wedding rings, necklaces, all kinds of familiar jewellery you could have. Since the place was actually really big, I pretended to lose them in different places, like the toilet, the bar or the balconies, where people could find them. I was interested in what kind of reaction that would provoke – if

people were going to nick them, if they were going to wear them, if they were going to leave notes. To my surprise, some people actually did leave notes; they were very concerned about the person who lost the piece.

It's very impressive how, once a piece of jewellery leaves the shop, it totally loses its monetary value. It immediately gains a kind of personal value, so that there's always this kind of gap in between, which makes it quite frustrating. If someone finds it, you get something that's half; you're just going to get the metal. It doesn't matter to you – there's no personal value in there for you.

The interesting thing is that the project relied on not telling the curators or the artists involved what the piece was going to be. There were two curators, and I told just one, so all the artists were wondering, where the hell is his work! It was quite a tricky thing to play, because once you tell, you can't have people's reactions, they're just going to put it in their pocket and have a laugh.

Sculpture as Dialogue

This is a piece in the British Art Show, with the carpet installation and the skull. What is very important for me as well is to have the works like a pendulum; that's why I've been showing works that I've done a few years ago with new projects. I quite like to have those pieces together in the exhibition. You have the carpet there with the skull and you have this other drawing made with the chains and the bones; they have like some skeleton hangs, so I think it's quite interesting to be able to relate one piece to the other to see how they inform each other.

The skull is one of the works with gold. It's about where you can find gold in ordinary life. I did a series of photographs, cut-outs, installed like books on the wall; basically the photograph would be the cover of the book: there was an image that would flip, and behind there was a golden area; the images were very dull, for example one of a swan in Kew Gardens. Or another one is about my neighbour who took over the street and obsessively put her flower pots there – because she doesn't have a garden – so people keep nicking her plants and she goes there and puts them back, so you flip one of those pots and there is gold.

This piece was made after a guy on the train reading a book and eating grapes; I did a cut-out and put the grapes and then I decided to make a sculpture with the same idea. It's all weaved grape stems and real grapes, so the difference is that for

every grape that was plucked out there was a dot of gold, so you have this very sparkling piece all woven in the shape of a skull. When you're dealing with such an obvious decay material in the present – because the grapes will become raisins – it is obviously about memento mori, so it would kind of reinforce the idea of all the qualities that a sculpture made of such a material has, plus relate to all of the gold projects.

This is a piece that I like very much as well. It's a chain hanging from the ceiling, there is the word 'aimless' written in it and there is this drawing that is just made of loops in and out. It's a kind of drawing where you don't have to think too much, maybe like a doodle you're doing while you're on the phone, but it's very meditative. Your mind goes in another direction, so in a way it is an aimless drawing, it could go on forever.

This was a project commissioned by Gasworks, called 'Lyric Underground', with the buskers in a time when it was illegal to busk in London. It involved making a jukebox with them, which you can access online at the Gasworks website. The busker thing now is legal, and it's very interesting to see the same people play under different conditions – it's all about change and transformation really.

Question about the Brazilian art scene

Tonico

People in Brazil always ask me, when are you going to come back, and I find that there are less opportunities in terms of projects or shows going on there. There are things going on – the Biennale in October is one of the highlights – and people are doing shows within that period, but I always feel my peers there are struggling... Lots of art has moved to the centres – New York, London, Berlin – and it is there that work is being offered.

I think one interesting thing is, when you change country, obviously it's much less comfortable than in your own country, you struggle with so many things, and the whole different environment shows in your work. For example, the concept of carpet is very specific to Britain and totally unfamiliar to Brazilians, so you can see these responses in my works.

I don't see my sculptures as a political statement. Some people make fun of the banana pieces because I'm from Brazil – or actually, it might be buried in one of

the layers, but it's not like some political flag. The fact that I'm an artist who has changed country is addressed in many of the shows I'm in, a kind of instability that many artists live in today.

Question

Do you ever see your work as part of Brazilian sculpture or not at all?

Tonico

It's difficult to say. I do relate to a lot of Brazilian artists. To put it in a really simple sense – if you are familiar with Brazilian art – there is a kind of sensuality in the materials.

Question

But it's also the kind of looseness and the fact that nothing is a fixed object and everything you make could be remade; it's a conglomeration of small things which are held for a moment. It's very unlike British sculpture in that sense. Do you see British sculpture as being a more fixed thing and Brazilian sculpture as being more ephemeral assemblage?

Tonico

Yes, I think that has a lot to do with the kind of experience people would have in Brazil – it's a very sensorial place, isn't it? The smells and colours and textures and food... Maybe British sculpture has more of a sense of stability and presence in a way.

Question

Can you explain a bit more about how you can manage a work in 18ct gold?

Tonico

Well, I had been working with bananas and fruit, ephemeral materials, and cheap carpet, and I thought, I don't want to be put in the Arte Povera pigeonhole in the more traditional sense. So I wanted to work with really expensive materials, with gold and gems. That's a funny area to work in because of all the middle class guilt we carry in

Brazil... Gold is seen as tacky as well, not only in Brazil, and it plays on people's vanity.

You can actually have really cheap gold. The chains are 9ct, they are quite cheap, the sculptures are 18ct because they're very difficult to make in terms of craft, and I work with a jeweller who wouldn't bother to spend that kind of time crafting. In Brazil, all the jewellery makers would just work in 18ct gold, which is quite interesting, so their time, which is much less well paid than here, is well worth it, once the thing is finished.

Question about the 'Chicken Feet'

Tonico

There is a link to the voodoo works, and also because I had these chicken feet in my studio, they're lovely, they're all dried and people like looking at them, they look really spooky. In the upper part you have a kind of circle structure made with the chicken's wishbones, so all the wishbones are used already, it's like I would make a wish for each and then there is no more wish left. Then they are restored, so what you see is all these broken restored wishbones with resin. The resin looks like plaster, so it's like they change their configuration.

Comment

The show upstairs is partly about making sculpture outside the gallery; you're not making an object which then you sell to a museum which then goes into the museum collection. There seems to be some kind of thread running through there of things which can be made, put together or packed away; it can take shape and then loose shape, you can do it on the street or you could do it temporarily and then you can put it in a suitcase.

Tonico

Yes I know, I always suffer because of that. Like this piece I did last December, it's something like 500 gems and I have to install it in a place, there's someone who takes a picture of it, and I have all these bags, I feel like crying and I say, my God, where is the work, it's going to be another couple of days. But it is very interesting, I quite like this, it's somehow unattainable.

Comment

It's interesting how temporary interventions suddenly take permanent shape... Even in the last gallery, there seemed to be things which began on the street as temporary interventions but in the end they've become permanent artworks.

Tonico

Once they go to gallery space or into an essay or when they become sort of a historical thinking...

Comment

They seem like actions in a way, like paint balls or putting currency notes together or weaving political posters, they seem like temporary actions...

Tonico

...which end up as a product. In the end, you have a product.

Comment

But it seems to have to do with the commercial galleries, the art world changing in Brazil...

Tonico

It's the thing with temporary pieces... the gallery of course wants to make money out of it and the artist needs to survive of the works, so then they use photographs of the sculptures, which obviously is not the same thing, but I respect those kind of decisions because it's what will enable you to do the next project. The photograph is not really the piece or it's not really an artwork – I don't think they are as engaging and interesting as the carpet – but they are necessary because the piece is ephemeral.

Comment

It's striking that you've taken the ICA photograph from above... you have a totally different sense of it.

Tonico

They were from the fox, that's the tail. Yes because the trace of the drawing is very strong on that particular section of the carpet, so that was the way of being able to capture it in an image.

Question

You're talking about these almost like drawings. Do you make drawings?

Tonico

I do, all the time. It's like a thinking process. I'm really obsessed with drawings and I love to see artists' drawings. When I was in college I curated a show with the gallery I still work with now, which was about the straightforwardness of drawings, the quick message, the lightness they contain.

Question

I was curious about the photograph of the work you change over time. You were describing the changes over time, but showing us a single image.

Tonico

Yes, that was a big dilemma for me for the banana drawings, because again, what is sold is a photograph of just one particular moment. And when you go to the gallery, you could be lucky to see the banana in its splendour or you could see it when it's horrible and smelly and you can't see much of the drawing.

In question of the photograph which was what was actually sold, I decided to take that stage when the drawing is most visible, when it's darker, just before it starts becoming invisible again, so there was a decision made about which moment I would frame into a photograph to be sold.

I have to tell you something which I found out recently which scared me a bit about those works, the banana photographs. I went to the Mori Museum in Japan, and they love gadgets there. They made these shirts with the banana fruits, which sold really well, and then some people started doing their own drawings on the fruits, but then someone showed me this link. Someone in America created a website, they call it 'Tattooing Bananas', and there are hundreds of drawings on bananas from 2005/2006 after the ones in Japan and it's just crazy how it went into people's mind... it was kind of scary to see, the size of it... you totally lose control. The internet sometimes

creates its own private religion of people who share the same awkward interests, and you don't have control of it.

Comment

We could leave you in this room and come back next Wednesday and you could make a carpet sculpture...

Tonico

No, please... Yes actually, I thought about that, just doing something quickly.

Question

You previously said your work was about disappearance, but it struck me that it's very much about appearance and about anthropomorphism. I wonder what you enjoy about seeing faces in things, seeing bodies?

Tonico

I like the idea of transformation, of when the work contains a certain type of dynamism. It is very subtle, but there is something in transformation, it's not completed, your mind is trying to complete something from a certain state. There is a kind of action going on within that created microcosm or environment. Even the bananas are like an environment where something specific is happening when you do the drawings, it's a very specific environment that I'm putting forward, the same thing with the carpet, and those things could not happen in a different environment.

Transcribed by Jackie Howson and edited by Marion Endt.