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Author Alberto Tassinari
Artist Nuno Ramos

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The work of Nuno Ramos is simultaneously driven by an acceptance and a denial of the limits of art. His paintings have always included a rectangle that supports operations that project from it. Acceptance of the traditional rectangular form for paintings is, however, denied by the advance of the forms in the direction of space. Were it merely accepted, the rectangular form would retain more of its flatness. Operations would take place close to the surface that contains them. Yet the forms advance towards the spectator in such a way that the base of the rectangle often goes unnoticed. So why not abolish it altogether? If this were done, the forms would spring directly from the wall or from some other irregular support made for the occasion. The traditional support would be suppressed rather than negated and, above all, there would be no contrast between the forms that leap from the painting and its traditional appearance. It is mostly from this contrast between what is at once readily accepted and, in part, denied that his works are made – a contrast that finds its reason in the very limits of art, in its discontinuity from the world. For a painting is not the world, but, rather, something delimited by the world. If the work of Nuno Ramos reflects a desire for things to continue into one another, if there is a marriage between disparate elements that unites differences, this sought-after

continuity is not of a kind that might unify art and the world or art and life. For Nuno Ramos, art differs from the world right from the very first. This basic limit, which he never abolishes, nevertheless does not stop him from moving through it, by seeking a poetic continuity towards the world that is based on art. The forms that leap from the frame truly represent this search yet their power would be diminished without the counterpoint of the rectangular base that supports them. They would not unravel into some promised unity of their fragments if the base upon which they are arranged did not possess the tranquil and assured resting place of the conventional and almost natural tradition of the painting as rectangle.

That this continuity is of a poetic order and not real is something that challenges Nuno Ramos and is, at the same time, accepted by him. The world that his work exudes belongs to the order of enchantment, but of an enchantment brought about by the works. He seeks out ways to make us believe that there is no clear-cut separation between the work and the world, even though there always is. Before these paintings that send forth rods, colored fabric and mirrors, one feels as though one is carefully entering a forest, watching for wonders, making one's way into a world secluded from the hiding places of the world itself. Nuno Ramos' response to the limits of art – without which it does not exist – is to transform it into a fable, a parable. If there are donkeys of flesh

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and blood in one of his installations, if art and life then appear to be one thing, this is only possible because little donkeys are slightly rounded equids already transfigured by man. They are beings with exceptional stories, from the Holy Family's flight to Egypt all the way to the donkey that decided upon being retired to become a musician in the tale of the Bremen town musicians. Beyond this, however, they are displaced donkeys – donkeys in an exhibition space. And thus they become slightly unreal in the situation in which they find themselves. Yet they are still donkeys. Just as (in another one of his installations) the constant downpour dispersed in a giant puddle is rain – a rain that only rains indoors, not in some external space – is artificial rain, albeit a highly precise *replica* of rain. But when it is death (and wrongful death) that the artist confronts, replication belongs to another order. So it is that, for each one of the 111 dead in the storming of the Carandiru [prison], within a space steeped in ceremonies, the artist arranged a paving block covered in tar and pitch. To these stone doubles of the dead, spread across a space in which one walks near a crooked, makeshift cross – a silent space of mourning – quasi-religious rituals are added and agglutinated by the artist so that art may generate, insofar as it can, lives that were unjustly interrupted. To regenerate that which has been destroyed, to bestow new life – another, merely poetic life, but a life nonetheless – upon that which is no more, to piece together fragments,

some of them ruined and, in the end, to achieve a unity in which the pieces flow into one another nourished by fantasy, by a communion of all things – such is the always sought-after result in the works of Nuno Ramos. This may succinctly be called a poetics of enchantment, for it exerts a fascination which only something that belongs to the order of astonishment – a feat of sorts – may engender by providing continuity to the discontinuous and uniting the un-unifiable, as if mistaking one thing for another were a necessary disguise prefatory to distinctness.

The earliest works in which this poetics of enchantment is achieved are the paintings of 1988. In them, the artist is still working very close to the surface of the delimiting rectangle. The search for continuity in that which is discontinuous, which generates an impression of fluidness between the parts, an impression of things that turn into others, emerges in these paintings – unlike the later ones, in which the fragments advance outwards – in the attempt to transport to the works the very gestures that engendered them. To this end, painting must necessarily be opaque, devoid of any depth in which gesture might be lost, so as to become, instead, a sort of stage upon which the painter works. Just such a type of painting came to Nuno Ramos when he became a member of the Casa 7 studio circa 1984 – a studio previously established by Carlito Carvalhosa, Fabio Miguez, Paulo Monteiro, and Rodrigo Andrade. Although

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they painted under the influence of what was then called the "return to painting", the Kraft paper they used as a support and the synthetic enamel that was the vehicle for their pigments already pointed to the opaqueness of the pictorial plane evinced by the pictures – even the figurative ones – they were then painting. In 1988, then, before an opaque plane, with no more than paints and hands to intermediate his actions, Ramos set himself the impossible task – inspired by abstract expressionism and by Pollock's great drip paintings – of transposing his gestures entirely onto canvas. It was not a matter of repeating Pollock's experiments or those of his contemporaries, but of finding an equivalent and a different way to do it. An impossible task for, in Pollock or any other, between the finished work and its making there is a hiatus, an unsurmountable discontinuity. If a painting by Pollock can provide the impression of the rhythmic dance that generated it, this impression, and not the very gestures that created the work, is precisely the proof that the making of a work is one thing and its result, its product, is another. This discontinuity – which is imperative in art, else it become practical action or be mistaken for life, failing to achieve its result – is known and, in all ways, respected by Nuno Ramos' paintings. But to test its limits, to see where it will lead, with one's hands laden with paint (like some sort of primeval painter standing before nothing but the rectangle of the canvas) is something that

Ramos has aspired to and achieved in spite of all the failures to which the undertaking was fated. To transport the gestures that engendered it to the painting itself required that they be recorded in some way, that they be signs of these same gestures. Between the signs and what they indicate, however, there is also a discontinuity. If the hand glides across the canvas, there will be a sign of this movement other than the movement itself. If the hand merely disposes of the paint, it shall designate nothing about the gesture. What was innovative about those paintings was that when the gestures were transported to the canvas they already knew the task they would not accomplish. Like a mountain climber who scales and slips at the same time, one cannot go far. And what we see are brittle, somewhat crumbling gestures that translate the impossibility of being whole. But the filling in of the frame is now revealed as whole and continuous. Scratched here, lumpy there, it emerges as a setting for what has not been fully (but only just) accomplished by confused signs of still-hesitant gestures that make up a somewhat phantasmagorical tissue of promises from which, a bit like Frenhofer's unfinished masterpiece, a hand might suddenly spring forth.

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It is hard to tell what counts for more in an artistic trajectory, whether the artist's intention or the autonomous movement created by a work at a given moment – one that propels the artist in directions he

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embraces without being quite sure of his motivations. Ever since its beginning (and regardless of the aesthetic intensity achieved in each one of his works), the trajectory of Nuno Ramos reflects an artistic ambition rare in contemporary art. Twenty-five years later, if his work appears to move and grow on its own, its beginnings in 1985 reflect an unequivocal vocation for artistic greatness (in paintings that prefigure those of 1988 as well as in his early sculptures and installations; generally speaking, this covers the first great period of his work – up to 1997). Throughout his trajectory as a painter (but also in his sculptures, installations and texts), Ramos has always asked of art the most that art has to offer, so to speak – which wouldn't have amounted to more than a psychological theme if his trajectory did not reflect moments to match his ambitions and, above all else, if those moments had not been historical responses to the median condition of contemporary art as compared to modern art. If the second period of Ramos' work possesses a more internal and self-propelled dynamic, the first indicates a decision as well as an investment in the diversity and greatness of art even in hard times for great art. And the *m* show of 1992 suffices to evince that the gauntlet was thrown and the challenge met, that all his experience as a painter and sculptor up until then was revitalized and expanded. Few works in contemporary art have the poetic intensity and ethical conviction of *m*.

Whereas his paintings in particular but also his sculptures and installations previously showed the aesthetic range to which he aspired, *m* emerged as a turning point in which his work began to ask more of the artist than the other way around, to induce him to hits and misses on a path from which there was practically no return, as it were, always demanding new achievements, new limits against which to be measured, denying, accepting, contrasting – and having to make it all communicate in poetic terms.

If Ramos' trajectory was established through limits imposed by art itself, as the years passed his concept of art and, therefore, of its limits, became increasingly varied. It was no longer a matter of tackling different ways to produce a painting from the basic rectangle of the frame or, when faced with marble – sculpture's traditional element – to set in the rawest of pieces elements of glass and, within those, liquid elements. The conjunction of liquids and solids is essential to almost all of Nuno Ramos' sculptures and installations. And here, as in the paintings, something of another nature is added to the traditional support, as if the liquids were a continuation of the solids, abolishing the difference between them in continuance of a poetic individuation more convincing than the mere disparity of the materials employed in the sculpture or installation – a disparity, however, that lives off the different and almost un-manipulatable materials with which he deals and which have been part of

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his paintings since 1988. To these contrasts, in which the different materials play a decisive role in the problematic individuation of the works, Ramos slowly added the more subtle material of writing. And, following that, recorded speech and songs. The discontinuity to deal with, and unite, is now one between visible elements and sounds that they reproduce (writing), or between the visible and the audible. Mounted for a single work or, oftentimes, for a group of works that make up a larger exhibition with paintings, drawings, sculptures and installations, the recordings of texts, themselves already tests of the limits of meaning of spoken language, give rise to total albeit preposterous works of art in which the spectator's effort to add everything up soon reveals that there is no way of uniting everything in an organic manner. These are groups of works that would require complex description. A brief introduction might profit more by highlighting the expansion of limits to which Ramos set himself, with the perennial acceptance of each artistic genre that he seizes upon even as (simultaneously) he attempts to artistically unite the limits imposed by each genre of art into a broader unity.

Beyond the limits of each genre of art, and of their conjunction, Nuno Ramos, in possession of a strong poetics, has also constantly been able to test limits of the influences of the work of other artists. He makes use of what is suggested to him by other works in a number of ways. The most clearly productive contrast would be the one

between his work and that of Frank Stella. After dialoguing with Stella's work, his own magnificent, albeit still fairly flat paintings of 1989 begin to advance into space. Yet that which is more graphic and more complex in Stella is more pictorial and simpler in Ramos. The appearance of his paintings changes but his poetics does not. And if the dialogue with Stella was a deliberate one, other dialogues emerged even after the work was finished, for the vast range of materials and forms he employs has its source in Beuys, in *arte povera* and in postminimalism, as well as in the readings of these by Brazilian artists of an earlier generation such as José Resende, Cildo Meireles and Tunga. That a work like *Matacão* [Boulder] is reminiscent of the work of Michael Heizer because it is made of stones buried to varying depths is, therefore, no cause for surprise. To this first impression, however, a more careful gaze will note that the irregular contours of the stones are approximate replicas of the contours of the trenches in which they are found – as if the stones had been born from the soil, from a living, storytelling soil. Unfortunately, the work has been destroyed. Other works by Ramos have also been destroyed or modified by the action of time. The confidence in his poetics that leads him to be unafraid of resemblance with the work of other artists is also responsible for the precariousness of some of his works. Dictated by poetic motivations, his choices of materials express no preference for anything that might produce ephemeral works. But nor

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do they seek any lasting quality. So it is that his early paintings lost much color and that some of his open air works do not weather time well. And there are also works that were created for a single occasion. In this regard, unlike other, more generic installations, they were, in fact, installations, lasting only as long as the very space that housed them, as was the case with *Mácula* [*Macula*] or the mounting of *Craca* [*Barnacle*] at the Venice Bienalle. Many of his paintings and sculptures, if well preserved, are intact and his more spatialized works – in other words installations in a broader sense – are remountable. Whether in terms of influence or of physical permanence, the works of Nuno Ramos allow themselves to be impregnated by historical or physical time. Thus, his poetics is not indifferent to invention or durability, but it is not guided by them. It is through these limits, too, that the artist tests art. And it is to the care of seeing and keeping by others that – in part – he entrusts the fate of his works. There is a risk here, but not one deliberately intended. And if there is risk, albeit not the necessary destruction from which no work in the world escapes, this is the ultimate limit that the artist establishes, one that depends, here, upon a continuity that must be carried out – or not – between the work and the public and their guardians.

The precarious quality of many of Nuno Ramos' works – his choice of materials that conflict with lasting materials; his choice of liquids, viscous or paste-like materials – likens him to Hélio Oiticica, the Brazilian artist who

is undoubtedly his great reference. In Hélio Oiticica, though, the precariousness that eventually impregnated his trajectory and attitude toward art is quite unlike that of Ramos. Like Lygia Clark, Oiticica saw in the end of modern painting the end of painting in general. Because it was no longer possible to paint, whatever lost interiority modern painting still possessed was transposed by Hélio Oiticica into the cavities of his spatial reliefs and, later, to his *Bólides* [Fireballs] – boxes that invited spectators to explore them – and, finally, to the installations that entreated spectators to enter.

Counterpaintings of sorts, those spatialized interiors (that were interiors nonetheless), ultimately led to the union between art and life, to interiors that the artist actually inhabited. And since that union, if it is not the act of an artist, if it contains only the aesthetic experience afforded to all, shall not unite art and life, for it is already part of life itself, so, in the case of an artist, difference eventually surfaces in the aestheticizing of one's own life. It is the old matter of dandyism, inherent and so often productive in the history of modern art and taken, here, to its ultimate consequences. In Nuno Ramos, however, there is no shade of dandyism. Nor of the union between life and art. If there is any likeness to Hélio Oiticica it lies in an ambition to produce an art that wills greatness upon itself, unafraid of testing limits. In Oiticica, however, testing the limits of art, and especially of painting, was to contradict it

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and even to contraband it to another genre, such as music, for instance. In Ramos, on the contrary, there is no testing of the limits of art beyond each genre. It is unrepressed aesthetic ambition that Ramos seeks in Hélio Oiticica and that would be difficult to perceive in his work without the historical precedent of Hélio Oiticica as revisited by Ramos.

On the other hand, Nuno Ramos belongs to an age in which contemporary painting, whether pop, minimalist, or that of so many other movements, had already been established. If in testing its limits he made way for his paintings (which are among the finest pictorial works of the last twenty years) as well as for other artistic genres, he never meant for one genre to abolish the other or in the hope that art should aspire to be life. Whether he is examining painters or sculptors, his admiration for his contemporaries is never less than the ambition he devotes to his own projects. In reading his essays on art, many of them about artists who are close to him, one might easily conclude that he admires their works more than he does his own – a fact which, coming from Ramos, from his maverick albeit moderate nature, is in no way surprising. If we stop to think about it, this is somewhat meaningless. Nuno Ramos measures the powers of art because (unless one is mistaken), his work can no longer keep it from being what it is. The fact that he has fearlessly tackled the experience of the limits of art with the ingenuous enchantment that he expects from it may well be a contradiction in

one who is so in touch with himself. Or not. In order to flirt with danger or play with fire, one should be well-equipped with spiritual serenity.

A serenity that is clearly noticeable in his sambas, for Nuno is also a songwriter. His songs do not quite contain aesthetic infractions. His paradigm (one about which he has written so well) is Paulinho da Viola, the link most associated with the traditional samba of our contemporary songwriting. And if we consider that Hélio Oiticica saw in samba a transgressive element of the plastic arts, even if through an arbitrary change of genres, with his *parangolés* made for seeing, but also for wearing and dancing, there is something disturbing about the fact that Nuno Ramos' *paideuma* accommodates both artists. For unlike other arts, the Brazilian song (and the samba in particular) is something that not only possesses great visibility and a public dimension in Brazil, something that owes nothing to other genres of modern songs, not even to the uniquely creative North American songbook, but also is produced by people in the fullest, not populist, sense of the word – to use political terms, in a sovereign, emancipated sense in which the poor man sings, and allows himself this licence, verses that only Shakespeare would dare to write, at once obvious and great. Who but a Brazilian songwriter or a seventeenth century sonneteer could still say something like "as rosas exalam o perfume que roubam de ti" [the roses exude the perfume they steal from you] without

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sounding kitsch? Thus, there is nothing to test in samba, for in samba we can never fall short of ourselves; we are incomparably free, unencumbered by external, aesthetic or ethical authority. In song, the slave – a peripheral being – becomes the master. Where we are no longer altogether what we might have been, whether through stylistic exaggeration (in the manner of Euclides da Cunha) or stylistic anarchy (in the manner of Machado de Assis), Ramos reconciles these two traditions of unorthodox Brazilianness for, in their place, as sure as the sun will rise, there is only samba. The first of these traditions follows the path of [poet, playwright and novelist] Oswald de Andrade, [sociologist] Gilberto Freyre, [playwright and journalist] Nelson Rodrigues, [novelist João] Guimarães Rosa, [theatrical director] José Celso [Martinez Corrêa], [filmmaker] Glauber Rocha and Hélio Oiticica himself, to mention only the more famous names; the second – the anarchic temperament of which is rarer – is the one that lives on in poets Manuel Bandeira and Mário de Andrade, [in the architect Oscar] Niemeyer, in the work of the concrete poets, in [poet] João Cabral [de Melo Neto], in the bossa nova, and in musical tropicalism. Occupying a central position between these two traditions is our – how to say it? – central artist: [Carlos] Drummond [de Andrade]. Had we a Drummond in the visual arts (and the candidate for such a position would be [Alfredo] Volpi (in painting) or Amílcar de Castro (in sculpture), and

Ramos' work would have been different, for it is entirely dedicated to our creative deficit (and also to its manifestation in the sciences or humanities). His work incorporates it, loses or gains from it whatever it may in a metabolism fully imbued with a certain social mission, although it appears to be a highly idiosyncratic oeuvre. Thus he has made of his trajectory the most open and generous adventure in our visual arts, his beautiful paintings resembling (somewhat intentionally, it seems to me) the carnivals, floats, and Pollocks he would like to see springing from the hills. Were there still hills, that is. Were there still Pollocks. Who knows?