

Reflections on the Creative Process of the Sculpture *Árvore das Almas*

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Abstract

This article presents the creative process in the development of Irene de Mendonça Peixoto's garden sculpture *Árvore das Almas* (*Tree of Souls*) as a three-dimensional unfolding of an artistic fabulation—starting with illustrations of the same name—which culminates in a combination of the artist's experiential immersion in nature, as a result of the social distancing and isolation that coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, and the haps of poetic intuition.

The analysis here of this creative and bioinspired process proposes an investigation of artistic processes from an intuitive and oneiric perspective, in which communication takes place in a sensory and mimetic way as occurs in nature, but moving in more complex evocations, unfolding the meanings of matter without losing the connection between the perceived and the imagined. In contrast, this work will also discuss the analysis proposed by the artistic creativity model based on Palle Dahlstedt's processes, in which the notion of negotiation between concept and material representation is fundamental to better understanding the supposedly random and subjective mechanisms of artistic processes.

Key words: art; nature; creative process; art studies

Introduction

By breaking with our firmly entrenched and deeply-rooted routines, the pandemic and the subsequent social isolation has caused a radical discontinuity in the temporality of global life. Societies and individuals have been obliged to experience the “auto-synchronous reference point” [1] mentioned by Bachelard, which is to live our internal time disconnected from the surrounding social life.

This procedure refers to the intimate vastness implied in poetic time, an instant of vertical intensity that, according to the author, is “solemn, great as space, without divisions of minutes or seconds, an immobile hour that is not marked by clocks” [1]¹. The experience of such an unusual moment, one ironically longed for by artists and poets, takes on cruel and frightening undertones in the context of a deadly pandemic. In the vertical time of the poetic instant, we live the abstract ambivalence of life and death; we no longer

know if the heart beats joyously or painfully in light of the present and the foreseeable future.

The pandemic has brought a more acute perspective to existential questions. In addition to inhabiting time differently, we have been forced to perceive the world around us in a broader way. Nature has imposed its rhythm on us and has put on full display its relevance to human societies, communities, and individuals now so profoundly isolated.

The creative process presented here of the *Árvore das Almas* (*Tree of Souls*) garden sculpture is the result of this urban and social distancing that has compelled the artist to retreat into nature and reflect on the plant world. These beings, anchored in the ground and still so incomprehensible to us, have always been a source of inspiration. As creatives, many of us envy the cooperative architecture of the plant world, its infinite forms that carry out functions so elegantly and with such charm—we are inspired by its energetic resistance in the face of the adversities imposed on it, many of them the result of human action or inaction.

Our intention with the analysis of the creative and bioinspired process of the sculpture *Tree of Souls* is to discuss the appearance of the poetic instance through creative strategies capable of perceiving and creating bonds between different worlds, reinventing qualifications under the aegis of the imaginal and the fabled. By perceiving her surroundings through the optics of this imaginal domain, the artist rescues, in the constitution of her own thinking, hidden or latent ideas, allowing the poetic content of events to emerge. This is the manifestation of a secretly syntonic world in which things can join in the most contradictory ways and show unsuspected affinities. This sensitive and mysterious dimension is frequent in poetic intuition, in which communication begins in a sensorial and mimetic way. Once again the plant world is responsible for teaching us a lot about mimetic communication and its countless counterpoints.

Another aspect of the present analysis of processes at the intersection of human creativity and an influence of/on nature intends to combine the apparently erratic mode of poetic intuition with the model of artistic creativity based on processes, as proposed by Palle Dahlstedt [2]. This article will work with the notion of negotiation between concept and material representation to reflect on the comings and goings of creative processes in the construction of a

¹ “All quotes from texts titled in Portuguese in the references section were translated by the author of the present article.”

physicality that guarantees its materialization in the world in line with its poetic sense.

The Discourse of Similarities

According to Mancuso, when “a living being emits a signal of any kind (visual, olfactory, auditory...) to the other, in order to influence the latter's behavior in favor of the former, we are facing a mimetic phenomenon” [3]. Mimesis is seductive in principle, so it makes sure to resemble that which is different in order to be more convincing. More precisely it imitates that which is unique to something else. This communication between different species also happens with plants, which are capable of a series of extraordinary adaptations so that they can survive in adverse conditions. There are incredible examples in the plant kingdom of species capable of simultaneously modifying the shape, size, and colors of their leaves to fit in inconspicuously among the shrubs and trees on which they grow. The question here is less about how plants can change their shape, and more how they know what needs to be imitated. For Stefano Mancuso, a possible explanation for the mimetic and changing behavior of plants is that they are endowed with a “rudimentary form of vision” [3]. One can also consider this particular form of vision a mysterious mimetic faculty to engender similarities.

Benjamin, in his text “Doctrine of the Similar,” warns that more important than identifying similarities is to look carefully at the reproduction of the processes that engender such similarities [4]. For the philosopher, nature is full of this mimetic engendering, as is man, allowing us to say that all of our most superior functions are “decisively codetermined by the mimetic faculty” [4]. However, with modernity, this faculty of mimesis has been weakening and its domain, which in antiquity entailed the mysterious “relationships between the micro and the macrocosm” [4] is now in a fragile state.

Benjamin maintains that the magical correspondences, brought about by the similarities, are no longer readable by modern man, becoming unimportant in our daily activities, because over time we have lost our capacity for extra-sensory perception, natural intuition, and magic which included reading and interpreting the signals emitted by nature. However, in artistic practice, the complex discourse of art seeks unthinkable bonds, harmonic counterpoints that produce imminent and different meanings. If art includes everything in its discourse, it is because, in line with the untamed nature that surrounds us, it remains knowing how to decipher the meaning of correspondences, synesthetic, extra-sensory similarities that once guided men to live in harmony with the natural world and to follow its lead.

Nature's harmony is marked by a melodic simultaneity, what one might call counterpoint. According to Deleuze, the song of a bird has its own harmonious relationships and, therefore, it can function as “counterpoint, but it can find these relationships in the song of other species, and it may even imitate these other songs as if it were a question of occupying a maximum of frequencies. The spider's web contains ‘a very subtle portrait of the fly,’ which serves as its counterpoint... The tick is organically constructed in such a way that it finds its counterpoint in any mammal whatever that passes below its branch, as oak leaves arranged in the

form of tiles find their counterpoint in the raindrops that stream over them. This is not a teleological conception but a melodic one in which we no longer know what is art and what nature” [5].

If nature and art mix to the point of confusing us, it is because both dominate the discourse of conjunctions in every way, a complex discourse whose principle is to engender similarities, to look for unusual bonds that produce unsuspected sensory reactions and teach us how to decipher the multiplicity of extra-sensory similarities that make it possible to relate the world of sense perceptions to that of the imagination.

Immersion in Nature and Creative Processes

The creative process of the bio-inspired sculpture *Tree of Souls* began long before the intention to materialize the work. The advent of the pandemic compelled the artist and author of this article to move from the urban center of the city of Rio de Janeiro to a rural site located in the middle of the Atlantic forest on the Brazilian coast. Her new daily life immersed in the shapes and sounds of her exuberant natural surroundings significantly influenced her artistic work.

According to Palle Dahlstedt, creative ideas do not suddenly appear as they seem in the public eye; on the contrary, “they are gradual processes, combining and elaborating previous knowledge into new thoughts, until the conditions are just right for them to surface.” [2].

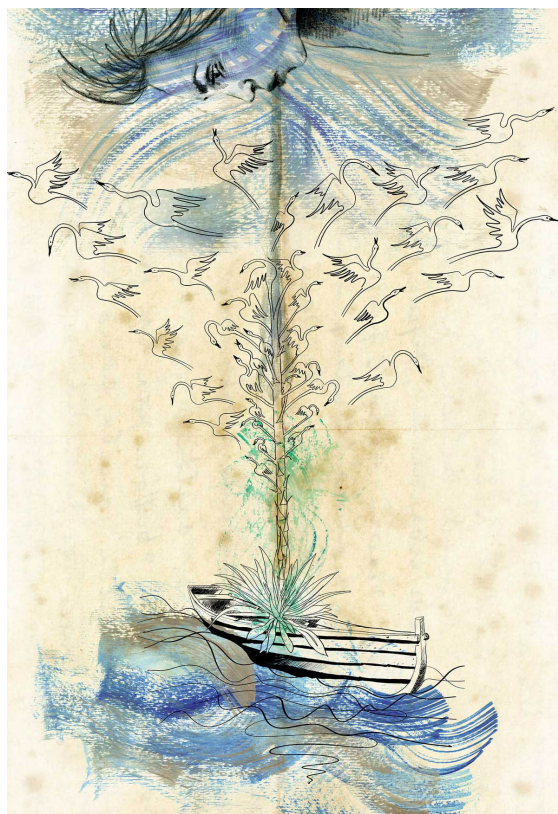


Fig. 1 Illustration from the *Tree of Souls* series, from the artist's book titled *Reverdecer (Revegetate)* (2020).

The title *Tree of Souls* refers to a group of illustrations (see Fig 1), a fabulation in an oneiric mode, of birds attached to the stems of a plant, needing to detach in order to take

flight. This image establishes a poetic counterpoint with the narrative of the Brazilian writer João Ubaldo Ribeiro [6] about the incarnation of souls in living beings. The souls, perched like birds on trees, launch themselves at newborns of all species to gain a corporeal existence. This initial imaginal compound, in Dahlstedt's words, constituted a first conceptual representation, a brief image of the work in "in terms of ideas and generative principles" [2]. For it to reach its final form, becoming an effective manifestation of a "material representation," it will be necessary to go a long way through the choice of materials and the application of appropriate tools, configuring "a dynamic, iterative process that navigates the space of the theoretically possible (in the chosen medium) following paths defined by what is practically possible (by the tools at hand)" [2].

The development of the idea, initiated in drawings, that informed the sculptural work happened by chance when, on a walk around the region, the artist found an iron object (see Fig. 2), at random, that, curiously, resembled the idea of the drawing. The object was not only incorporated into the group of images called *Tree of Souls*, but also became the poetic trigger that pointed to another material possibility, another expressive means, for the idea of the work. We have here not only an example of articulation of and coordination between the perceived and the imagined based on extra-sensory similarities, but also of the artistic creativity model based on Dahlstedt's processes, whereby the introduction of a new material space affects artistic expression.



Fig. 2 Found object made of iron by unknown artist.

In this model, the creative process operates in a field of innumerable unknown possibilities; however, it is not entirely left to chance. Artistic achievement is largely guided by an artist's prior knowledge, vision, references already seen and rearranged, diverse conceptions, and mainly by the tools one knows or feels one is capable of using.

Therefore, within this model of creativity, the creation of work exists in these two forms simultaneously: the material representation and the conceptual representation. Since "the focus of the creative process continuously changes between these two forms, and requires mechanisms to translate from one into the other, in both ways" [2], Dahlstedt adopts the term implementation when moving from concept to material and reconceptualization whenever the concept is recreated using material different from that previously used. For the author, "the discrepancies between the two representations, and the imprecision of the translation in both directions fuels the creative exploration, embeds qualities of human

expression in the work, and imprints a trace of the creative process onto the work itself" [2].

In Peixoto's case, the found iron object clearly influenced and modified not only her initial conceptual representation, but also—and consequently—the material representation, which until then had been two-dimensional (sketches and watercolors on paper). Its reconceptualization took on a three-dimensional shape (Corten-steel sculpture) on a much larger scale (3m x 3m) than the design area (40 cm x 60 cm).

The introduction of a new focus on the creative process implies new conceptual and material representations, opening different questions and negotiations until the final completion of the work. Thus, the material representation in Corten steel belongs to the corresponding material space and includes "the application of different tools in succession, since they all operate in the same space" [2]. This space is a theoretical construction that contains all possible instances for the use of the material, in this case, Corten steel. In this reconceptualization, the chosen instances are the laser cutting tools for birds combined with the use of hammered rebar for the stems.



Fig. 3 Illustration superimposed on the Corten steel sculpture.

The idea expressed in the conceptual representation of birds found an almost immediate correspondence in the new material representation of steel. The outline of the initial design, applied to the metal, has not undergone any relevant changes in the laser cutting (see Fig. 3). The stems, which in the drawing would attach to the trunk of a tree or shrub as if they were branches, did not achieve the same correspondence. The introduction of rebar led the artist to rethink the original conceptual representation. The rebar curiously caused a return to an early sketch (see Fig. 4), the drawing of a bouquet of birds in which the birds seemed to be on the verge of taking flight. In this case, the rebar material (shape, weight, and movement) was decisive for yet another reconceptualization of the work.



Fig. 4 Preliminary sketch of the drawing *Tree of Souls* adapted for application in the sculptural design.



Fig. 5 Overview of the *Tree of Souls* sculpture



Fig. 6 Detail of the sculpture *Tree of Souls*

Another important issue in the transition from the two-dimensional form of the first implementation of the work to the three-dimensional was the fact that the surroundings of the illustrations are the empty surface of the paper itself, in contrast to the more elaborate and detailed outline for the idea of the *Tree of Souls* sculpture. The surroundings of the sculpture in the garden are much more complex, since the garden dialogues with nature and its immense variety of forms (see figures 5 and 6). In this case, a formal simplification expressing the essence of the idea would be much more impactful than simulating the details of a living plant where there was already so much plant life. Therefore, instead of the literal representation of branches and stems, the artist opted to express the movement of these branches and stems that abstractly would also evoke the flight of birds. The question then was how to express the similarities of movements between plants and birds by means of iron rods (see Fig. 6). In contemplating this question, the artist considered how bouquets and floral arrangements behave, how the branches of bougainvillea bend, the fronds of palm trees, and the relationship between and distribution of weight and size of a leaf and its stem, so that the scale of the steel stem would support the bird with a similar elegance.

After countless tests with different curvatures and different thicknesses for the rebar, the outline of the bird bouquet gained shape and weight in the garden, and at its base, mixed with the iron stems, the artist engendered a living, green arrangement making it look like the steel stems had sprouted from the plant life placed at the base of the sculpture (see Fig. 5).

Final Considerations

The isolation imposed by the pandemic drove artist Irene de Mendonça Peixoto's to an unexpected and sustained immersion in nature. This coexistence with such varied exuberant volumes and forms so different from daily life in urban, geometric, and planned settings—usually observed through apartment or car windows or the screens of digital devices—influenced the artist to create a garden sculpture instead of her usual two-dimensional works.

The model of artistic processes proposed by Dahlstedt based on his own creative practice as a musician has proven applicable to other fields of art. Even though the Dahlstedt's intention is the controversial application of his model in research on creative software for works of art generated by computers, what interested the author of the present work—the artist herself—was the systematization of processes considered intuitive and subjective without disregarding the fundamental poetic dimension of artistic practice.

Every artist knows from experience, something of which the lay audience is often unaware—the distinction established by medieval theologians between “*creare ex nihilo*,” which defines divine creation, and “*facere de matéria*” [7], which defines human creative faculties. An artistic work is the result of a laborious effort to imagine the unimaginable and give shape to unprecedented creations with the tools and materials at our disposal via the complex creative processes that lead to the realization of a work.

References

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