

# EMMANUEL NASSAR: A CRITICAL CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR 1

**Tadeu Chiarelli**

For many people, Emmanuel Nassar's work is disconcerting: it contains works that look like paintings but are made up of shaped pieces of metal sheets used in advertising – scratched, corroded and without any apparent sign of having been worked on by the artist – which Nassar combines and re-combines (often on the computer, working from digital photographs) until he achieves the result that he and his client (whether a collector or museum curator, it makes no difference) find most pleasing; paintings that look like modern photographs of details of common objects or ornaments; photographs that look like modern paintings of common objects or ornaments; works on fabric that look like flag, and flags that look more like works of art on fabric.

The comment above could be expanded with more examples of Emmanuel's curious way of populating the modern art world, eroding as far as possible the frontiers between art and anti-art artwork, and during this process putting to the test the complicity of other components of the circuit and the complacency of the ordinary observer.

These characteristics, which are noticeable in much of the artist's recent production, are the result of a matured process of choosing between certain characteristics that have been appearing throughout his career.

I start from the following premise: Emmanuel Nassar is today linked to an attitude in the visual arts that has been commonplace since Marcel Duchamp. If we observe his recent production we see that he no longer identifies himself with the traditional figure of the artist who produces his work based on the link between thinking and doing. Emmanuel can therefore be described as an 'artist-editor'<sup>2</sup> of the kind that selects and rearranges the objects and images of the world, giving them back to us filled with alternative possible interpretations.

In his essay "The Artist as Consumer"<sup>3</sup> the German academic Boris Groys points to certain questions that may help to understand Nassar's career. Firstly the writer states that, rather than a producer, the artist today is "a consumer of things that have been anonymously produced and are already circulating within our culture"<sup>4</sup> and must decide, choose and combine this universe of things based on a critical view of it, an attitude which is typical of the person consuming and choosing a product, and not of someone who makes a product.

This reversal of role on the part of the modern artist – who was previously a producer who submitted his work to public scrutiny and is now a consumer who chooses and works on what already exists, thus exercising a critical faculty – came to have significant consequences that Groys develops throughout his interesting essay. I believe however that for the purposes of this interpretation we need only remember the following point: in order to choose the images of things he will take as his own, this artist-editor is taking on a position not only in relation to that which is appropriating, but also in relation to the results he will achieve based on this process, and in relation to the environment that will receive them.

As we know, Emmanuel Nassar is not alone in this branch of modern art in Brazil. It also includes artists such as Nelson Leirner, Farnese de Andrade, Hudnilson Jr., Alfredo Nicolaiewsky and various others who – by means of the most widely differing critical choices that they have developed or are developing from among worldly objects – are greatly expanding the range of possibilities for art in Brazil today.

Taking this more general picture as a basis – in fact, being an artist-editor is almost a precondition for being an artist in Brazil today, where a number of artists who have this critical spirit are working – it will now be interesting to move onto a kind of unveiling of this critical precondition and its appearance within Emmanuel Nassar's career, pointing out the mechanisms it has created during his gradual process of maturation as an editor of the world, shaped by his relationships with the art world.

If this disconcerting characteristic is more accentuated in his current work, it is important to point out that it had never existed in isolation, since Nassar has never taken that route alone. Although it seems to be dominant today, there have been periods in his career when this cold and critical attitude towards his work and the art world has coexisted with other attitudes of his towards his own work. For example, some time ago it was common to find, alongside this attitude which is today typical of his production, works in which he was trying to establish a certain lyrical and therefore 'expressive' dimension, others in which he reclaimed the authorial dimension of the material he was producing, in short, a series of procedures which – as we shall see – were an attempt to react against the attitude which was gradually imposing itself and which would turn his work into more of a critical commentary on the systems that fed it than an actual affirmation of traditional artistic originality.

This text does not attempt to describe the whole of Nassar's career, explaining when and how these characteristics appear and how they superimpose themselves on each other. I shall concentrate only on setting out an interpretation of that phenomenon in order to perhaps increase even more the discomfort many people feel when they look at this artist's work.

As an interpretation, the following paragraphs describe how I perceive and attach meanings to certain aspects of Nassar's career, not always agreeing with what the artist himself may think about certain aspects of his production and certain specific attitudes that he has

about the art world. In this case I take full responsibility for what this text contains that is both documentary and fiction.

As we have already mentioned, Nassar has not always acted as a critical consumer of the images around him. That is, he has not always been aware of this situation and even when it was developing Nassar often used processes to suppress or at least diminish that situation. In retrospect, we can see in his career moments when he really seemed to believe in the expressive force of his work even if at that time he was already working within quite a particular framework of appropriation.

From the very beginning Nassar has based his production on two vectors or two pictorial universes which, although they develop in parallel and have some points in common, remain at a distance from each other: the visual culture of Amazonia – above all that of the state of Pará and specifically its capital, Belém – and the constructive tradition of 20th-century Western art, including some of its excellent results within Brazil.

The initial motivation that led Nassar to choose to explore the first of these two sources is found in the cultural environment of Belém in the 1980s when the need arose for local professional artists to shape and incorporate into their respective production the wealth of visual culture created by the poorer sections of the population of Belém.

As a member of a group of local people from the middle-class, sensitive to surrounding society and connected to the arts, Nassar, along with certain other young artists from the town, felt impelled to take a course of action which, although it had existed for some time (since the Romantics of the 18th and 19th centuries), could also be understood as a kind of 'Duchampian operation' (pardon the anachronism), a 'consumer operation', to use a term coined by Boris Groys: the professional artist sees a source of stimuli for his senses that arises from what is produced by the ordinary people around him. Faced with this supposedly pure source of 'real' native vision he must take it as the foundation on which to construct work which, although devised to circulate within a cultured world, takes for its main justification the fact of having been inspired in the 'truth' of the people.

There are innumerable examples of this particular kind of appropriation of visual stimuli by one class from another, by one culture from another, both in Brazil and abroad, and not only in the visual arts. In the case of Brazil, this type of appropriation – or, some would say expropriation – has gained the status of being an absolute necessity.

In many works at the beginning of his career Nassar seemed to show signs of believing in this mission and in many of the results he achieved in his painting at that time he showed positive results in terms of the effort to bring to the world of modern Brazilian art certain important elements of the way that ordinary people typical of his native region see the world.

In several canvases that he produced under this early influence we find a more definite absence of any indication of authorship to show that the person who had produced those paintings was in fact Emmanuel Nassar. The appropriation process had been carried out so well that the anonymity of the appropriated structures seemed to have been seamlessly transferred to the result of the appropriation.

It is interesting to note that, faced with these results Nassar, perhaps feeling insecure at the virtual loss of authority over the results of his actions, is consciously or unconsciously looking for methods that can reverse this situation.

But how can the impasse be resolved? Using expedients to create supposedly unequivocal stylistic signatures of authorship based for example on a voracious system of gestures in the 'expressionist' manner was out of the question for fear that it should contaminate the two-dimensional nature that was so characteristic of the appropriated structures. The answer Nassar found in some work was therefore to include in the pictorial field his initials: E.N., letters which were also flat and which, at the same time as they conformed to the general two-dimensional nature of the compositions, drew attention to themselves and, for the artist, rescued his essential self from the result of the appropriation activity. Nassar can now rest easy, the art world can rest easy, because it is now clear that the object before them consciously emulates the framework of the popular without however being completely the production of some anonymous person.

After a series of works that continued to mimic the world around him, it seems that Nassar did not take long to realise that the way in which he appropriated what he saw, while making clear the primary origin of his visual sources (the world of the people), showed indications alluding to that other tradition, the other source that has been referred to: the international constructivist source which had such powerful effects in Brazil (Niemeyer, concretists and neo-concretists, Volpi, Schendel and others). In fact most of his paintings, even when they emphasise the first creative framework, or perhaps precisely because of that, reveal certain constructivist solutions that can be linked to a category of post-1970 Brazilian and Latin American artistic production that became known as 'sensitive geometry', a term coined by the critic Roberto Pontual; in fact, much of Nassar's early production had a tendency towards a certain 'geometrical lyricism', either by the deliberately naive use of colour or by incorrectly drawn lines and other methods.

The perception of this possibility of a connection between the everyday and the academic, however, soon began to be contaminated by

the critical aspect we have already alluded to that would place the artist in the power of that original, shall we say, Romantic assumption.

It seems that it was precisely the fact that Emmanuel Nassar had never been a Romantic (or at least not always) that allowed him to realise that his work was more than an expression of a synthesis between the everyday and the academic; it was a kind of commentary or statement about common points that could be used to link both elements. Understanding this helped the artist to believe, in the period from 1980 to 1990, it would be possible to explore the possibilities of any type of nativism deriving from Romanticism that did not tip over into kitsch or, worse still, bad faith.

And how did Nassar realise that his work could be taking this dangerous path if he had not realised it at an early stage? I believe that what must have helped to speed up this realisation was the gradual understanding of the structure he was using to produce most of his canvases: using the rectangular shape of painting in his head – the same shape as the viewfinder of a camera, it may be said in passing – while looking for the everyday structures around him, Nassar was mentally snipping out certain details of ornamentation found in the most varied array of everyday objects around him, and throwing them into the arrangement on the canvas. While he carried out this appropriation – either literal or metaphorical, depending on each particular work – what he was doing was to transfer those visual stimuli from the world of ordinary people into the great tradition of Western painting. And within that universe what was the tradition associated with the operation he was carrying out? It is not important whether tradition of constructivist painting is ‘sensitive’ or ‘lyrical’, because in one way or another, any solution would always be linked to that tradition.

It is interesting that, based on that perception (which was definitely not an immediate one but which emerged in various paintings interspersed with exercises alienated from the very system that was developing), Nassar would emphasise the contradiction he saw between those two sources by exaggerating certain impulses that had been absorbed into everyday ornaments (certain ‘amateur’, unstable plastic solutions already referred to here) which, when contrasted shockingly with the constructivist discipline the structure

of the canvases demanded, gave his paintings a unique flavour, placing them between the ordinary and the academic without, however, creating a synthesis between the two traditions the artist had appropriated.

This ‘unique flavour’ was in fact the critical and good-humoured seasoning that Nassar gave to his pictures. It seems that this was the seasoning that allowed the artist to create a certain distance between these two frameworks and also a distancing from that need – actually a false one – to create a poetic that would unite and appease the differences between the everyday and the academic, the need, as we have seen, that had produced Nassar’s first utterances as a newly-born artist.

If this distancing may already be seen in some of the paintings from the beginning of his career, it has to be said that the reception of his work by the artistic world of Belém and the rest of the country would not show that same distancing.

If, with the passing of time and the analysis of his work, Nassar seems to have received these responses with a mixture of satisfaction and irony (after all, the artist is always the first to see his own work) specialist critics in general accepted his production happily: at last, a Brazilian artist who brought together the ordinary and the academic, thus managing – right at the end of the 20th century! – to produce a genuinely Brazilian form of art.

Although it has not yet been very much studied, this demand for a ‘typical’ form of Brazilian art has existed since the days of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in the 19th century. Despite there being no history of art criticism in Brazil, we may detect this demand within that which had existed for a longer period within the national debate on art, a phenomenon which, from the first discussions in meetings of the Academy’s experts, spilled over into the columns of newspapers, into books, into various artistic productions during the 19th and 20th centuries and – after almost 200 years – still finds echoes in the modern debate about art in Brazil.

Thus it is not strange to see interest in creating academic art based on everyday sources from Amazonia in the mid-1980s as one more sign of a desire that had already existed for a long time in Brazil. And it is therefore not strange to observe the positive reception given to Nassar’s work as he broke away from his regional limitations to be accepted in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro – the most dynamic artistic and cultural centres in Brazil at that time.

To return to Nassar’s story, evidence of this positive reception is found in invitations to hold one-man shows in the south of Brazil, to participate in group exhibitions of Brazilian art overseas, and the acquisition of his paintings by prestigious collectors and museums.

Instead of easing the contradictory relationships Nassar had with his paintings, this very positive reception only exacerbated them. If it is possible on the one hand to find a satisfied Nassar producing his ‘sensitive geometries’ and ‘neo-concretisms from Pará’ for a large public that was anxious to see new examples of his poetic imagination that was so ‘original’ and ‘Brazilian’, on the other hand we see how that critical aspect began to acquire other shades of radicalism.

And this radicalism gained strength as the artist, while broadening his critical awareness based on the stimulus of certain procedures used in his appropriation strategies, transfers it into the way in which he relates to the art world.

An example which perhaps summarises much of this new situation was the way in which Nassar solve the problem of sending his works to be part of the *15 Brazilian Artists* exhibition in the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art in 1996, a show which I organised. Instead of being careful about sending his work from Belém to São Paulo with all the precautions required today in transporting works of art, Nassar chose to send it without any kind of special provision.

I remember that the explanation he gave at the time concerned the fact that, because those works were permeated with a (real or metaphorical) vernacular provenance, they could travel very well without any special protective measures. Any damage that might happen would be cheerfully absorbed and be effectively and conceptually integrated into them.

Obviously this attitude may at first sight be attributed to his easy-going, happy-go-lucky 'North-country' personality – as we prejudiced Southeastern Brazilians might say. However, there is a logic implicit in his behaviour that is not in the least easy-going: those objects that were transported as ordinary goods would only rise to the status of works of art on entering the museum premises to be exhibited as such. In this case, the criticism of his own work was shackled to the criticism of the art system as a whole.

Until a few moments earlier, those objects which, on entering the museum would begin to be seen as alleged syntheses between the ordinary and the academic sources, had been no more than prosaic objects that had perhaps been withdrawn from their functions as walls. Were they the syntheses of two types of aesthetic or were they commentaries on the limits of modern art? Were they the synthesis of two types of aesthetic or the fruits of a particular selection from the artist's view of the world in order to draw everyone's attention to the way in which the art world (here we include Nassar's own view, as one of those belonging to it) was able to make visible and aesthetically appreciable objects which, outside the museum, would simply be prosaic, the products of the material culture of people who are almost always wretched and excluded?

This conflict in Nassar's attitude to the works he sent to the MAM – his choice and immediate selection of shapes he considers to be art and the subsequent treatment of them as common objects – would become part of the artist's whole career from that time on.

There were some situations in which these directions would be reversed. On another occasion, also at the São Paulo MAM, Nassar offered to donate a series of municipal flags from the state of Pará that he had collected – after he had issued an appeal through the press to all the municipalities of that state – to create an installation entitled *Bandeiras* (Flags) which is today in the Museum's collection.

Obviously it was Nassar's world view that had enabled him to realise, by means of the series of flags symbolising the towns of Pará, the aesthetic \*qualities that bring together characteristics of ordinary as well as academic sources that are dear to the artist. However, within that group of flags – according to Nassar's account – there were some that he had invented.\*

How can we gain further understanding of this attitude of the artist to his work and the art world? Nassar could have made *Bandeiras* only from the flags he had received as a result of his appeal. This action would have been well received by the art world (as in fact it was). Or he could have developed the installation using only flags designed by him but with characteristics typical of municipal flags (something he would do at a later date, in 2010). So why should he include false flags among the real ones?

Within his own logic, Nassar was giving increasingly obvious signs that, based on his own experience in the art world, it was possible to stretch to the limit the complicity and complacency of the art world working by means of the tricks that made those who were interested re-think their respective ideas on the limits of modern art with each work he showed.

One of the artist's even more extreme provocations came about during his retrospective exhibition that was shown in three state capitals in Brazil between 2003 and 2004. In that exhibition, alongside installations and paintings that indicated periods felt to be the most significant ones in his career, the artist showed a series of photographs.

The provocation certainly did not arise out of the fact of Nassar showing photographs. Retrospectives may also serve as a stage to illustrate certain previously unknown aspects of the featured artist. What could definitely be considered to be a provocation was the way in which the photographs were presented: measuring 100 x 150 cm and displayed with all the required museographical discipline, with the other works on display they formed part of the public's interest in understanding Nassar's art.

But why show those photographs that competed with the paintings, not only by reason of the size and 'artistic' display of the two groups, but also by the fact that explored the same motifs? Which came first, the paintings or the photographs? Were the latter the basis of inspiration for the former, or vice versa?

When I referred above to Nassar's strategy of capturing the world around him I pointed out that he was always aware of the rectangular shape of the canvas, the same shape as the camera viewfinder. What was implied in that statement is that Nassar's view of the world, which chooses what should or should not be rescued from the universe of stimuli that surrounds him, is basically photographic, in other words it is codified by that instrument which was created to view the world.

However, while he was making these choices public through painting, the photographic eye that is typical of him may be understood as being one more source that had shaped his aesthetic interest. Nevertheless, when he presents

the photographs he takes raised to the same level as his paintings, which have always had a photographic aspect, it was as if Nassar was eliminating the once and for all the differences between preparations for his paintings (the actual photographs which may be assumed to have served as the basis for his paintings) and the paintings themselves. Choosing to show them side-by-side in the same artistic environment implied abandoning any possibility of still considering the content of his work as being that of an artist restricted by the norms of a certain predictability.

For example, if he considered his photographs to be the source of work still in progress, almost as a way of surpassing painting on the way to achieving a technique more in accord with current (market) trends, this would be understandable even if hard to justify. But this was not how the photographs were presented; the way they were shown led to the conclusion that they were one more revelation of Nassar's critical attitude towards his work and to its reception during the whole of his professional career up to that moment.

Soon afterwards, in his 2005 one-man show at the Millan Antonio Gallery in São Paulo Nassar presented a show – actually an installation – in which modular sheets of metal found in the streets of Belém, completely 'ready-made' or ordered from a workshop in that town, covered the walls of the Gallery. If anyone was interested in acquiring one or more of the modules, Nassar allowed them to choose at will. Five years later, anyone interested (a collector or curator, it makes no difference) could, by using the artist's notebook, set up virtually the whole set of those metal sheets without necessarily seeing them close to.

On approaching the end of the essay quoted earlier, Boris Groys reminds the reader that the story of art begins with recording death, in other words by building sepulchres, pyramids and museums, which means that art consumes the consumable (what is death if not the 'final consumption of everything?'). And in doing so, records that consumption.

Later, mindful of the fact that Andy Warhol, such a symbolic post-war artist, was above all interested in what we first threw away when we consume, turning it into rubbish – cans, packaging and posters, Groys says:

Anyway we know that our modern art museums are full of rubbish: the remains of food, cigarette ends and broken glass. But it is precisely in consuming the consumable and recording scenes of consumption that art manages to escape from simple submission to the permanent change of fashions that control mass consumption – and at the same time manages to describe new, critical, variations of consumption. So the artist today does not become merely a consumer but a consumer of the consumable and thus also the creator of new kinds of critical consuming behaviour. 8

Based on that quotation we must ask: what has Emmanuel Nassar's career been if not an increasing emphasis on a critical consuming behaviour which, based on the critical consumption of objects taken from a material culture that were destined to become rubbish or part of the folklore of 'popular culture', has gradually arrived – but with the perseverance worthy of a suicide (a suicide in terms of being an artist, within still extant traditional frameworks) – at consuming the consumable of the poetic imagination designed by himself?

## Notas

As far as is possible this text takes further certain ideas about Emmanuel Nassar's work that were first suggested in previous comments written by me: "Da fotografia à pintura à fotografia à pintura à fotografia: comentários sobre a produção de Emmanuel Nassar", published in: MATTAR, Denise. *Emmanuel Nassar: a poesia da gambiarra*. Rio de Janeiro: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, 2003, p.137 et seq.) And "Luiz Braga e Emmanuel Nassar: matrizes" (published in: MENEGAZZO, Maria Adélia (ed.). *Marco cultural: questões contemporâneas em debate*. Campo Grande, MS: Ed. UFMS, 2008, p. 37 et seq.).

In some of my writings about Emmanuel Nassar (see the Bibliography), this idea of the 'artist-editor' as someone who manipulates images and objects appropriated from the outside world has already been the foundation of many of the interpretations that appear there. As this is a topic that greatly interests me the topic also appears in other writings about Brazilian artists (Nelson Leirner, Leda Catunda, Rosângela Rennó and others. However, it was in a short piece I wrote about the work of Alfredo Nicolaiewsky in which the expression 'artist-editor' first appeared as well as in the short introduction: "O artista como editor" ("the artist as editor" a folder written for the one-man show presented by Alfredo Nicolaiewsky at the Centro Universitário Maria Antonia in São Paulo from September 2007 to January 2008.

"El artista como consumidor" in GROYS, Boris. *Obra de arte total Stalin: Topología del arte*. Havana: Centro Teórico-Cultural, 2008. p. 150 et seq.

*op.cit.*, p.154. PONTUAL, Roberto. *América Latina: Geometria Sensível*. Rio de

janeiro: *Jornal do Brasil*, 1978. (Exhibition catalogue) We must also add to the explanations for this rapid acceptance the

need at the time for new painters who would expand and turn into a reality the 'return to painting', a strategy on the part of the local and international art world to increase its influence arising from new demands from the market.]

The exhibition "Emmanuel Nassar: a poesia da gambiarra", already referred to in note 1 was mounted in 2003 at the Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil in

Rio de Janeiro, the Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil in Brasília, from 2003 to 2004, and in the same year at the Centro Tomie Ohtake, in São Paulo.

*op.cit.* pp. 163,164.