

The skin of painting, and adhered memory

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The character could not be more current: a graffiti artist at the height of his success executes daring and invasive art in urban spaces. A can of spray paint in hand, wearing splattered coveralls, with long hair and an open smile, in contrast with his/her ironic, playful, but well-founded perspective. The photo could be printed in some book published abroad, in English or German, about the acclaimed Brazilian graffiti, which in the first decade of the 21st century began to occupy prestigious spaces in the international circuit and has even been inscribed on the façade of Tate Modern, in London.

Frantz's photo could be in these publications if they were less superficial in their investigation of the historical origins of what they describe. After all, this is a phenomenon that has existed for more than four decades. The image of Frantz the graffiti artist, however, is indelibly emblazoned in the cultural memory of Rio Grande do Sul. It helps to contextualize and deepen any rigorous critical study regarding graffiti's influence on contemporary painting in Brazil.

Frantz's artistic path and oeuvre are essential to a comprehension of the settling of accounts with the tradition of painting that occurred at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st. They explain the freshness of the proposal for updating the pictorial in contemporaneity, which takes place through the subversion of concepts previously held as written in stone, such as the issue of authorship and intentionality. Frantz subverts these and various other principles, giving rise to an invigorating analysis of what is essential and what is secondary in painting's rich historical legacy. He points to several possible paths

for the revitalization of this medium which is both the backbone of art history as well as the trench where the larger battle between reaction and renewal is fought.

An expression of urgency

Frantz was one of the protagonists of the turbulent 1980s. Just like him, an entire new generation waged an assault on an environment used to the meritocracy of long resumes. Frantz soon achieved a clear presence in the exhibition halls and awards at the national level. His first solo show was held in the most prestigious space in the Rio Grande do Sul cultural circuit: the Museu de Arte do Rio Grande do Sul. It was 1982 and the artist, then only 19 years old, was already basing his work on his courage for skillfully breaking paradigms and crossing minefields that paralyzed other artists or coaxed them into negotiations with the established and accepted. His canvases appropriated fragments of antidictatorship phrases spray-painted hastily and clandestinely on the city walls.

Frantz took this urgent and formally stark expression as the root of his work. The stealthily seized moment, stolen under the watchful eye of the so-called forces of law and order did not allow for useless embellishments. These were not the times of saccharine graffiti mimiticizing multicolored and falsely infantile universes, like those that characterize a good part of the pampered production seen in the streets nowadays, consisting of thinly veiled efforts to gain entrance to the art market. In those times, the lines needed to be quick and concise. The colors were limited to black and red, along with the white of the wall. Time was of the essence. There was no chance to hesitate, choosing among various colors of spray paint. The invasion of the visual space took place in the gaps of the repression of a moribund but watchful totalitarian regime.

Transferring his interventions from the streets to the canvas, Frantz resorted to the capital letter “X” as an emblematic sign for a successful phase of paintings, which carried out an exploration of ambiguity. This symbol was appropriated from graffitied denunciations of the totalitarian regime containing the letter “X” in the word “abaixo” [down with], as in the phrases “abaixo a ditadura” [down with the dictatorship], “abaixo a repressão” [down with repression]. He treated the “X” as a sign of exclusion or multiplication, negation or agglutination. All very subtly, because this was during the extremely subtle era of the encoded messages. The political censorship was still active, with a heavy hand.

The graffiti artist and young painter of canvases in the 1980s is a clue for understanding the continued rebellion of an artist who has maintained, and even enhanced, his singularity through the years. Frantz reconfigures the place of painting beyond the conventional practice of established models and the mastery of manual techniques. He places it at the center of a conceptual discussion with a great potential for creative rupture when he affirms appropriation as a tool for analyzing pictorial practice itself. He generates a zone of friction that sheds light on a medium which has been extensively contaminated by mere obeisance to the hegemonies of established languages.

At the epicenter of painting

Since his graffiti days, Frantz always made it very clear that his aim was not to do whatever it takes to gain acceptance by the system, but rather to show to that system his own very personal way of thinking about and making art. His personality was already one that is affirmed by contrast and controversy. He is not one of those who is molded, but rather one who impugns the molds through pertinent (and impertinent) questions. Two and one-half decades after abandoning graffiti, he continues to be moved by challenges. He likes to provoke

uneasiness. He feels a special pressure in dynamiting the terrain before constructing on the ruins.

Even though he was conferred important official recognitions – such as his award at the Salão Nacional (Funarte, 1986) – he did not receive a conventional academic training. In 1990, he was a resident artist at Kunstverein Kiel (Kiel, Germany), a studio attended by a large number of young artists from various parts of the world, exactly when Germany constituted an epicenter for the return to painting.

He preferred to learn by doing, coupled with the pleasure he takes in reading extensively about art history and, especially, about artistic techniques and materials. He is not, in any way, a naïve or intuitive artist. He has a thoroughgoing knowledge of the so-called *métier*. But he admits a certain impatience with theoretic texts: “I learn more from looking at what the artists have made than from what the theorists think about this production.”¹

“If I want to know something, I read or ask,” he summarizes. He says that he did not always find someone willing to reveal details and secrets of the trade. The most generous, he observes, were the great names. “Iberê Camargo explained to me in detail how to prepare canvases for painting,” he recalls. After all, he concludes with a dash of irony, “someone who knows where his art is knows that it does not lie only in the technique but rather in what one does with it and to what end.”

Outdoor exhibitions

It is perhaps useful for the reader to know that I met Frantz in the early 1980s, just before I moved from Rio Grande do Sul to São Paulo, when I was writing a weekly page of visual-art criticism for the daily newspaper *Zero Hora*. I noticed and reported on Frantz’s

rise in the art circuit and the refreshing rupture he was bringing about in the solemn and hierarchized field of painting. When I decided to suggest that the *Zero Hora* sponsor an outdoor exhibition in Porto Alegre, I immediately saw to it that Frantz’s name was on the list of 30 invited artists. He was the youngest talent in a roster that included Iberê Camargo and Vera Chaves Barcellos, among other eminent names from Rio Grande do Sul.

This outdoor exhibition – held in 1984 and inspired by a similar event held the year before by art critic Aracy Amaral in the streets of São Paulo – was attended by a large public, including groups of students from the state’s interior, which led to the show’s being prolonged for several weeks. Frantz showed a composition in red white and black in which graffiti signs from the canvases are returned to the space of the street. This was one further re-signification among many that the artist has brought about with his work by altering media and ways of conceiving and making the space of painting.

Any closer dialogue on my part with Frantz and his production, was, unfortunately, interrupted by my move to São Paulo. At that time, geographic distance was much more significant than today, when a virtual dialogue can be just as effective as a presencial one. Our dialogue was resumed for the making of this book. This was more than an encounter with an artist inscribed in a determined moment in the past, as I immediately noted the currentness of his outlook and perception. There was no reason to engage in the nostalgia of bygone times. Frantz was entirely immersed in the here and now, once again demanding the utmost of my perception and reflection.

His work is entirely relevant to the current art scene and is fueled by the urgency of definitions at the root of contemporaneity. The high degree of accumulated creative force throughout this 25 year period during

which I did not follow his production hit me with a jolt, in weeks of intense updating and observation of a torrential, diversified production that experimented with a wide range of media and languages. It was impossible to resort to the critic's routine toolbox. The continuously expanding universe in Frantz's oeuvre could not be pigeonholed. The only means was to construct a possible genealogy, researching a basic thread that would help to find the driver of his work, its motivations and goals.

Constructive appropriation

The first operative principle necessary to penetrate into the mechanism of this painting is to clearly define what it is not. It is not instructed by the authorial brushstroke, by the action of the artist's hand and the greater or lesser ability to masterfully execute the pictorial techniques for the expression of a theme. There is no style (at least not in the traditional sense of the term, which derives from authorship, from skilled brushwork, from the chromatic palette or from obedience to an established language). All of Frantz's painting is appropriation. In the last instance, this would be his style. But it is more than this: it is a constructive concept.

The essence of Frantz's action does not lie in its execution but rather in the artist's process. "I am a painter who doesn't paint," he says. A painter who understood the place of painting in the 21st century, we can add. In these new times, painting is much more of a means to raise questions and push limits than a placid recipe book of certainties. It demands keen reasoning and nullifies the dexterity of the brushwork – a subproduct of the painter's work so often considered as its greatest value.

Frantz's pictorial discourse is made of fragments and scraps of what is not painting nor ever intended to be so. Something that only becomes painting at the moment when the artist sees, cuts, and articulates on

stretcher bars the pieces of canvas previously used as drop cloths to line the walls and floors of studios. By taking these marginal vestiges of the act of painting and structuring them in independent modules, Frantz configures and proposes another stage of perception for them. He confers intentionality and an artistic context to a nonartistic thing. To do this, he relies on the spectator's complicity. He relies on the articulation between what is seen and what is remembered. The larger one's repertoire of the history of art and one's visual memory, the more one will enjoy the high pictorial voltage of Frantz's nonpaintings. These selected fragments leap through time as a simulacrum, revisiting a wide range of periods and personalities of art. Precisely those that remain adhered to our visual repertoire.

A voyeur in the studio

There is another complicity necessary for this nonpainting and its appreciation: that of the students in the classes of technique and pictorial expression given by Frantz. There are also the professional artists (some who are well established in the national art circuit) who collaborate with the raw material for these artworks. They allow Frantz to invade and line their studios with the same thick cotton fabric used to make canvases for painting. They accept the presence of this colleague/voyeur who periodically visits their studio to observe if the "painting" of these marginal surfaces is ready. Frantz analyzes the accumulation of residues and the various occurrences that impregnate them (brushstrokes that stray outside the canvases, footsteps, dust, circles of paint cans and the occasional gestuality of the cleaning broom that passed over the wet paint on the floor). And he gathers an incredible spectrum of palettes of colors, indicative of each collaborator, which are added to his authorial project.

Based on these appropriations, Frantz's painting can either use the

entire area of the surfaces pulled out of the studios or edit them to focus on some portions that appear more significant to him. The edges that delimit the composition result from a visual negotiation. The size and characteristics of each fragment obey what Frantz identifies as “the inner logic” of the stains and residues. “I’m not the one who establishes the dimensions of the cut; rather, these vestiges of the act of painting are what show me the borders of the composition.” With this, the artist further underscores the tension and questioning of the normal notions of authorship and intentionality. In our hyperinflated culture of images, who is most important: the one who makes an image or the one who sees it and imparts a nexus and reading to what was made?

Paintings for reading up close

After appropriating the entire area of the drop cloths in the studios, Frantz gradually began to work with cuttings and editions of these fragments. The artist identifies this moment of change in the creative process with the beginning of his books, in 2001. He refuses to define these works as artist’s books. “I prefer to see them as a set of paintings,” he affirms. They are books bound in raw canvas whose pages are formed by these vestiges/palimpsests left over from painting. “Although they can exist individually, I think that their force derives from their accumulation, on various shelves.”

This library of painting is analyzed in detail in the present book by Paulo Gomes. So I need not go into this theme further here. In any case, it must be admitted that Frantz’s books involve a fascinating proposal. It is another way of looking at painting. Instead of the view established by the distance from the object observed (the territory of the framed painting, especially the large-format works) these small books propose an observation that benefits from the same intimist and warm proximity

of the reading. Instead of dwelling on words, the retina takes its time observing minute details of spilled and splattered paint and how these fragments of colors and gesture, when seen up close, establish complex universes. They are worlds and galaxies of paint, which are articulated in a visual syntax and grammar full of discoveries fanned by memory.

Similar proposals were already made in artist’s books (and with this nomenclature assumed by their authors) by matteric painters in the 1980s and ’90s. But their articulation in a library (which owes much to Anselm Kiefer and his books made of lead) lends an undeniable authorial value to this formulation by Frantz. An authorship, paradoxically, constructed on an appropriation of randomness. A powerful poetic charge that is hidden from sight when the book is closed and placed on a shelf, with its spine of raw canvas signaling resonances with Donald Judd’s minimalist repertoire.

An unavoidable ghost

By taking the precarious writing of splatters in the studio and displacing them to the framed canvas or the pages of books, Frantz also discusses the expansion of the concept of painting. Something which, by a curious coincidence, approximates the artist’s experiment with that of this curator in holding the show *Pintura Reencarnada*, at the Paço das Artes (São Paulo, SP, 2004). On that occasion, I observed that a good part of contemporary art production (including installations, objects, performances and video installations) “have their creative matrices solidly couched in pictorial thought.”²

That is, in painting, but not one necessarily made with paints on canvas; rather, one which, “detached from the material that characterized it, comes to rest in an indelible and perfectly recognizable way”³ in works realized in other media and with other creative processes. This

painting that I initially denominated *reincarnated* (to reaffirm the existence of an art periodically thought to be dead, and which always winds up demonstrating its vitality and essentialness) is perhaps better understood as expanded painting. After all, the concept that gives rise to my reflection is in the famous text by North American theorist Rosalind Krauss, about the enlarged field of sculpture.⁴

In a certain way, Frantz realizes an expanded painting. Although it is still anchored in the traditional materials, the fulcrum of his work completely dispenses with their direct use. Frantz conceives the painting, he “thinks it” – he does not execute it by traditional methods. For him, as stated previously by the Renaissance genius Leonardo da Vinci, “l’arte è cosa mentale” [art is a mental thing].

In this operation of recognizing and identifying the singular in the banal, in this search for the random event that can be transfigured into purposeful design, Frantz reflects on painting’s place in contemporaneity. It can be a humble place, a simple piece of trash that the cleaning people would take away if it were not saved for consideration by an attentive gaze. It can be a doubt, a mistake. Something to be thrown away later. Or something that affirms its existence in a serene and lasting way, despite the apparent lack of attention. After all, painting has so often withstood its announced death that today it is simultaneously a presence and an unavoidable ghost. Enigmatic in its eternity cut out from this quick and precarious world. Fixed, immobile, and in a certain way comforting, under the complete rule of the image in movement and ceaseless substitution.

Pictorial archaeology

Frantz’s art involves a nostalgia. His appropriations fulfill a reparative function, as if the time of painting needed to be re-valorized, placed

again into its frame, returned to the place of honor it once enjoyed more prevalently in the context of cultural production. A kind of archaeologist situated somewhere in the immediate future, Frantz excavates and maps the pictorial terrain to find ancestral traces of paint that dignify it. Not rarely he finds some DNA from the long trajectory of painting, right there, conserved in the elastic and multicolored amber of paint detached from the canvas, existing like skin without a body.

Depending on the chosen medium, this skin can have the translucency and the self-bearing, sculptural elasticity of synthetic resins, or the brittle and fragile structure of concentric shells peeled off the bottom of paint jars and carefully affixed, with an entomologist’s care, onto sheets of paper. It is at this moment that the nostalgia for painting and the drive for its return become very clear. It must be remembered that Frantz emerged in the so-called Geração 80 [’80s Generation], which recovered and updated the empire of painting, which during the two previous decades had been submerged in the dematerialization of art promoted by minimalist and conceptual art, by the non-object and by performance, as well as the then new expressive media offered by the electronic image.

What is the place of painting? This is a recurring question in Frantz’s current production. By taking the indices of painting that he discovers in common places like the floor and walls and transferring them to a symbolic place, the artist carries out a poetic operation on a semiotic basis. The change of place determines the shift in the value of this pictorial finding. The appropriation that confers the artist’s signature and status to anonymous vestiges is also a historical allusion. It recalls the portable place of easel painting, of the painting-object able to be accumulated in public and private collections – unlike the previous painting, made on walls and ceilings of palaces and cathedrals, destined

for collective appreciation and the affirmation of the power of the state or the church.

Another perception of time

There is also the symbolic operation that underscores the perception of time adhered to the paintings. For years, Frantz has cultivated a sort of column of painting fragments. In this rectangular glass box, almost as high as he is, he deposits the remains of the many skins of paint he collects. They are splinters of color. Isolated, they could never configure an aesthetic happening. They gain body and meaning when they are added to the many others already existing inside this glass safe. A sculpture? An object? It might be an hourglass with just one compartment, measuring the continuous, indivisible time marked by the deposition – in our memory – of the paintings we have seen throughout our life.

The reflection on time and on painting's insertion in contemporaneity were two among various other arguments that convinced me not only of the absolute relevance of Frantz's work within the current scene, but also of the need to include his works in the exhibition *Instantâneo/Simultâneo*, which is being held as I write these lines. The event is part of the *Agora/Ágora: Criação e transgressão em rede* project, a curatorial concept for approaching multimedia that I created for Santander Cultural of Porto Alegre.

The set of huge paintings with predominantly blue tones, appropriated from vestiges of paint from Frantz's studio and classrooms, occupies the mezzanine of that exhibition space with a strong enough presence to attract and hold our gaze even after it runs over the long distances of that impressive architecture.⁵ Though they are made from the most precarious instant, the canvases paradoxically provide an anchorage in

pictorial tradition for that space permeated by digital images, film and video projections, photographs, web art and installations by 14 national and foreign artists.

The roster of artists was drawn up to “celebrate, interact with and question this fundamental characteristic of our day-to-day life: hybridism, superposition and instantaneity.”⁶ Because “our perception of the world has changed. In the 21st century there is no longer the illusion of obtaining a complete explication of our existence. Our daily activity is to sew together fragments, instants, in jigsaw puzzles that will never be finished.”⁷ Frantz, a voracious discoverer of instants of painting where it should not apparently exist, is wired into the spirit of his era.

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Notes

1 All of Frantz's statements cited in this text were made in a series of interviews held by the author with the artist in December 2010 in São Paulo, and in March and April, 2011, in Porto Alegre.

2 MORAES, Angélica de. *Pintura Reencarnada*. Catalog of the exhibition held at Paço das Artes (São Paulo, SP), 2004.

3 Ibid.

4 KRAUSS, Rosalind. *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, USA, 1985.

5 MORAES, Angélica de. Curatorial text in the catalog of the exhibition *Agora/Ágora: Criação e transgressão em rede*. Santander Cultural, Porto Alegre, 2011.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.