

“Made By: Feito por Brasileiros” and “From La Voie Humide”: An Analysis About the Body in Transmutation on Tunga’s poetics

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Abstract

Recurrent on the Brazilian visual artist known as “Tunga” and unquestionably in vogue on the visual arts field, the rereading of the body by the hybrid languages of the contemporary art resets the debate about its place in society. Rendering problematic themes such as identity, science, history, reason, fiction, sexuality and time, among other issues, through performances, instaurations, installations, happenings, sculptures, fictional writings, paintings, photographs, videos, books, etc.; Tunga writes a new chapter on the Brazilian Art History, in consonance with this tendencies known as “expanded field” of the contemporary art. In this article, the Tunga’s poetic will be analyzed from the thematic “body in transmutation”, an issue that dialogues with all of his trajectory as a visual artist and widely explored on the expositions “Made By: Feito por Brasileiros” and “From La Voie Humide” that occurred in the city of São Paulo, in the year of 2014.

Keywords: Brazilian art, contemporary art, performance-art, instauration, body.

1. Introduction

This article is an adaptation of one of the chapters of the master degree’s dissertation entitled *Instauration and Alchemy: the body in transmutation in Tunga’s works*, defended in February, 2017, on the *Art Institute of the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP – Brazil)* and oriented by the PhD professor Maria de Fátima Morthy Couto. In this article, the Tunga’s poetics will be analyzed from the “body in transmutation” thematic, issue that dialogues with all his trajectory as a visual artist and broadly explored in the expositions *Made By: Feito por Brasileiros* and *From la Voie Humide* that happened in the city of São Paulo, on the year of 2014.

Braided from the central thread of self-reference, the works of Tunga (1952-2016) invite the contemporary spectator/participant to swallow some kind of anthropophagic banquet¹

¹ On the book *Narrativas ficcionais de Tunga*, Marta Martins (2013, p. 49) lectures about the relation between the artist’s works and the Oswald de Andrade’s *Manifesto Antropofágico*. According to the author, “on the wide Tunga’s material and mimetic formal universe, the problem of the Brazilian identity constitution . . . goes through the understanding that it is a plural, heterogenic and discontinuous mark”.

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of fables, performances, sculptures, installations, videos and objects that are constantly “served” in his expositions. When creating an art work, Tunga agglutinates references from diverse orders of knowledge, as well as of his own history, weaving a complex poetic weft.

- The primary goal is to analyze Tunga’s poetic in its complexity, establishing a dialogue with the tendencies of the expanded field of the contemporary visual arts.
- This leads to a better understanding of the contemporary art scene in Brazil, and the place occupied through the hybrid poetics, such as Tunga’s.
- Analyzing the “body” as an art thematic, we can contribute to a better understanding of the complex condition of human thought.

The body is understood in Tunga’s work as being the diverse artistic languages he utilizes, such as: sculptures, performances, paintings and instauration². In constant transformation, the thematic problematizes, among other aspects, the very human condition, since it touches on themes as life and death, space and time, fragility and complexity, as the immanence and the ephemeral of the bodies.

Another fundamental aspect to understand the thematic that rules the expositions that will be analyzed hereinafter is Tunga’s constant reference to the universe of alchemy. The compound between chaos and order, spiritualism and rationalism, present in this kind of “proto-scientific” thinking, intrigued and deeply inspired the artist. Alchemy is the source on which Tunga looks not only for the titles for some of the works but also for inspiration for a more precise choice of materials that would bring their respective symbolism to the interior of the artistic work in the course of all his poetics. Some examples of this kind of “poetic operation”³ are the recurrent presence of materials such as copper, lead, silver, gold and sulfur, which resonates alchemy both in the way they are employed, as in the shape they assume in Tunga’s compositions.

2. Among crystals, pearls and seeds: From La Voie Humide

In April, 2014, Tunga inaugurated, at the North American gallery *Luhrig Augustine*, in New York City, the exposition entitled *From La Voie Humide*. In August of the same year, the exhibition came to Brazil, by the gallery *Mendes Wood D.M.*, in São Paulo. At the beginning of 2015, the exposition was also rebuilt in Turim and London, always presenting unpublished works⁴. About the title and theme of the series of expositions, Tunga affirms:

“It’s a reference to alchemy, from ancient Greece through Medieval times: “the humid way,” or “the wet way.” There are two basic techniques to transform matter: first is the humid way, with organic or fluid materials and use of the senses. The second, the dry method, would be through the intellect. Philosophy and science, for instance, would result from this process. Each method of transforming matter

² The term “instauration” was coined by Tunga to designate some of his works on which occurred the hybridism between the languages of the “installation” and the “performance-art”. Tunga’s “instauration” were object of analysis for researchers like Viviane Matesco (2013), Lisete Lagnado (2001) and Suely Rolnik (1998).

³ Suely Rolnik (2011) calls “poetic operations” the diverse ways Tunga works with the materials and themes he pick to create his artworks. On this article, we use the term with this same meaning.

⁴ The exposition *From La Voie Humide* occurred at the gallery *Luhring Augustine* in New York between April and May of 2014. It was rebuilt at the gallery *Mendes Wood, D.M.* in São Paulo, between August and October of the same year. In London, at the gallery *Pillar Corrias*, the exposition remained from November to January of 2015. Simultaneously, the exhibition also occurred in Turim, Italy, until the month of December, at the gallery *Franco Noero*. In each of the exhibitions, Tunga presented unpublished works in settings that cross-references to previews compositions.

corresponds to spiritual change. According to alchemical theory, everything we do to matter has repercussions in the spiritual world” (Tunga as cited in Ebony, 2014).

In this declaration, the artist establishes a deep relation between some alchemic theories and the creative process used to elaborate the works exposed in *From La Voie Humide*. About this issue, after interviewing Tunga, David Ebony emphasizes:

“His work reflects the artist’s psychoanalytic research and features an imaginative interpretation of esoteric sciences, especially alchemy. Encompassing a wide array of materials, forms and processes, often with a performative component, his complex sculptures and installations appear to result from some arcane ritual activity” (Ebony, 2014).

Part of the exposition seen in São Paulo, and its reinterpretations, were composed by many materials that were previously used by alchemy students around the world, in an investigation located in the fulsome poetic field, on which the artist explores the possible relations among balance, form, texture and color of the materials, developing a deep symbolic investigation.

Like the illustrations on the alchemy treaties, on which reality and fiction were blended to the unconscious projections of the “artist” that performed the “great opus”, the final set of each one of the expositions entitled *From La Voie Humide* insinuates a sequence of experiments and fantastic notes that he executed. As if it was possible, in some way, to “freeze” the distinct stages of a long process (or of a “long alchemic recipe”) to reveal to the spectator some of these stages and their respective “results”. There are drawings, sculptures and installations filled with flasks on which, in the organic forms created by Tunga, can get out of the “pots” of the unconscious in the direction of the gallery’s space.

Besides the thematic relations, the objects in *From La Voie Humide* have another characteristic in common. As it can be noticed on the installation *Jardim de Orvalho* (*Dew Garden*; Image 1), Tunga built his sculptures balancing great volumes in vertical holders, evincing the presence of empty spaces between the forms, exploring the possibilities of stability and tension among the distinct parts of the compositions. For so, the artist commonly sculpts with “the emptiness”: to explore and study ways to intervene and problematize on the absence of forms.

On the installation that will be further analyzed, Tunga, apparently, manages to find another way to study the absence: the artist seems to investigate the time inherent to the forms he builds and, consequently, expanding the problematic to the surrounding spaces. With this poetic operation, Tunga leads the spectator to reflect on the temporal issues that are inherent to his creative process, which are immanent to each one of the artworks exposed in *From La Voie Humide*. Such relations are sewed to the very concept of sculpture developed by the artist along his poetics.

On the installation *Jardim de Orvalho*, an iron structure sustains forms that cross-refer to rudimentary ceramics vases, kitchen instruments, thermometers and human body fragments. On the ground and in diverse parts of the work, such as exposed at the gallery *Mendes Wood* in São Paulo, there were pearls and crystals that blended to the leafage, in addition to small seeds that hung from the tree located beside the installation⁵.

⁵ The installation *Jardim de Orvalho* remained exposed on open air, between two of the diverse exposition rooms of the gallery *Mendes Wood D. M.* in São Paulo. The space was constituted by a cold floor and surrounded by small and medium size plants, as well as a big tree, forming a garden. Tunga occupied, with the exposition *From La Voie Humide*, the main room, the gallery entrance and the room that was posterior to the installation *Jardim de Orvalho*.



Image 1. Tunga. Jardim de Orvalho [Dew Garden]. Gallery Mendes Wood, D.M. – São Paulo, 2014. Iron, plaster, rock crystals, fossilized log, ceramics, bronze, glass and linen. 223 x 60 cm.
Source: Lauriano Benazzi and Vanessa Deister photography. Author's personal archive.

It is possible to visualize the action of time in this work through the “trails” that the rainwater left when it meandered through the holes from one ceramic form to another or by oxidation, dilatation and the typical coloration change of materials that are exposed to bad weather. The passage of time can also be observed by the spectator on the decomposing state of seeds and leafage that suffered texture and color alterations by rotting amidst pearls and crystals, found inside the ceramic forms or lying on the ground under the iron structure.

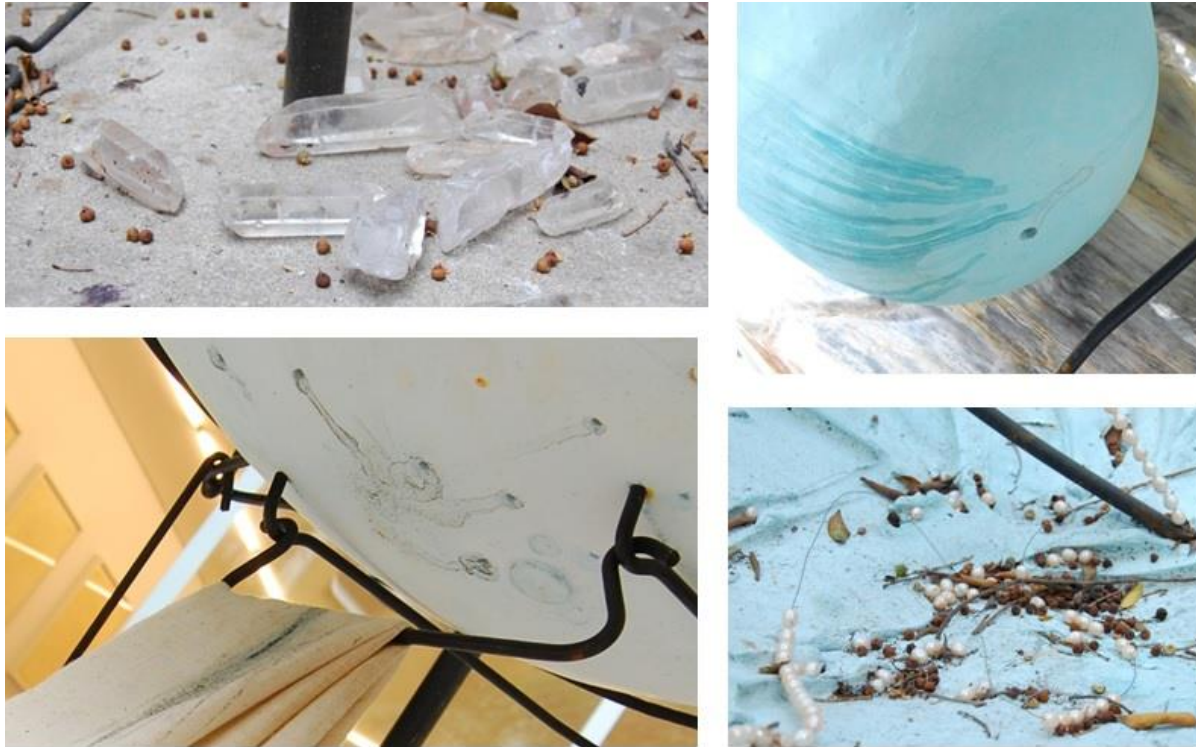


Image 2. Details from Jardim de Orvalho, 2014.

Source: Lauriano Benazzi and Vanessa Deister photography. Author's personal archive.

Symbolically, the passage of time is also instilled on the creation process of the objects that compose the installation: the ceramic objects needed to be molded, chilled, burnt and cut, as well as the iron structures. In other words, the time of heating and cooling, the tension and relaxation to which the artist put the matter through, constitute data that can't be separated from the *Jardim de Orvalho's* structure: data that, when blended with the abovementioned external elements, manage to build a unique visuality. Consequently, besides the external elements and materials that were manipulated by the artist, all other ingredients that constitute the work also cross-refer to the investigation Tunga developed during his whole artistic life about the act of "sculpture". On the introduction of the book *Olho-por-olho* (2007), Tunga makes evident his fascination for the sculpture language on the visual arts field. However, through the following declaration, the artist shows that his understanding on the theme reaches a particular dimension:

"Curiously, opposite to the sculpture processes, on the losing of teeth, we preserve and take care of the parts of the process (gum, maxillary, ourselves) despising the part that generated most effort of creation, namely, the teeth, this true sculptures. Therefore, it is not an absurd the recovery of this theme as sculpture" (Tunga, 2007: 16, V. Deister & W. Bastos trans.).

On the book *Olho por Olho*, the teeth are treated like sculptures built by the human body. On each turned page, they appear literally transformed into sculptural objects or used as thematic for the construction of diverse installations and instaurations. Using the same poetic operation exposed in *Olho por Olho*, Tunga also performed artworks with other corporeal elements, as the hair, for example. Sometimes represented through copper threads, sometimes literally, the hair also constitutes installations and permeates instaurations that can be seen in details on the book *Barroco de Lírios*.

On the printed material of the exposition *From La Voie Humide*, that occurred at the gallery *Mendes Wood D. M.* in São Paulo, a photography on which Tunga puts in front of his face

a white painted tortoise shell (therefore, another sculpture), dialogues with this line of thought, peculiar to the artist. Entering the exposition, the spectator would find many pearls and crystals composing Tunga’s artworks, materials that, hence, have direct relation with an geologic “sculpting”, on which nature performs, through the action of time, some kind of “natural lapidating”.

Therefore, it’s not an exaggeration to claim that Tunga chose to sculpt with “natural/geological sculptures” in order to insert deep symbolic data on the tridimensional compositions of *From La Voie Humide*. With the insertions, Tunga dialogues with a slow and experimental artistic practice, associated with some kind of cosmological rhythm, orchestrated by the transformations, deaths and rebirths that are present in nature.

In other words, Tunga’s “ritual-chemical-poetic” experience dialogues with the maturing rhythm of a pearl inside an oyster, with the formation of a crystal on the bosom of the earth and with the time of fossilization of a wooden piece. Besides this temporal data, Tunga accepts the rhythm of decomposition and rot of leafage and seeds that eventually fell over his *Jardim de Orvalho*. On the artist’s “humid way”, productive combinations, emerged from the vegetal, mineral, geological and cosmological universe, connect practically all the fluxes that inhabit the dimension of existence.

Looking closer at the work *Jardim de Orvalho*, it shows that the structure created by Tunga was elaborated in a way that the rainwater, or the minuscule dewdrops (also known as “mist”) could be collected and stored in its interior. Besides, there is some sort of trajectory created between the vertical “levels” of the installation, on which the water can pass from one “recipient” to another, just like it was on the purification processes of the ancient water filtering systems.

Nonetheless, during the course nominated “humid way” of the alchemy, the collection and depuration of the chemical elements that are present on the dewdrops were part of one of the most laborious stages of the *opus*⁶. Object of curiosity even after many centuries, many modern scientists even investigated some experiences described on the alchemical treaties. The French scientist Armand Barbault, for instance, was photographed on the year of 1979 squeezing canvas soaked on dew moisture while trying to reproduce a stage of the “Humid Way” that was described on the *Mutus Liber*⁷.

Coincidentally or not, on Tunga’s *Jardim de Orvalho*, a crude linen tissue was placed under one of the works of the installation. This work looked like a big plate, on which were made various holes to drain the rainwater and the dewdrops. By passing from the recipient that contained pearls and seeds, the water assumed a darker color⁸, gradually dyeing the tissue with a grayish stain. All the water drops apparently evaporated during the day, making the process restart on the next dawning.

The choices of the title, the materials and the forms that compose *Jardim de Orvalho*, on the context of the exposition built in São Paulo, transformed the installation in a great gateway

⁶ The dew harvest is commonly described and/or illustrated on the alchemy treaties. It was believed that the saltpeter that is present on the dew was the only capable of refining another salt that would be further inserted on the “recipe” for the obtaining of the “philosopher’s stone”. Linen tissues were used for the execution of the task, which lasted many days.

⁷ Or *The Mute Book* (1677): building “the resemblance of an illustrated enigma” from the transcriptions made on the 18th century from much older texts. The book was known for concealing “its messages on sequence of fifteen engravings” with few text insertions (Roob, 2015: 304).

⁸ The darker coloration could come from the tree seeds, from the dust, as well as from the soil or from the ink vestiges that were daily present on the piece that was anterior to the tissue that, by being moist, could darken the water drops. The chemical components, present on the air of the big capital, could also react in some way with the rain and dew water, altering its natural coloration.

for the spectator to immerse on the poetic subtleties, inspired on the processes of “humid way” described in diverse alchemical manuals that served Tunga as inspiration. Simultaneously, the rhythm of the dyeing of the tissue, that was strategically placed in *Jardim de Orvalho*, associated with all other elements previously described, reinforced the reading that Tunga presents, in *From La Voie Humide*, a set of artworks that dialogue not only with alchemy, but, also, with the time inherent to the natural cycles, composing thus a complex weft of relations.

Apart from collecting dew, Tunga’s installation depurates and transforms it, literally, into image. The stain increases its size according to the days of exposition. The uncollectable, the immaterialized, transforms itself into image. As for on the *Jardim de Orvalho* created by the artist, the very action of time is the “responsible” for the drawing printed on the linen. Here the artist managed to create the necessary conditions to transform time into a co-creator, into matter, on a physical elucidation of the movement.

If discontinuity and mobility are the keywords that characterize the cadence of the cities hurried steps and the rhythm of the modernity⁹; on the contraflow, Tunga proposes a decelerated, patient, continuous, agrarian, geological, cosmological rhythm. However, despite being uninterrupted, Tunga’s time is, also, rhizomatic, as it cross-refers to the memory, the unconscious and all its possibilities of fantasy.

3. *Made By: Feito por Brasileiros and From La Voie Humide: Dialogues*

A profound investigation and understanding of time and of the natural rhythms was one of the great duties of the alchemist. Interfering on the temporal rhythm and transforming matter from this rupture was the secret for obtaining the philosopher’s stone, an objective that is only achieved by those who also had a deep self-understanding. The process of matter research and transmutation happened, therefore, in two ways: one empirical and, the other, intellectual¹⁰.

Associated to the “dry method”, as emphasized by Tunga, occurred the alchemist’s intellective process. By nominating as “humid way”, and not as “dry method”, his set of expositions, Tunga clearly elects the experience field as the prime location for his objects. Thereby, the artist intensifies the sensitive and the mutable, instead of a strictly rational space of interpretation and meaning elaboration, for his works.

From La Voie Humide entitles, therefore, a set of expositions idealized by Tunga that, more than once, dialogue with Nietzsche’s idea of a created process fixed on the becoming (*devenir*), on immanence, on love to experience, on the active force that provoke the will for an eternal return. Using the artist words, his works are placed on the field of the transitory, of the continuous transformation:

⁹ According to Teixeira Coelho (1995) what we understand as modernity was characterized by the following elements: the discontinuity, the mobility, the Scientism (this, according to the author, would be the modern “myth”), the aestheticism and the predominance of the representation over the real (the simulacrum).

¹⁰ Concurrently to the “dry” and “humid” methods, the alchemist also believed there was some kind of “spiritual path” that interfered on the results obtained on his experiences. However, as the centuries went by, alchemy became more empirical and intellectual, completely withdrawing from the mystics that involved the research about matter transmutation. The complete isolation from these old alchemy biases was the modern physics and chemistry genesis. Nevertheless, distinguished modern scientists like Isaac Newton also got interested on the old alchemy recipes. The study was not encouraged because of the lack of scientific objectivity and absence of veracity of the information contained on the manuscripts, what might compromise the reputation of those who sought to go deeper on the theme. Because of these factors, the confirmation that Newton, for instance, would have studied the formula for obtaining the “eternal life elixir”, came public only recently.

“On the act of “making art”, the transformation process is continuous. There is no finitude – this is art’s idealism. The word “vernissage” is “varnishing”. But if the artist thinks he will pass varnish on the board and crystalize that image, he is wrong. The processes persist: the light keeps oxidizing the canvas colors, for instance. For this reason, since the beginning, I was interested in seeing art as a process of continuous transformation and that the great matter transformation passed for gradual mutations. On those small alterations, we can find a metaphor for a larger transformation which is continuous and peremptory for the work’s elements. In other words: it is important to know that things are not motionless. We can’t stay stuck in one experience. They are dynamic – just like the thinking – and can transform themselves into other experiences that are often more subtle and delicate, but not less important than the great experiences” (Tunga, 2016, V. Deister & W. Bastos trans.).

If the “humid way” was the transformation process on which the alchemist, in some way, transforms himself by modifying matter, Tunga’s “humid way” is the place of a continuous inquiring of the concept of art through matter. And along with it, a way of discovering the deepest drives of the potency of the living, the acceptance of life as a cyclical and uninterrupted process. According to the artist, a rebirth that “won’t necessarily mean a new birth, but a birth summed to other previous one” in an infinite expansion.

On the same interview on which he made the above declarations, coincidentally the last granted before his death, Tunga was questioned about his religious orientation, from the statements given by him that could be confused with issues related to the sacred. Tunga’s precise and succinct answer reinforces the previous hypothesis: “I believe in life. On the power and force of the living” (Tunga, 2016).

Life and death, the metaphor of the natural cycle on which we are inserted as living animals, are the main issues of many artworks constructed by the artist in all his career. This characteristic thematic is also recurrent in his last works as, for example, on the instauration *Untitled* performed at the gallery *Pilar Corrias*, in London, on the year of 2014. On the occasion, three women dressed in white were threshing corn and sewing pearls on the spikes, instead of grains. While calmly performing the “task”, their bodies were in interaction with the sculptures of *From La Voie Humide* that were being exposed on the gallery.

Were part of the instauration the three women, a net, clay recipients, sculptures in diverse organic formats, iron holders, pearls and a kind of manual “machine” to thresh the corn grains from the spikes. The same instauration was executed in São Paulo, on the exhibition *Made By: Feito por Brasileiros (Made By: Made by Brazilians)*, also on the year of 2014.

Both instaurations didn’t have a title and derived from actions that were very similar to those executed by performers from commands that were personally explained by Tunga.

According to the artist, the presence of the corn and the female body calmly executing the actions of threshing and sewing the pearls, cross-refer to very old images that are latent on the western culture:

“We live under the aegis of a very archaic civilization, for all of this thoughts that formed ourselves – since the bible up to the Greeks – remain latent in our culture. I don’t think they’ve been erased. It’s just taking a scratch with your nail that you’ll find the mythical instances that are in our society up to the present. The human being is very young. If you think about the Neolithic revolution, for instance, it’s only 10 thousand years old. This is a very short period. It is not a coincidence that we are talking about a Neolithic revolution. The domestication of agriculture and animals is linked to the creation of the female goddesses. It is the moment on which men starts to believe that femininity is what procreates. And are, therefore, the goddesses of procreation that will favor men’s fixation in a process of finalization of the nomadism

and beginning of the stratified cultures and societies . . . we can't think that the present was founded today. It built itself from far behind events and remains among us. And I try to bring back those things in my work. To show how up-to-date it is" (Tunga, 2016, V. Deister and W. Bastos trans.).

The "Neolithic revolution", mentioned by Tunga, occurred between 7.000 and 4.000 years before the Christian age in some parts of Europe and Africa. On this historical moment, men left the nomadic life and passed through a long process of sedentariness on which the agricultural and stockbreeding economy became predominant. The cultivation of cereals such as wheat and barley were associated to the first pig, goats and sheep breeding. This was the moment when the women's role started to be more socially expressive, since there are major archeological evidences¹¹ that leads us to believe that these first societies developed an analogy between the powers of maternity and the earth's fecundity capability. Women "participated, maybe, even predominantly, on the plantation and harvest of the cereals, and as a mother and life nurturer, were considered as a symbolic earth's auxiliary in its productivity" (Campbell, 1992: 120-124).

Along with the advance on agriculture and stockbreeding, it's on the Neolithic period that ceramics and weaving started to be a part of the quotidian of the first cities build by men in adobe bricks. Those cities aroused on the region of the so called "Fertile Crescent", in the Middle East. On this context, the female image was associated to the care of the land, the children, the loom, the sewing, the ceramics, and the necessity of maintenance e preservation of human life. By constructing ceramics pieces of work that store corn¹² from the feminine work, alongside with the organic sculptures with abstract shapes that follow surrealistic influences, Tunga was updating the imaginary that hovers above this period through a sensible and poetic investigation of the theme.

By making an association between the instauration *Untitled* and the alchemy's "humid way", other symbolic relations overflow the materials chosen by the artist. On the alchemy's proper universe, the seeds, the pearls (Image 3) and the crystals can also be associated to fertility¹³. On the alchemist view, the crystals literally grew on the bosom of the earth, feeding from some kind of "vital energy" from the depths, just like a fetus develops on the mother's belly. Therefore, the temporal logic, the same logic and vital force that served for the understanding of "life", present in a seed springing on the bosom of the earth, also ruled the development of the human fetus, the crystal growth or the pearl's maturing inside the oyster.

¹¹ Joseph Campbell (1992) admits that "nobody can surely affirm about the women's social and religious position in this period". He emphasizes that his affirmations are hypothetical, from the archeological findings and secular studies about the issue. Further on, concludes that the feminine sculptural images created at the time still produces meanings on the present days. On Campbell's words: "we have a broad knowledge about the roles of such images on the immediately subsequent periods (on which writing already exists) and its function up to the present days. They provide magical-psychological aid on birth and conception . . . follow the farmer in his tillage. Protect the crops; protect the animals on the barn. They are the guardians of the children"

¹² Maybe one of the most significant elements/materials present in this Tunga's instauration is the corn. The grain has a history associated to America, because it is, originally, a Mexican alimentation that was taken to Europe after the Spanish invasions. By performing the same action in an English gallery and then in Brazil, Tunga would also be, symbolically, "reactivating" the historical issue that are latent on this alimentation.

¹³ For the Greeks, the pearl was an emblem of love and marriage, of birth and regeneration (Eliade, 1991: 123-146, V. Deister & W. Bastos trans.). Once the beginnings of many alchemy writings, as the very notion of "humid way", date back to the archaic Greece, the association among a crystal, a seed and a pearl, in this particular universe, could perfectly happen through an interpretation linked to fertility/maternity/maturation, just like Tunga emphasized in some interviews about the exhibitions, as further described.



Image 3: Details of the sculptures that made part of the exposition *From La Voie Humide* at the gallery Mendes Wood D.M. – São Paulo, 2014. Source: Lauriano Benazzi and Vanessa Deister photography. Author’s personal archive.

The version of the instauration *Untitled* that was most commented by Tunga and, also, the one that best represents the associations between the abovementioned materials and actions, was performed in São Paulo during the exhibition *Made By: Feito por Brasileiros* at the *Hospital Matarazzo*, on the year of 2014. Thereafter, we analyze the way that Tunga conceived the instauration from the transformation/transmutation metaphor, recovering and deepening the arguments abovementioned.

4. Cultivation, sewing and rest: the line in transmutation

The exhibition *Made By: Feito por Brasileiros* was nominated as “creative invasion” by its organizers. The proposal consisted in an occupation, made by diverse artists, of the *Hospital Umberto Primo* (known as *Hospital Matarazzo*, in the city of São Paulo) with diverse artworks. The edification remained abandoned for twenty years and, after the exhibition, that occurred between the months of September and October of 2014, the space went through a transformation to become an art center. During 35 days, more than a hundred national and international artists were able to expose their works on the old rooms of the building. Most of the works were contemporary artist’s installations conceived exclusively for the space that was for them designated inside the unusual “museum”. However, some works from well-known names, such as Lygia Clark, were also part of the exposition.

One of the first works of *Made by: Feito por Brasileiros* was Tunga’s instauration *Untitled* (Image 4), composed with the same materials from the set of *From La Voie Humide*. Built entirely in open air, directly over the soil, the installation was composed by two big inverted ceramic recipients, which were balanced in iron structures and united by leather stripes. A long-lined shape, which looked like a finger, horizontally performed the connection between the ceramic recipients. It also composed the installation: mirrors, pearls, corn and other abstract objects that were manually molded. At the background, tied between a wall and a tree, was a white and long net, made from a material that resembles the weft which the fishermen use in the sea.

On this work, the actions were executed by at least three and at maximum five women during the time the installation was in exhibition. The ambient of the instauration was delimited by the gravel that was laid out on the floor, drawing a big circle. The gravel (*saibro*) dirtied the feet, the arms and the white clothes of the performers, who walked, sat and laid through the space. The net at the background remained occupied by one of the women while all the other slowly executed their tasks. In an interview, Natália Coehl, one of the actresses/performers, describes the experience:

“Tunga explained that the work was uterine, fertile, he gave us an action/image that consisted in thresh corn and sew pearls in the spike under that bells . . . There were

three hours of daily experiences inside that space, inside that universe, experiencing being there, respecting each second, dilating the movement time. Each action was valuable, each breath was essential, each pearl sew was a childbirth. The “in and out” of the needles penetrated the earth and made the corn sprout... There it was and there it grew the entire ecosystem... the cycle of life. The work was alive, everyday it was transformed by the performers that passed though there, by the animals that fed, by the weather and the birds that from the top of the tree sewed flowers, making them fall on the red soil, giving the lilac color to the artwork” (Coehl, 2014, V. Deister & W. Bastos trans.)¹⁴.



Image 4: Tunga, *Untitled*. Photographic record of Tunga’s instauration at the exhibition *Made By: Feito por Brasileiros*, São Paulo, 2014. Photography by Lauriano Benazzi and Vanessa Deister. Author’s personal archive.

¹⁴ Interview conceded to the author, by videoconference, on 21 November 2014.

As related by the actress, the temporal dimension proposed by Tunga was slow, agrarian and “uterine”. The act of sewing pearls was burdensome and Natália alternated his three hours turn with other fourteen girls. The actress explained that the experience managed to alter, in some way, her perception, because, every time she left the instauration space she had difficulties on returning to her normal work routine because of the noise and the “accelerated” time imposed by the São Paulo’s capital. Natalia related that were almost thirty days of “immersion” on the atmosphere created by Tunga and that the experience was very profound for all the people involved.

About the characteristics and meanings of the work, Tunga affirms:

“This strange thing that is here is a kind of machine, of instrument to bring the sun and the moon together, they thresh the corn with this weird machine, so there is a kind of rain, I would say, of corn dew. This spike is then taken to this two characters that are under this bells that sewed pearls on the corn spikes. These pearls are lunar. This grain is solar” (Tunga, 2014, V. Deister & W. Bastos trans.)¹⁵.

In another interview, Tunga comments again about the meaning of the work:

“It was a work about the passage from the solar energy to the lunar energy, about the birth of agriculture, of these goddesses, of these rites. And, at the same time, exposed the women and the contemporary femininity. It brought to a present moment, things that were established 10 thousand years ago and things that still exist today” (Tunga, 2016, V. Deister & W. Bastos trans.).

As previously observed, the cereals were the first alimentation cultivated by the western men. To improve the practice of cultivation, in order to avoid the complete loss of the harvest, men started to observe the movement of the stars, building circular calendars on which the seasons were a succession of infinite events, which were repeated with the passing of the months and the years. The soil fertility and the appropriate epoch for harvest and plantation were also factors associated with the star positions and the lunar and solar cycles¹⁶, as well as mathematics and other practices that gradually emerged to supply the necessity of explanation of the “mysteries” of life. On this context were born the myths and, along with them, the rites, permeated by gestures, objects, movements and proper signs (Campbell, 1992: 125-129).

As in a ritual, the art of performance aims the provocation through symbols, actions and verbalization of specific words, which are able to promote deep transformation on the body and mind of the participants. According to Renato Cohen (2007: 46) “performance is basically an art of intervention, modifier, that aims to cause a transformation on the spectator”. Language ritualistically works basic essential issues and is ideologically linked to the ideas that were disseminated by Allan Kaprow and the concept of “live art”. On this contemporary ritual, on which the art seeks to assume an “alive” position, despite the meaning not being religious but poetic, the spectator is confronted by the body of another human being, which came out of the experience, in some way, “modified”.

¹⁵ Audio transcription of a declaration made by Tunga on a promotional vídeo of the exhibition *Made By: Feito por Brasileiros*, restored on 20 October 2016, from http://www.feitoporbrasileiros.com.br/invasao_criativa.

¹⁶ On the author’s words (Campbell, 1992, V. Deister & W. Bastos trans.): “The new inspiration of the civilized life based, in first place, on the discovery, through long and meticulous observations verified in once and other times, in first place, that there were, besides the sun and the moon, five other visible celestial spheres (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn)”. Still according to the author, the identification of the celestial patterns led the first western civilizations to believe that the same dynamics that determined the star movement also ruled Earth’s events in all levels, including the very human thinking. This same principle was followed by the first alchemists and is present in practically all literature related to the theme.

The performer's narrative helps us to understand better the possibilities created from this kind of experience. To Eduardo Néspoli (2004: 8-10) "the performance, as ritual manifestation, elaborates itself in an alchemic operation that transforms reality into other possible realities". Just like on a ritual, the one who executes the performance, as well as a master of ceremonies, priest or shaman, usually leaves it with another perception of the everyday actions. In other words, from a performing act it is established a "time-space overflow", in a "latent" ambient.

The performative actions proposed by Tunga on the expositions *Made By: Feito por Brasileiros* and in *From La Voie Humide* suggests this instauration of the space, capable of modifying the individual and the other bodies that surround him. On the first case, executed on the heart of the São Paulo metropolis, Tunga managed to create an agrarian atmosphere through the manipulation of the corn, the pearl, the spike, the soil and the rain, suggesting plantation, sprouting and harvest. The net, at the background, created a lapse, a rupture on the rhythm, a time of resting, on which the women could sleep, respecting the embryonic time of the corn.

When the spectator finishes going through all the exposition *Made By: feito por Brasileiros*, the Tunga's work provokes new resonances, because of the place on which it was strategically inserted, just on the beginning of the exhibition. When the spectator was analyzing the exposition map that was given on the moment of the accreditation, Tunga's work *Untitled* was in a place marked as "A1". In other words, the instauration of the artist was the first work of the entire circuit that was elaborated by the curators and participating artists of *Made By: feito por Brasileiros*.

Thus, the first block of the building, the "A1" block, had, as its flagship, a kind of plantation and harvest ritual, celebrating the cycles of life. This was the first image confronted by the spectator even before he walked into the main exhibiting space. On the end of the exhibiting circuit, on block G5, there was the old hospital chapel, as if the route had come to a final point, that could also be a "restart".

The actress Natália Coehl tells that the experience of participating on Tunga's instauration was so remarkable that not only her, but other performers that were also part of the proposal, made notes about their perceptions. Later, they decided they would send what was written to the artist. Just before his passing, Tunga published his *Diário Psicoativo – Volume I* (2016) – in English: *Psychoactive Diary* – on which he transformed those notes, that were sent to him, into poetry.

On the *Diário Psicoativo – Volume I* are found reports from Tunga (and his staff) about the works executed between the years of 2014 and 2015, as well as texts about the artist. However, most of the publication refers to the instauration *Untitled* from the exhibition *Made By: feito por Brasileiros*. These are excerpts written by the actresses, reread and transcribed by Tunga, constructing a sensible and poetic fictional dialogue that gives back to the public "psychoactive" nuances of the actions performed during more than thirty years of instauration.

About Tunga's diary and the notes sent to him by the performer, happened, in some way, a resonance with the present research. After the interview, Natalia Coehl had access to excerpts of her speech that would be inserted on the final version of this work. The actress rewrote these excerpts, eliminating the marks of orality, and resent them.

Apparently, the records of all the actresses, including Natalia's speech, were sent to Tunga only after this episode, once I identified the same Natália's declaration on the text of the *Diário Psicoativo – Volume I*, with little modifications:

"Created space... given space... life in happening... That's how occurred the partnership, Tunga created his universe in clay, iron, corn, soil, pearls, and gave us – in a tender way – for us to experiment being there. Work that was alive, each day

was transformed by the performers that passed through there, by the animals that fed, by weather and by the birds – whose there, from the top of the tree cut flowers, making them fall over the red soil, giving the lilac color to the work. 3 hours of silence, respecting every second, dilating the movement time. Each action was valuable, each breath was essential; each pearl sewed was a childbirth. The in and out of the needles penetrated the earth and made the corn sprout... There was and grew the whole ecosystem... the cycle of life” (Tunga, 2016, V. Deister & W. Bastos trans.).

On the actress perception, the shape of the central volume on Tunga’s installation, located on the center of the gravel circle, resembled a uterus, with its respective tubes and ovaries. For her (and for Tunga) the issue of fertility (the earth, the women and the seeds) was one on the most touching themes of the instauration.

In other excerpts of the *Diário Psicoativo*, not only the themes of fertility and sexuality appear recurrently, but also the theme of plantation, harvesting and the suggestion of the rituals that were part of it:

“Phallus spike, I sew the still alive semen. Needle drills dense skin, sparse orgasm ... Under the moonlight, with the thread of my hair, I sew each pearl to offer you ... To feel the thread slowly crossing the needle, delicate, an orgasm, a stunning pleasure. Oh god Dionysius, who brought fertility and the corners of the Earth, I prepare your festivity to celebrate the harvest” (Tunga, 2016, V. Deister & W. Bastos trans.).

The theme of alchemy and the issue of time related to an oneiric universe that comes from the performers’ imaginary were also transformed into poetry:

“On the net I dream somebody’s dream. The foot touches the earth, star births in the space. Pearls, all the galaxies. I thresh the star dust. Time, another time, another slow dream, slumber, time, explosion of the instant takes place in the body. Cell transmutation, particles on the oneiric encounter travelling through the space-time of the body of the earth of the cosmos of the dust. I am from the dream’s nature, my skin is aerated, dilated, myth organs. Time is the time of the infinity” (Tunga, 2016, V. Deister & W. Bastos trans.).

Once more, the objective of the publishing written by Tunga was not to decipher the meaning of the action executed by the actresses during the instauration, but to amplify the potency of the gestures and sensations experimented by the participants. By introducing the actresses’ poetic narrative, Tunga (along with his staff) advise, on the diary’s introduction, that he seeks the spectator’s “delight” through the reading of the texts; making “the artist production’s aura sprawls on the mind of those who allow themselves to live in poetry”.

With this phrase, Tunga suggests the spectator to live “in a state of poetry”, in other words, to find art everywhere, including on the most unusual ones, as he already declared other times. Tunga proposes to live in a zone of undiscernment between the lived and the poetic, in a kind of permanent artistic state of alert, moment on which any person can transform the becoming into art, the immanence, the maximum potency of the living.

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