

## **Creativity and sale in art: plastic artists at handicraft markets\***

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This paper contemplates an aspect from art that is not always highlighted: the sale. To do that we reflect upon the ways through which the sale is linked to several attributes that generally form the identity of the artist, such as the original character, individualised and not commercially interested in production. By analysing a situation of plastic artists working at a handicraft market in Fortaleza, in Ceará state - Brazil, we register that the categories *artist/art* get closer and also back away from *craftsman/handicrafts*, and that it contributes to pondering the variable meaning of the procedures involved in selling their products, the conditions in which they do it, and how much that leads to distinguish plastic arts, not only from other artists but also among them.

### ***True craftsmen and true artists***

The Feira de Artesanato da Praia de Iracema [Handicraft Market of Praia de Iracema] was established in 2009, mainly as a result of a process taken by the Fortaleza city council to improve the important commercial tourist point on the Beira Mar avenue<sup>1</sup>, a place also attended frequently by locals from the wealthier neighbourhoods on the littoral part of the city. By the pressure of neighbours, frequent attenders, shop keepers from the waterfront area and permitted marketeers from the Feira de Artesanato da Beira Mar [Handicraft Market of Beira Mar] – an important selling point of products destined specially for tourism, and which has been on since decades –, several *merchants* or *illegal marketeers*, or “*the irregulars*”, or *ambulant sellers*, were compelled to stop working on the area without the city council’s permit, and a wider registration was due. Groceries, soft drinks, toys ‘made in China’, and

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<sup>1</sup> A tourist will receive suggestions in maps distributed in Pinto Martins International Airport by Secretaria de Turismo do Governo do Estado do Ceará [Ceará State Government Tourism Bureau], and also in hotels and from city neighbours to visit the “Market of Beira Mar”, or “Handicraft Market of Beira Mar”, or even “Beira Mar’s Handicraft Centre”, among other names: “Whoever comes to Fortaleza can’t leave without knowing that post-card”, we read in a map, referring to the whole area of Beira Mar avenue. Cf. Map **No Ceará, você tem uma companhia para onde for: a alegria. [In Ceará, you’ve got company wherever you go: joy]**. Secretaria de Turismo do Ceará. (n.d)

many other products, along with paintings on canvases and handicrafts, were being sold on the avenue's paved path, outside the approximately 200m<sup>2</sup> area occupied by the permitted marketeers' stands. Among the banned workers there were *craftspeople*, some of which were *ambulants*, some others worked in fixed points sometimes occupied over years. And, among those craftspeople, there were those participating in smaller markets close to the Feira de Artesanato da Beira Mar and along the waterfront, organised by craftsmen associations and by a trade union called Sindicato dos Artesãos Autônomos do Estado do Ceará, Siara<sup>2</sup> [Ceará State Freelance Craftsmen Trade Union, Siara].

During the confusing and dramatic process which reorganised tourism business on Beira Mar<sup>3</sup> avenue and which competed to the creation of the Feira de Artesanato da Praia de Iracema, the press and other social actors and agencies involved mentioned the craftsmen who were impelled to stop working in the area in many different ways. Because of the occasional illicit quality of their activity, they were frequently called *irregular* or *illegal merchants*, *ambulant sellers*, *non permitted marketeers*. Some times they were referred to as craftsmen, in opposition to resellers or mere merchants, especially those reselling industrialised products. Finally, after a process that had intense negotiations between Siara, the craftsmen associations involved and the city council, a distinctive treatment and a different location from the other workers were given to the *true craftsmen*, who produced and sold their goods, handicraft, on Beira Mar avenue and were associates of the trade union. That market, the Feira de Artesanato da Praia de Iracema, was being created for them, located at Praia de Iracema, where there is tourist and neighbour activity, but in a much smaller scale than in Beira Mar avenue. Therefore, craftsmen who didn't belong to a trade union and still worked on Beira Mar area, and others who were interested, had to join one in order to participate in that new handicraft market.

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<sup>2</sup> We came across different data as to the number and organisation of these small markets. Members of the craftsmen association, the trade union and other craftsmen and craftswomen interviewed informed either that it was just an association or that they were many, and they even informed that only the trade union organised the handicraft markets along the beach before the operation for the regularisation of trading activities in that area of the city.

<sup>3</sup> Among the various events that brought the new trade organisation on the area, two were especially mentioned in the news: a hunger strike by an ambulant seller, who remained laid down inside a coffin for days, and a demonstration by the president of the Associação dos Feirantes da Grande Fortaleza [Wide Fortaleza Marketeers Association]. He remained tied to a cross for some days on the footpath of Beira Mar avenue protesting against the prohibition that marketeers associated to his trade union and the ones not registered by the city council had to sell any goods on the area, and also against the "privileged" treatment given to craftsmen sent to the ongoing Feira de Artesanato da Praia de Iracema.

Joining a trade union requires a series of procedures which are focused on disciplining the activity. The Centro de Artesanato do Ceará [Ceará Artisanry Centre], also called Ceart, is linked to the Secretaria do Trabalho e Desenvolvimento Social do Estado do Ceará [Ceará State Employment and Social Development Bureau] and is able to provide a craftsman licence, by means of charging a fee and implementing a test consisting in creating, in front of evaluators, products of one or two *typologies*<sup>4</sup> – e.g., xylography, pottery, wood, clothing, leather. The reason for that is to verify if the candidate is able to craft pieces, i.e., to verify abilities and authorship. Once craftsmen have that licence, they are exempt from specific taxes and free to sell their products. Also, they will be able to join a trade union, subjected to a monthly payment to Siara, or to participate in any of several craftsmen associations in Fortaleza. With that, they will gain access to various handicraft markets and events that the associations organise to sell their products in places established together with the city council, and will get bank loans, among other advantages. They will also be able to easily get courses and counsel from Serviço Brasileiro de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas [Brazilian Service for Micro and Small Business Support] – known as Sebrae - and other support entities, which organise events, for example in hotels, where craftsmen can sell their products.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from contributing to their trade union and other associations, craftsmen must pay a weekly fee to those who supply plastic chairs and tables on which their products are exposed for selling at permanent markets like the one at Praia de Iracema. In that market, the arrangement of those chairs and tables create *aisles*, each putting together craftsmen and craftwork into a determined *typology*. In the beginning there were 300 craftsmen working at the market, today approximately 140 participate in it, and they are arranged in twelve aisles: ‘footwear’, ‘dolls’, ‘bags’, ‘crochet’,

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<sup>4</sup> Widely used by craftsmen, researchers, merchants, agencies and several social actors involved in researching, producing and distributing Ceará handicrafts, the term *typology* corresponds to the kind of handicraft, and not to the system used to classify it. Therefore, each of these *typologies* consists on categories that cover and differentiate handicraft articles, even though they vary considerably in content depending on the contexts of its usage. Typologies can be related in different ways like, for example, to raw material, techniques, traditions, regions, sizes and values, and added to the important system of discipline, production and distribution of handicrafts from Ceará.

<sup>5</sup> Craftsmen that were interviewed complained about a distinctive access that Siara and craftsmen associations give to some group of associates, as for example, some of them not being informed of opportunities to participate in courses and markets.

‘souvenirs’, ‘bed, table, bathroom and carpet ware’, ‘lace’, embroidered and painted clothes’, ‘bijou’, ‘typical food’, ‘woodcut’ and ‘plastic arts’.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, in that count, plastic artists are included. In 2009, when the market was established, there were approximately 50<sup>7</sup>, with their canvases exposed all over the wall that separates the beach sand area. Today there are less than 10 “who stood their grounds”, and that decrease was caused, according to craftsmen and market managers, by the strong wind carrying water and sand from the beach, thus soiling and overturning canvases, upsetting craftsmen themselves and keeping customers away. According to plastic artists who still work there, “resellers” were the first to “run away”, “those who weren’t true artists, and only sold canvases”. They had gone along with plastic artists to the recently established Feira da Praia de Iracema when they – both plastic artists and resellers - were prohibited to keep selling canvases next to the always crowded Feira da Beira Mar, during that trade discipline operation on the waterfront of the city. But there were “true plastic artists” that also quitted Feira da Praia de Iracema because they went bankrupt due to the low sales they had at the quiet Feira de Iracema. Some of those artists hadn’t come from Beira Mar but, as many others, had joined the new handicraft market by obtaining their craftsmen licence with Ceart, like all those craftsmen and plastic artists who now sell their works at Feira da Praia de Iracema.

It is relatively common to find plastic artists in handicraft markets, where they generally occupy specific and well situated areas, differentiating them from craftsmen, always bigger in number. Those chairs and tables are not used in Feira da Praia de Iracema; craftsmen expose most of their canvases and paintings on the floor, or fixed to structures and metal fences, or even standing back against a wall. Visitors might not pay attention to the *plastic artists* classification, used by craftsmen and market coordinators<sup>8</sup>, and which craftsmen justify according to the different support

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<sup>6</sup> The number and composition of the aisles has changed since the market was established, when there were nine of them. The way in which they were designated has also changed. Even today among participators, coordinators and *curators* (see note 8), there are countless ways to name them. “Frames aisle”, “canvases aisle”, “artists aisle”, were the names given to the “plastic artists aisle”, which is the name that was used by the press more frequently when the market was being established, and largely employed even today.

<sup>7</sup> Different plastic artists and craftsmen who worked at the market from its beginning stated that there were approximately 100 plastic artists selling there.

<sup>8</sup> Market organisation includes *coordinators*, responsible for administrating and keeping relation between market and trade union, and aisle *curators*, who control if works sold by craftsmen fit the quality and appropriateness criteria set by the trade union. During this research we received information about negotiations involving craftsmen, *curators* and the trade union concerning changes

that plastic artists use: “they are plastic artists because they make paintings, canvases”. In reality, those distinctions are sometimes quite variable, and plastic artists themselves give different reasons to establish them, beyond the support they use to craft their works.

For craftsmen of Feira da Praia de Iracema it is quite natural to have the presence of plastic artists at the market, but artists consider the place as a provisional one<sup>9</sup>. Most of them emphasise the absence of an adequate management from the city council concerning *true plastic artists* during those actions taken to organise trade on the waterfront. The council ended up treating artists as resellers, keeping all of them from working on Beira Mar, or not caring enough to transfer them to a place as crowded as it is: “We have been waiting for a better place all this time. But we are keeping at it as far as we can. We helped creating this place. It was abandoned, there was nothing here.”

But there are those who associate that provisional manner of their presence at the market to the thought of not considering adequately treating a plastic artist “as a craftsman”: “What I do has nothing to do with handicraft. I mean, it didn’t use to. I’m an artist. I’m prostituting myself here. Can you see that yellow work over there? I’ve made thirty just like that one.”

### **Repetition and creation**

Different from most of plastic artists that work at the market, that artist considers it as a necessary resting point, after a series of problems she had during her career. She lived in an European country, where she was regarded as a plastic artist, and where she exposed her works in galleries and received critics from specialists: “There I could create. I would really develop my work. Here I make the same thing if anybody asks for it. For me, that is handicraft”. Contrasting art with handicraft, taking repetition as variant, without recognising any process of artistic creation in it, seems

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in some works characteristics, like *shine* in bijou, that were different from the *regional*, or *rustic*, standards, but that would make them easier to be accepted by the public and, therefore, easier to be sold. “Craftswomen who work with bijou were on the verge of not coming anymore. Now they sell much more”, explained a coordinator.

<sup>9</sup> According to interviewed artists and craftsmen, their will to leave the market has nothing to do with the relationship they have with other artists and craftsmen who also “expose” their work there, which is one of collaboration and friendship, built for more than two years. As a matter of fact, I witnessed several demonstrations of trust and proximity, as for example plastic artists using card machines from craftsmen to sell, participating in chats, celebrations and craftsmen anniversaries at the market, and sharing high tea with them.

to be quite frequent among plastic artists. Some of those who have been selling their works for a long time at Alambrado, situated at Fortaleza's waterfront, and who have not been affected by that Beira Mar arrangement operation done by the city council, ponder over how inappropriate is for plastic artists to sell their works at a handicraft market: "There are only plastic artists, paintings and sculptures here at Alambrado. Art is art, handicraft is handicraft. (...) Every plastic artist is a craftsman. But few craftsmen are plastic artists. The difference is that a craftsman is always crafting the same things, and a plastic artist is always creating."

The idea of repeating the procedures of production and aesthetic standards is widely acknowledged in contrast to the notion of creation, and is commonly associated to handicraft by several artists, regardless their specific art studies<sup>10</sup>. This notion of creation is usually attributed to the connection that painting and sculpture have historically maintained with what is called "arts mécaniques", in contrast to "arts libéraux" (Nathalie Heinich, 1996). Note that there is an important correlation, as Nobert Elias (1995) points out, between, on the one hand, "craftsman's art" and "artist's art", free and insubordinate, and on the other, places and social structures that craftsmen and artists have occupied during time. A considerable part of sociological literature on art also employs classifications based on that sort of distinction, even when transition and continuity are pointed out, as Howard Becker does (1982), between art and handicraft. <sup>11</sup>The attribute of creativity always leads to the artist, while utility functions and virtuosity does to the craftsman.

For most of the plastic artists who work next to craftsmen at Feira da Praia de Iracema, the opposition art/artist against handicraft/craftsman doesn't appear to be of great importance, except when they are asked about the subject: "In reality I'm an art worker, an art workman. But I'm also an artist. I'm a craftsman and an artist. I am both". Plastic artists also characterise their work as non-repetitive, highlighting their social origin – which would take them to labour if it were not for the gift they insisted in adopting and developing, according to what they stated -, and a necessity to

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<sup>10</sup> As a matter of fact, that differentiation is quite extent, and includes the contemporary art area. In a contemporary painting course at an important visual arts school in Rio de Janeiro, the teacher, a plastic artist, recognised the emphasis with which students with practice in handicraft treated the material, and would relate it "to a manual system, to a automatization of procedures that reproduce a decorative standard, without the student having to worry about creating a language through painting". (Dabul, 2001: 125)

<sup>11</sup> H. Becker considers two possibilities: "In the first case, participants in an art world borrow from or take over a craft world; in the second, a mature art world begins to exhibit some of the characteristic features of craft worlds." (1982: 272)

produce in order to survive as a condition that would somehow make them resemble craftsmen. For example, they confess that they copy the style of a famous north-eastern painter who lives in Miami to make certain works, which are later easily identified and wanted by buyers, and whose creation is made with the aid of his relatives, which does not occur with their own works. Some of them don't sign those works to distinguish them from those they did create. But what is seen by Alambrado's plastic artists as repetition in canvases painted by Feira da Praia de Iracema's plastic artists – and even seen as such by some plastic artists from this market – is considered by others from Feira da Praia de Iracema as a derivation of their own creation: “I always make these ones this way. And of course I sign them. It's mine, I created it. I established this style. Nobody had used it before.”

The repetitive manner of procedure, works and standards – what also sociological literature normally acknowledges in handicraft - in which Praia de Iracema's artists' production is perceived, represents for most of those artists an inappropriate accusation or a mistake caused by incompetence to identify variations in their work. By analysing several self-made “postcard style” canvases, one of those artists shows his coastline landscapes with rafts under the moonlight, “most wanted by tourists and even by locals”, which he considers as fundamental criteria: “I vary the number of rafts, colours, shapes. I try something here, something else there. Look at the difference. It's never the same thing. If you look well, you'll see that even the sizes are different. It's not a copy. People who say it is a copy don't know how to tell the difference, don't know anything about art”. And adds: “Every time that you think an artist is repeating himself, check if (...) he isn't repeating in order to change it”.<sup>12</sup>

Among those who highlight the repetitive production manner of those artists, there are some canvases sellers, whom artists call “resellers”, who sell on many spots of the city, like the ones regularised in stands at Feira da Beira Mar. Those merchants consider the canvases they receive – even from Feira da Praia de Iracema's plastic artists - as any other mechanical and unqualified work: “This bloke paints ten canvases with rafts, all identical. He sells, he turns away: he brings ten more. He could be selling corn but he learnt to paint canvases. That's not art; it's at best commercial art”. According to some of those merchants, generalising that repetitive manner would even affect artists from Alambrado, who want to differentiate their

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<sup>12</sup> Manoel de Barros (1997:11), a poet, defines that process: “To repeat and repeat—until altered./To repeat is a gift for flare.”

production from handicraft and plastic artists' work like the one at Feira da Praia de Iracema: "They talk and talk about other people. But pay attention: if they sell a painting, you need to go back there the next day to see that there'll be another identical one hanging, the very same thing."

One plastic artist from Feira da Praia de Iracema suggests that by evaluating his work as "Alambrado's folk"<sup>13</sup> do, apart from not being fair to the canvases' quality, one ignores the fact that it is impossible to identically repeat a piece when doing art: "Even if one wants to copy certain work, it'll always be different". Even craftsmen, highlighting their own technical limits, point to a incapability of repeating a work of art, regardless the artist or craftsman: "Those who say that they can make two identical pieces are lying. Even when copying from others. That's impossible". According to a craftswoman's opinion, it all depends on people's interest when observing and evaluating works of art: "If I come here and I want to say that everything craftsmen make is the same, like the handbags I make, for example, I'm going to see it that way. But I can also see the differences, only differences, if I want to. Every single one is unique".

Craftsmen and artists from Feira da Praia de Iracema emphatically affirm that it is impossible to repeat works of art in response to the suggestion of handicraft work being based on copies, or of plastic artists from Praia de Iracema resembling craftsmen, and thus reproducers. However, in other contexts, both plastic artists and craftsmen claim that their work is most inventive. They specify many details when describing their creations, models, textures, establishing the type of material – specially when it's difficult to work with - or order as the trigger for innovating their work. Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold (2007) describe many difficulties when identifying, even in art, transformation processes with an improvisation trait, not guided by a previous explicit intention.<sup>14</sup> They call attention to how much those processes differ from what we understand today as *creativity*, an event that is

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<sup>13</sup> Feira da Praia de Iracema's plastic artists gave very different opinions about Alambrado's artists. Some worship them as "pioneers", whose firm permanence on their point of exposition and sale is admired as a kind of resistance to that action launched by the city council that affected so many artists. Some others consider them "posh", always ready to "show more than they have", thinking themselves superior to all other artist that work at the city's waterfront.

<sup>14</sup> Even though it is not part of our object, we can highlight the generative trait that improvisation has in art, which sets creative possibilities that become established and fixed for some time, and so do permanent features of their results. On that matter, vide Robert Faulkner (2006). In a different style of research, focusing straight on "work itself" (Becker, 2006), perhaps we would start from the importance of those processes of adapting to clients' orders and to the materials, which are used to create art.

normally projected and appears suddenly, contrasting with prior activities and standards, and highly individualised. For artists and craftsmen, however, those creative processes adapted to demands that refer to widely recognised *typologies*<sup>15</sup>, therefore suitable for activities that lead to sales for their living, would not be able to express all their artistic and creative experiences.

Contrary to what we usually think, the will to create goes beyond the experience of work of those craftsmen and artists whose production is commonly regarded as repetitive. We came across several stories of situations triggered by many different reasons, that would lead them to use procedures to produce pieces of art and to imagine the most unusual results. For example, a craftswoman told us that, on some occasions, she gets up earlier to make a piece, which “suddenly” she felt inspired to create. “I feel like held to it”. Deviating considerably from the type of handicraft she normally makes, she focuses completely on its creation for hours and hours, in her house’s workroom, catching the husband’s attention, who asks her to “go back to work”: “I really need to stop and go back to my work, if I don’t, I’ve got nothing to sell.” When we asked her if she would sell that piece, she emphatically denies that possibility: “one thing has nothing to do with the other”.

Those experiences are not present in the usual speech about creation processes that craftsmen and plastic artists from Feira da Praia de Iracema deliver, and neither are those special works taken to the handicraft market. These works are quite common for some, and they can be a pleasure to be made. “I sometimes don’t make the money to pay for my daily fees here, so I can make that sort of piece. That’s why it’s difficult to work on it as much as I would like to. And I would never bring it to the market. Everyone would think I went mad. I would charge four thousand, five thousand, for a painting. Nobody would pay that much here.”<sup>16</sup>, says a plastic artist from Feira da Praia de Iracema. He then brings back the idea of the customers’ lack of appropriate

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<sup>15</sup> And we cannot stop in processes of manipulation and presentation of a collection widely recognised – by agencies that stimulate handicraft sale, like Sebrae and Ceart, and institutions like trade unions and associations, and social actors like scholars, customers and Ceará’s handicraft sellers – as *regional, authentic, rustic, artistic, original from Ceará*. Several researchers, as Machiko Kusahara (1997), describe experiences of that nature as being the ones that, on their own, define notable and creative attributes of many artistic products, which differs from what we normally regard as artistic value, *originality*.

<sup>16</sup> However other plastic artists told us about situations, in other places, where they sold works originated from reverie and hard research. This artist told us that a rich landowner, by “other means”, acquired for thousands of reais a piece that took him very long to create and which was never exposed at the market, and neither would.

eyes which would acknowledge and ponder the worth of a work with such characteristics.

Those pieces of art are exceptional mainly because they require large amounts of time, attention and interest by artists and craftsmen who make them.<sup>17</sup> It is also due to materials and making procedures: “They are painted in oils. The ones I bring here are acrylics. The ones I paint freelance are in oils, which take longer to dry. That alone adds difficulty. I have to wait for them to dry.” Furthermore, according to what craftsmen and plastic artists from Feira da Praia de Iracema said, they mean something with those works, there is a *message* of a different nature if compared to the ones they sell: “Every single one I sign has a meaning. Into those ones I bring back everything from place of birth. Trees, animals from there, everything.”, explains a plastic artist whose works usually have very distinctive themes. If all artistic and handcrafted works of art possess a message, those exceptional ones would possess a non-conventional meaning that would not be completely controlled by their author. Therefore, besides the amazement caused by them, they would need other public and spaces for exposition.<sup>18</sup>

### **The sale and the artist's place**

Some plastic artists as the ones exposing their works in galleries and cultural centres of Fortaleza, and also scholars, very frequently associate to the sale the replication, the repetition, the standardisation that they acknowledge in handicraft and in art found in markets. This vector would lead to producing objects following procedures that oppose those that lead to art, and that aim to creation. Taking that to a further stage, we may say there is a connection between those ideas and another widely spread one, which suggests that handicraft is commercial while art is voluntary, submitted entirely to the artist's individualised fantasy. In social sciences we tend to comply with this idea, easily recognising the need for a living as an important and unconditional engine of handcrafted and artistic production by lower classes.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> And we mean creative processes that include experiences beyond *insight*, closing up on *reverie*, or *enthusiasm*. For more on that matter, vide Fernando Muniz (2011).

<sup>18</sup> In this research, we could not reflect upon what craftsmen and plastic artists who work in markets meant by using the verb “to exhibit” when referring to “selling”, “displaying” or “arranging” their works at the place of sale.

<sup>19</sup> Vide in H. Becker (1982) how much the dependance on the satisfaction of a client is part of the *handicraft* classification and moves the traffic of *art* in its direction. Vide in Pierre Bourdieu (2007) the

At Alambrado's, a plastic artist might occasionally be compared to a craftsman by his colleagues, insinuating that he or she produces “always the same thing”, perhaps to get easier sales. As a matter of fact, in art, production and sale tend to be understood ideally as separated and strongly hierarchised activities, placing artists away from commercial concerns. And it seems to be a rule that plastic artists must stay away from situations when their piece of art is being presented, even if it is for non-commercial reasons, as exhibitions at museums, cultural centres and galleries — with the exception of certain exhibition arrangements that need artists's decisions and vernissage ritual occasions.<sup>20</sup> We are led to believe that the artistic field considers convenient and legitimate that artists stay away from sale situations. The Feira da Praia de Iracema's plastic artist we mention before, who showed a deep discontent with having to repeat her works in order to satisfy customer's demands, and who compared that to prostitution, never took on sale operations. “My husband comes with me to the market for that. He handles the clients' money. Everything is with him, I don't touch the money”.

At handicraft markets, it is common to find craftsmen selling<sup>21</sup> and, very frequently, crafting other pieces — such as bags, wire decoration, bijou, lace and crochet items, etc. One of Feira da Praia de Iracema's coordinators explained that “craftsmen do not have any stock, so to have something to sell they usually have to produce it here”, and guided me through many tables to see craftsmen working — an old lady was making a bag, and had a colleague next to her learning how to do a specific finish; an old man was shaping a wire string into the letters that some tourists wanted to see in the piece; a young woman was making a necklace, etc. This junction of spheres, so often separated as claimed by plastic arts, is stimulated at the market: “they even bring their own cushion and all, so people can see how the bilro lace is done”, continues the coordinator referring to the lack of stock at the market. Agencies as Ceart, shops, hotels and institutions that make possible the production and sale of handicrafts in Ceará also recommend the presence of craftsmen working near the works they sell. They argue that “tourists like it”, and that “customers want to see the

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idea that lower classes's taste is identified with the aesthetic of the need, whereas wealthier classes' are related to a notion of freedom in relation to the need of making a living.

<sup>20</sup> Vide comments about changes in what is normally called contemporary art related to the contact between the artist and his public in Dabul (2011).

<sup>21</sup> At Feira de Artesanato da Praia de Iracema it is mandatory for the sale to be made by the plastic artists or craftsmen themselves.

pieces being made”, they want to make sure the process is handcrafted, “authentic”, not industrial.<sup>22</sup>

At Feira da Praia de Iracema it is very common to see plastic artists painting their canvases while selling already finished ones. They blame the inappropriate condition in which they produce their paintings, usually in canvases, with or without structures and placed along the ground, on the lack of time to bring along enough finished ones with them. In situations when artists paint at the market, however, they become special attractions, mostly for children, because customers can see how the procedures to manipulate materials and paints are developed, and look at the pieces that are already to sale. This act of making use of the point of sale to produce canvases contradicts common sense and the idea widely spread among plastic artists, even from Alambrado’s, which says that plastic artist must not get involved with commercial situations, much less produce pieces while selling. As a result, customers would not have access to neither artists nor the process for making art pieces. To some degree, there is a distance concerning creation situations, considered individualised, intimate, free from embarrassment moment, and during which artists would fully be involved.

### **The meaning of sale and the hierarchy of everything**

In reality, both plastic artists and craftsmen value the sale beyond the direct earnings it provides, i.e., beyond the possibility of obtaining resources to make a living and to spend with materials and other expenses of handcrafted and artistic works. The sale also proves the acceptance, and thus the value, of their production.

The different methods used to verify the artistic quality of plastic artists’ works, among which we find the sale, are linked to their distinct trajectories. According to what Feira da Praia de Iracema’s plastic artists stated, the sale means for them the most important referential to really recognise the value of their works. On the other hand, at Alambrado’s, some artists have more direct connections with the artistic field, and they participate in exhibitions at cultural centres and galleries, and at the contemporary art market. Moreover, they occasionally win prizes and are

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<sup>22</sup> Many records and analyses have been made about the characteristics and outcomes of the moment when sale and production occur simultaneously. Vide for example Antonio M. C. Novaes (2011), the description of the performance done by craftsmen from Juazeiro do Norte, Ceará.

successful in contests that lead them to, for example, have their works printed in state-owned phone book covers.

In Ceará, requirements for handicraft to be accepted are particularly diverse, and they are associated, among other elements, to the possibility that craftsmen have of “displaying” or “exhibiting” their works at specific shops and markets, and of obtaining funds, technical support, invitations to participate in exhibitions and markets organised by hotels, state-owned or federal agencies, Sebrae, trade unions and associations. Well-known craftsmen or *mestres da cultura*, still consider the sale, specially the price of sales, a fundamental representative to assess their work and prove its value, even on occasions when they ignore these methods of acceptance or hold, for example, other ones that link their production to art — such as academic studies, media coverage, acquisitions of pieces by collectors or art institutions, or work requests for exhibitions. For one *mestre da cultura*<sup>23</sup>, an internationally known saddler, sale represents the most important proof of his work’s worth, and the one that most pleases him.

When the price is established and maintained despite the customer’s attempts to bargain, the artistic value of art pieces sold by craftsmen and artists is also set. Feira da Praia de Iracema’s coordinators are concerned about this and advise craftsmen to keep their prices fixed, even when customers insist on lowering them: “Tourists are only interested in low prices. I talk a lot to them [craftsmen]. Only the person who produced it knows its real value, the amount of work and time put into it, the importance if this work”. Maintaining prices is a subject often mentioned by Feira da Praia de Iracema’s craftsmen and plastic artists when discussing the artistic value of their production, despite the fact that bargaining is quite recurrent and that craftsmen themselves lower their prices in accordance to the initial ones — as when facing a possibility in which a customer is interested in a larger number of items.

Not lowering a piece’s stipulated price is revealed to be associated by artists and craftsmen to the value given to it. Those exceptional works from Feira da Praia de Iracema’s plastic artists we mentioned before could only be sold at an impractical price, far beyond the time and materials spent on its creation. At Alambrado’s, many artists, when establishing a difference between their situation and craftsmen and

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<sup>23</sup> This is a designation given by the Secretaria de Cultura do Governo do Estado do Ceará [Ceará State Government Department of Culture] to individuals, since 2004, and to groups and organisations, since 2006, whose production is considered *cultural tradition*, worth of preservation and valorisation.

artists who sell at handicraft markets, stated that they never negotiate the price of what they sell: “I’d rather not sell it. But they end up paying the price I ask. It doesn’t take that long for them to buy it.”

Craftsmen and artists link customer’s interest, which leads them to buy products at fixed prices, not only to their purchasing power but to the capacity they have of evaluating appropriately what they see. This association would be linked to the type of public that attends handicraft markets and the Beira Mar waterfront, which is quite diversified and, according to craftsmen and artists, scarcely qualified or “learned”, and who not always assesses solely the artistic value of works. “I don’t paint for working class tourists”, an Alameda’s artist said. “My paintings require an understanding of art, a minimum sense of art”, he added. As stated by artists who sell at that point, the vast majority of foreign tourists of Fortaleza that are interested in buying paintings is composed by “workmen”, people who prefer paintings showing fishing rafts, coconut trees or “a *Lampiã*<sup>24</sup>”: “so they’ll hang it on a wall in their living room and say: ‘been there’.”

The fact that plastic artists “exhibit” at handicraft markets represents an inconvenience for them because these places are not considered to be appropriate to sell pieces of art; while other artists, even from “commercial art”, believe the public of markets is too diversified and quite disqualified, and they feel virtually “selling on the street”: “when my manager asked me to sell on the street, everything began to go wrong. I was selling a lot, even more than at galleries, but the value of my work dropped. Galleries are galleries, the street is the street. It loses its value. Then I came back to Brazil”, told us the plastic artist who was deeply unsatisfied for having to sell her work at a handicraft market, explaining that her career had not gone well after a successful period in a European country. In reality, galleries are considered to be an ideal place by many of these plastic artists, if not to sell everything they produce, at least the pieces that result from special creative processes, as the ones discussed before.

For some plastic artists, as shown before, getting directly involved in selling their works seems to indicate a strong need to renounce the use of the particular position held by artists focused exclusively on creation. In addition, they consider sale

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<sup>24</sup> Nickname for Virgulino Ferreira, a well-known social bandit from Brazilian north-east in the 30', who until now divides people and intellectuals' opinion about him — between those who admire him and those who despise him.

points valued or unvalued based on different criteria. Some evaluations of these spaces are related to the conditions visitors have to enjoy the exhibition, comforts for those who spend hours selling their products, market's infrastructure organisation and hygiene, merchandising, visibility and access to tourists, especially.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, they prefer one market over others, or they would like to be in one market rather than in others. Feira da Praia de Iracema is evaluated as being low attended, but more organised and “exclusive” — i.e., without the presence of ambulants — than the spaces where they used to sell their creations at Beira Mar region.

Their *workrooms*, or their *spaces*<sup>26</sup>, where they produce a big fraction of their works, are often referred to as superior places if compared to handicraft markets, and where their most interesting works would occasionally be looked for. Feira da Praia de Iracema's plastic artists frequently speak of galleries as spaces where they could find people willing to understand meanings and able to assess their work's worth. Social background, purchasing power and place of attendance are the elements that artists associate with the possible interest and occasional purchases of their most special works, generally by wealthy class individuals: “You could say that there are some people that know how to approach an art piece, they know how to get at it. Slowly, quietly, calmly. These people learnt to look for art, to look at art. Here at the market, customers sometimes don't even want to know who made the piece”. These artists admitted not having had the possibility to access galleries, and some of them wait to be “lucky” enough to exhibit their works at them.

Their social background and the resulting need to work for a living are triggered as factors that would prevent them from having contact with galleries: “No, I don't know anybody from the gallery. And, of course, I would like to make an art piece, something brand new, then let some time pass and make another one; I would like to make only pieces with my own story. But I have to sell my works here at the market, a humble place, without any doubts. At this point I'm not an artist, I'm rather a labourer. And I'm an artist.”

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<sup>25</sup> Plastic artists and craftsmen from Feira da Praia de Iracema point out to recent and important changes on their public, due to a decrease in number of European tourists and the increase in Brazilian ones. More importantly, people from poorer neighbourhoods nearby have been consuming canvases and other pieces more frequently.

<sup>26</sup> Most plastic artists from Feira da Praia de Iracema refer to their personal workspace as *workroom*, as craftsmen do, or *space*. Many of them don't refer to it as *atelier*, as many others do, including the ones from Alameda. Also, they state that they use their home as workroom.

The hierarchy of places of exhibition, is associated to important distinctions made of those who exhibit, who see and purchase and by the very value of what is being exhibited. Concerning this, one Feira da Praia de Iracema's plastic artist, while being interviewed, pointed out a series of events that took place there, and these served as proof of the distance existing between his reality and the ideal situation that he believes he can find at galleries: a child eating popcorn kept on touching one of his canvases while his inattentive parents were discussing about other exhibited work; a tourist kneeled down next to a huge painting picturing an indian woman, posed, and her partner took a picture, all without the artist's consent.

### **Blindfolded?**

The target public whom artist and craftsmen working at Feira da Praia de Iracema produce their pieces for represents in many ways an important vector of their creative process. The subject of sale is attached to places to which real or potential buyers flow or could flow, i.e., admirers of their works. The fact that these interested individuals exist, even though they might attend unknown places, or spaces which craftsmen and some artists don't have access to, such as galleries, bears a big part of the initiatives which end in productions that, as commented before, are evaluated by their creators as completely inappropriate if compared to their work routine and the place where, and to whom, they sell.

Depreciated as art's last operation by many who get involved with contemporary art, or art being looked for only by specialists and wealthy classes, the sale is in fact part of the art made by craftsmen and plastic artists who work at handicraft markets. Beyond the necessary and inexorable impact that sale has on their living, and on the very continuity of their production, it is through sale that the value of their work can be imagined, and it's also with this value they have opportunity to set the communication that they wish and assume to institute by delivering the art they create. If there are eyes, then and there, that can truly acknowledge and then make up the value of their works, it will often determine what craftsmen and artists make and if they would carry on making it. The fact that this vision which they long for is somehow considered to be an attribute of upper class individuals, who attend to places that are not always accessible either to their work nor to themselves, presents a problem that many recognise not to know how to solve.

There seems to be an inconvenience in emphasising the commercial aspect in art when creative elements and meanings given by artists to their production are contemplated. Certainly, it is not uncommon to study handicraft and art created by lower class artists without considering sale as a crucial moment, operation, dimension. When we withdraw from that dimension, we analyse street craftsmen and plastic artists' art from the perspective of a supposedly carefree artist, not concerned with sale aspects of their creation. As a matter of fact, researches in craftsmen and artists who work at handicraft markets often forget and depreciate sale, and treat it as a sort of greedy invasion that would decrease the true artistic value of their work. Contrary to the situation studied, in this kind of analysis it is as if it were possible for art to exist unattached to its creators' living and to their will to control and expand the reach of what they wish to communicate with it.

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