

# Beautiful Eccentrics

**Pablo Helguera**

**The One-Trick**

**Pony Trap**

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*When an artwork turns  
into a hit—and then into  
a headache.*

Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839–1908) is revered as one of the most important Brazilian writers as well as a central figure in modern Western literature. Being a Black man, born in poverty and a descendant of freed slaves in a country where slavery was not abolished until he was forty-nine years old, his rise to literary fame is a story in of itself.

I often think about Machado—or rather, his novels and short stories, characterized by a sharp wit and powerful critical social lens. One in particular, published in 1896, always comes to mind. It is titled *Un homem célebre* (literally “A Famous Man,” although it is often translated in English as “The Celebrity”).

The short story is about a composer named Pestana who is hugely famous for his polkas.

He composes hit after hit. After Pestana turns each piece to his publisher, the latter comes up with absurd pre-made titles that are arbitrarily attached to each composition just because they will stick and sell (titles like “Fine Words Butter No Parsnips” and “Hey Missus, Hang on to Your Hamper”).

As Pestana churns out an endless stream of popular polkas, he is nonetheless

deeply dissatisfied artistically. He wants to be in the league of Mozart and Beethoven and spends endless tortured nights in his study, before the portraits of these and other great composers, trying to make serious sonatas and orchestral works. But nothing original ever comes out of him. In contrast, he can effortlessly come up with polka themes, which he can write in no time, and these polkas make him even more popular and

commercially successful than before. He accepts and to an extent enjoys the success and adulation that his light works receive, but he secretly suffers for not being able to become a “real” composer.

The story refers to an all-too-common experience among artists: the moment when one makes a work that turns into a hit and soon the public demands variations of that same work over and over again.

This scenario presents the artist with a conundrum: on the one hand, capitalizing on the success of the work can be profitable; on the other, succumbing to the demands of the market is harshly judged by critics, and after a while it becomes harder and harder for the artist to break away from demand and recover from the perception that one is a one-trick pony.

I first learned of the one-trick-pony problem many years ago while in art school in Chicago, during a materials and techniques class. My professor was deeply knowledgeable of old master techniques, and he had a unique capability to paint like Rembrandt or Vermeer. One day he showed us slides of his own work: seventeenth-century-style landscapes and still lives, but with a surreal, US midwestern twist.

At some point he had started making landscapes with trees that were oddly knotted with one another, as if they were dancing a contorted tango. He remarked that he needed to keep making those trees because the market demand was so great. “They keep selling like crazy,” I remember him saying, as if puzzled by the fact that people were so fascinated by them. For a while he became a factory of paintings of twisted trees—

until, I assume, the demand finally died out.

The one-trick-pony scenario presents a paradoxical issue in artistic practice: when an artwork results in failure, it is very simple: the only way left to go is up. But when an artwork succeeds, and the public demands more of the same, an artist must decide how to balance their own artistic integrity with the pressure to repeat the same

work endlessly until they lose credibility. For that reason, I was always sympathetic to those established artists who refused to continue making, or even to speak about, their early work (which was the work that had made them famous in the first place) and instead talk about the work they were doing at present (which generally was not nearly of as much interest as the earlier work). It also made a lot of sense to me to

see artists like Vito Acconci abandon performance art and reinvent themselves in a completely different practice (in his case, architecture).

Yet the temptation to go back to one's early hits can often be inescapable, and destructive. This is related to the "signature style" problem, when an artist embraces an approach that becomes uniquely associated with them: while instantly identifiable, it often becomes



suspect or dismissed as a formulaic brand and not anymore as anything transgressive or that could break any new artistic ground. It is true that when one looks at art history and at those old masters, this criteria for innovation seems to come from the aesthetic inheritance we receive from the avant-garde. But that is in the end, at least for now, the criteria we have created for contemporary art.

What seems to lie at the center of whether an artist can get away with their signature style is perhaps one of the hardest questions in art criticism. I would venture to say that it may have something to do with authenticity. When it is perceived that the artist is eager to please the market at the cost of artistic integrity, it can mark the end of their career. But when we sense that this aesthetic choice comes from a solid stance or belief,

whether aesthetic, personal or political, the work is harder to dismiss as merely formulaic.

An exception: those who are usually exempt from this aesthetic cul-de-sac are often those defined as outsider artists. It is perhaps the unquestionable dedication that these artists have to their own obsessions—the rest of the world be damned—that attracts us to them. In their case, their unceasing compulsion in

making the exact same image or shape over and over and over again is not seen as a hollow commercial strategy, but an extraordinary monastic activity. They are not making that work for us, and that is precisely why we want it to be ours.

In its most fundamental sense, the one-trick pony trap poses questions to all artists: to what extent should one pursue a practice which may not

receive any public or critical support, and where is the line after which one can be dismissed as a caterer to the whims of the public?

The end of *Un homem célebre* (spoiler alert) is simultaneously comedic and sad: Pestana's wife dies, and he decides he will compose a requiem for her, to be performed on the first anniversary of her passing. He spends the whole year solely

dedicated to making this grand composition day and night, but as the deadline arrives he is still working on it. Then, on the morning of the anniversary, and in tears, he admits defeat.

After two years of creative silence, upon the insistence of his publisher he finally gives up his quest for artistic greatness and returns to composing polkas. Pestana himself dies shortly after

resuming his compositions,  
leaving two newly finished  
polkas for his publisher, not  
angry with his adoring crowd  
of sub-par artworks but rather  
with his own inability to raise  
to his own artistic standards—  
“in peace with men and at  
war with himself.”

## Colophon

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[www.kiosk.art](http://www.kiosk.art)

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