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STONES, WORDS, IMAGES

Mabe Bethônico and Radu Lilea

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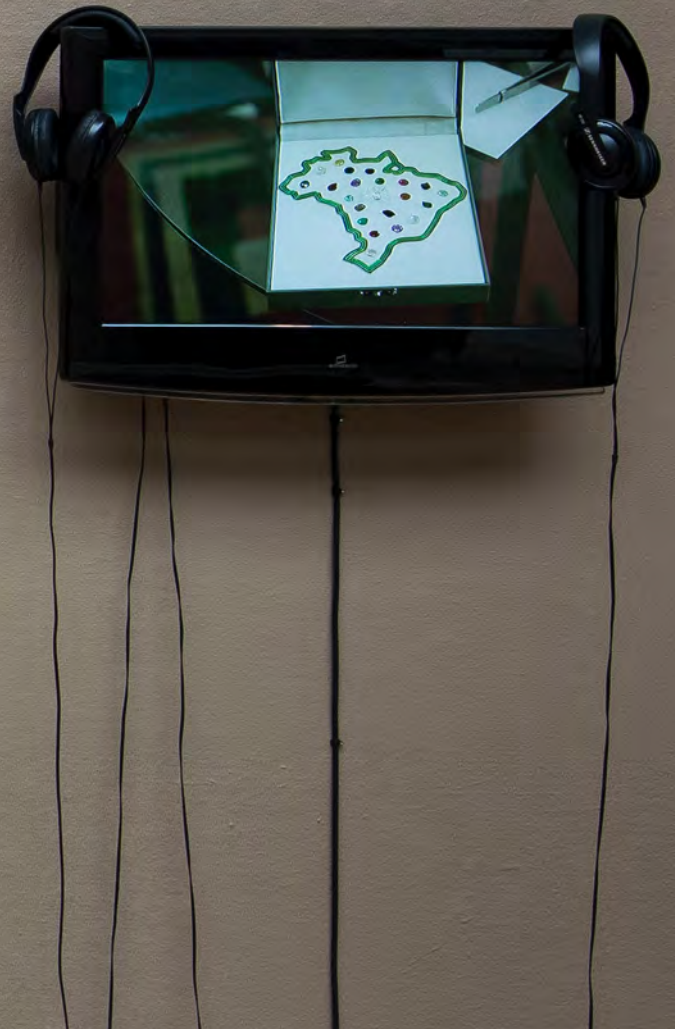
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PORTFOLIO

STONES, WORDS, IMAGES

A SCALE OF MEMORY AND TIME

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Mabe Bethônico is artist and researcher, and her work has been exhibited extensively, e.g., in the 17th Biennale Architettura 2021 in Venice and in the 27th and 28th São Paulo Biennials. In 2005 and 2019 she participates in the Panorama da Arte Brasileira at Museum of Modern Art São Paulo. She has been member of World of Matter, an international group of artists and theoreticians investigating primary materials and the complex ecologies of which they are a part [<http://www.worldofmatter.net/>]. The project was exhibited at CUNY Graduate Center in New York, HMKV in Dortmund/Germany, Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery at Concordia University in Montreal, Katherine E. Nash Gallery at the University of Minnesota, at Nottingham Contemporary, etc.

With an MA and PhD from the Royal College of Art, London, she presently teaches at HEAD-Genève and at ENSP – Arles. In 2013, her post-doctoral research *One Traveller after Another*, developed at the Museum of Ethnography of Geneva with support from CNPq, the National Research Council of Brazil, was awarded four Brazilian prizes.



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STONES, WORDS, IMAGES

A SCALE OF MEMORY AND TIME

Abstract

Cultural memory, as viewed by historian Alexander Etkind, influenced by the world of computers, from where he takes this blatant yet effective reference, is binary: there is a “soft memory” preserved mostly in texts, and a “hard memory” stored primarily in monuments (Etkind, 2013, p. 177). His perspective on how cultural memory crystallizes, functions and then moulds people's lives and communities was laid out in a study devoted to Soviet cultural heritage, particularly to those memorial practices engendered by an unburied past which always seems to be resurfacing. It is precisely this way of understanding memory, as an interconnected system whose parts can only work together, that can be further applied beyond the cultural space presented in Etkind's book.

This is, in fact, quite obvious in the works of Mabe Bethônico, a Brazilian visual artist which brought to my mind this insightful way of perceiving cultural memory. Her art projects explore and probe into the veins descending deep into both her country's past and the earth's belly – historical and geological veins that, under contemplation, take on more than just a literal meaning. They acquire, simultaneously, new metaphorical and universal interpretations, rendering the artist's work extremely relevant outside the immediate Brazilian context. Mabe Bethônico's artistic practice operates in this fuzzy elusive space, where soft and hard memory meet and converge. Her art successfully turns narratives around, fills voids and uncovers histories that have been silently living among us. The text below is based on an interview she kindly gave us. Nevertheless, for the sake of brevity and to observe the formality of the Portfolio section, we have turned the questions into themes. Therefore, this is the artist's 'curated' testimony that, in a different setting, would most likely have taken a different form.

Keywords

memory
image
word
archive
violence



Figure 1.
Speaking of Mud, 2019.
 Details of Part 1,
 cut newspaper pages
 reporting the disaster
 in Brumadinho,
 happened in 2019.
 Photo credit:
 Nrishinro Mahe/ ZUM magazine

ARTISTIC PRACTICE AND INTERNATIONAL BACKGROUND. BRAZIL SEEN FROM A DISTANCE. THE DIFFERENT SIDES OF A CAREER

I received a scholarship to study towards a master’s degree abroad, when a postgraduate degree in art was offered in only one school in Brazil. The government was then investing in training, educating future researchers for setting up new programmes. There was a certain prejudice against the study of art at this level and I had professors who ‘warned’ me that doing a master’s degree would distance me from art. I was interested in expanding and better articulating the questions I

deal with in my work, as at the art school we were dealing with images in very reduced discourses. I spent much of my time at the Royal College of Art in London, attending lectures by artists and theoreticians; I observed practices and the way they were articulated in words. Growing up under a military dictatorship, my background did not allow distancing and asking questions. I even pursued a doctorate, always desiring to work with words.

Distancing from Brazil was very important. On the one hand, using a foreign language required me to be accurate in elaborating the issues and describing contexts. On the other hand, I was studying the history of the mineral industry and as England had a strong presence in extractive culture in Minas Gerais, I soon realized that it made sense to be there, researching documents from the colonial European experience. I had access to rare works on the history of mining and accounts from travellers in Minas Gerais and these studies are fundamental to all my work.

Although working abroad, questions that interest me end up relating to Brazilian issues. And pieces that were firstly addressed to a foreign culture, dealing with contents that may seem obvious to a Brazilian public, were revealed to be relevant in Brazil.



Figure 2. *The Collector* [1996]. Details of installation: twelve cardboard boxes [each measuring 47 × 34 × 6.5 cm], with newspaper clippings in polystyrene, envelopes and stamped/sorted paper folders; map of the collection and quotations. Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo Collection. Box IV, Destruction: Women and Destruction.

Historically, Brazilian artists had relations with the European artistic world and have been strongly influenced. Movements in the first half of the 20th century allowed different geopolitical issues – in many ways opposite – to shape various practices. But while aesthetics, mediums and strategies may be similar on both continents, we have seen artistic production in Brazil that addresses singularities. More recently, this became even more so, given the visibility of Afro-Brazilian and indigenous visual production. Both were absent in the visual art scene and their presence in the public sphere has allowed important debates, mirroring specificities and bringing to view the lasting colonial violence, for example.

The roles I take up as an artist, professor or curator are linked to one another; they mix and add up as means of conveying knowledge. Research is inherent to my work; it is its common thread. For example, invited to a solo exhibition at Galeria Celma Albuquerque in Belo Horizonte, I chose to place my work in relation to that of other artists; it was a collective exhibition, a curatorial exercise and a given context from where to articulate my practice.

BRAZIL UP CLOSE. THE CAATINGA¹

Translating Edgar Aubert de la Rüe's² book on the Brazilian *caatinga*³, while living abroad, allowed me another approximation to Brazilian issues. It started in the most unlikely way, while I was looking for images of the Alps in the archives of the Swiss geologist at the Museum of Ethnography in Geneva. I found images of the *caatinga*, and dedicated to studying his mission in this region of the northeast of Brazil and his book about the place, published in the 1950s. I had never been to the *caatinga*, a region very present in the imagination of Brazilians and I ended up learning about it from a Swiss, in French, a language that I did not know. I translated the book word by word over a year of research, while also observing all of the author's scientific production.

Then, to better understand the author's perspective when describing this ecosystem that exists only in Brazil, it was important for me to also visit the *caatinga*, using the translated book as a guide. It is a descriptive book, in the scientific tradition of 'human geography': it shows ways of life on the territory, it describes the landscape and maps the mineral riches and exploitation possibilities, seeking the development of the region's economy.

The book reveals a colonial stance, but the travel to the region in 2016, after Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government, led me to discover the transformation of the region: the *caatinga* of northeast Brazil did not reflect the misery of the past. The project resulted in photographic works, reading performances, installations, objects and other books. This was an experience of overlapping cultures, languages and places – Switzerland and the *caatinga*.



Figure 3. Mabe Bethônico. How Mabe Bethônico travelled the *caatinga* region, in Switzerland, through the archives of traveller-author Edgar Aubert de la Rüe, and learned the French language from *Brasil Árido (La vie dans la caatinga)* in the process of translating this geological study of Northeast Brazil, which De la Rüe visited on a UNESCO mission to locate mineral deposits in 1953–4, consisting of a map of the mines with focus on human geography and photography, showing landscapes, occupations and lifeways in the *Polígono das Secas* (drought-stricken region). Rio de Janeiro: Editora Capacete, 2014.

1. A semi-arid region in northeastern Brazil entirely or partially extending into several Brazilian states (Alagoas, Bahia, Ceará, Minas Gerais, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Piauí, Rio Grande do Norte and Sergipe).
2. Edgar Aubert de la Rüe (1901 – 1991), Swiss geographer, geologist and photographer.
3. The original title: *Brasil árido: la vie dans la Caatinga*.

The *caatinga* is unknown even to Brazilians, who see it mainly from its aspects of poverty and drought. But systems of water distribution are many and the hinterland was transformed due to the Lula government's actions. Access by road was exceptional, we observed numerous industries, a different reality from that described in the 1950s as a slowly developing and miserable place with no economic alternatives. This image of a useless, infertile region has allowed the destruction of its ecosystem, by extraction and burning, despite it being the richest soil in the country. Today we find an agronomic industry that does not match the clichés, including vast watermelon plantations in the state of Ceará, an extremely dry region. But this industry extracts groundwater and pollutes it with the use of pesticides, while serving especially the international market. Besides that, sustainable activities are also in place and we found a region that had eradicated unemployment.



Figure 4.

The artist followed the route of the Swiss geologist Edgar Aubert de la Rüe in the northeast of Brazil and donated her book to libraries along the way. Part of the *One Traveller after Another* project. Photo: Joerg Bader.



Figure 5.

One Traveller after Another. Partial view of installation at Marília Razuk Gallery, São Paulo, 2016. Photographs [variable sizes], projections, books, posters. Photo: Everton Ballardin.

IMAGINING A CAREER IN THE PAST. ARTICULATING MEANINGS: THE ARTIST AS RESEARCHER AND STORYTELLER. ART DOES NOT RESULT IN IMAGE

In other times maybe I would have been a storyteller and my work would integrate even better into the social fabric! I have worked with lecture performances since at least 2002; being invited to lecture about my work, I used the situations of conferences or roundtables to create new works. I did not feel any tension when presenting in academic contexts or in exhibitions' parallel events because they were poetic contributions linked to the transmission of my work, as I was invited to speak. From 2014, with *Mais Perto que Cafundó*, I started to set up events for the presentation of spoken works, which were readings accompanied by image projection and sometimes music. Speech 'occupied the space' simultaneously with the projected photograph. I am interested in the process of transmission in a collective situation, within the tradition of storytelling or teaching. If the work is a pretext to bring people together in a situation of transmission, in a way I don't need the context defined as 'artistic', although it may push the boundaries within the art context.

In some of my projects, long texts to be read by the public are usually distributed in the form of handouts or journals; a part of the exhibition is taken home to be read. The public is used to the curatorial texts of contemporary exhibitions and my work does not demand much more. As for the spoken pieces, the duration of a performance normally does not exceed 30 minutes; this is already a work that contains more than a hundred projected images and the text is the result of many months of research.

Being previously recorded and presented in a loop, in these situations the public is not invited to take part in a dialogue. The duration of the performances was never an issue, the audience is engaged from beginning to end. On the other hand, it is difficult to measure the audience's engagement with the video recording that is shown after the initial live event. And if it is a fact that the works demand immersion time, such an investment should be inherent to any work of art.

I am interested in engaging with the contexts where I work, e.g., to elaborate on a certain geopolitical or institutional issue, linked to the places where I am invited to collaborate.

This requires research and somewhat lengthy processes that will lead to visuals and texts that will come together in narration. This does not end in a single object or image and requires the public to associate parts and curiosity to delve into the issues. We are led to passivity in the face

of the images we consume on a large scale and with high speed, but artists work with different temporalities, in layers, articulating meanings beyond appeal and immediate seduction.



Figure 6. *Extraordinary Mineral Stories*. Performance at 20th Videobrasil Festival of Contemporary Art, 2017. Photo: Everton Ballardin.



Figure 7.
Mineral Invisibility.
Installation: 26 posters, 90 x 60 cm each, photographs, video, text by Anselm Jappe, reports from the Ministry of Labour and Employment. Partial view of exhibition World of Matter, HMKV, Dortmund U, Germany, 2014. Curated by Inke Arns. Photo: Hannes Voidich.

THE MANY RICHES OF MINAS GERAIS. LANDSCAPES DEVOID OF MEMORY. NARRATING THE SILENCE

My interest in minerals comes from my origins; Minas Gerais is a state that bears the name of fields of mining. Its territory is marked by colonial extraction perpetuated by large companies with the support of governments, under the pretext of the region's 'vocation' – an understanding that the region is made for extraction. Thus, this place is characterized by its own destruction, because its geology provides multiple ores, while its exploitation marks the mentality, the spirit, the history of the place. What is striking is that this same constitutive activity is kept away from public debate, which does not engage in criticism. Added to this is the absence of memory, the disregard for a past marked by slavery and the current existence of other forms of violence against workers and affected communities, victims of exported profits. It was precisely this framework that I wanted to elaborate projects from, identifying the absence of discourse, visibility, and history regarding the mining industry in Minas Gerais. As an artist, it made sense to make the discursive absence noticeable; I am interested in narrating this absence, showing traces, pointing out the silence. My work developed at a slow pace, with limited sources and references, while the subject of mountains (and their disappearance) is almost taboo, as if it is such an obvious topic that it does not need to be formulated.

The 'mineiro'⁴ chooses not to look at the mountains, adapting to the context without strength or desire to protest against what is the aforementioned vocation. In recent years, this has changed thanks to awakening voices fighting against mining. Militants who, by the way, suffer death threats. Minas Gerais is a rotting land, where destruction is hidden behind curtains of trees planted around huge craters. Pollution is not just visual, industrial violence reaches the groundwater, causes dust storms, consumes water on a large scale to transport, wash and stock ore – and the destruction is not reversed. The local communities do not receive benefits or compensation. I wanted to understand this context and I continue to unfold my work as a means to highlight its issues.



Figure 8. *Women in the Mines of All Kinds*. Installation view at Kunsthall Aarhus, 2015 at Dump! Multispecies Making and Unmaking, curated by Elaine Gan, Steven Lam and Sarah Lookofsky. Photo: Axel Schütt.



Figure 9. Christmas party of women from the Conceição Mine, Itabira, Minas Gerais. This is the only moment of the year when there are no women in its operation area; they conduct the largest machines of Brazilian industry. Photo: Mabe Bethônico.

Although the reach of visual arts seems limited, not always reaching a large audience in Brazil, artists make social reality noticeable. Elaborating on ecological issues, criticizing the perpetuation of the colonial mentality that allows the exploitative violence to take place, the artist responds to an urgency. Different questions are at the core of my practice and there is a will to generate debate. As for changes, they are made possible through collective action; it is difficult to assess the 'efficiency' of an artist's work, but I believe in the reverberation of works that bring people together to reflect or to denounce, putting events in historical context, contributing to other practices of other people, artists or not, adding up to other actions and discourses. I believe in a kind of learning and influence network, enabled by artworks or made possible by the practice of teaching.

⁴. A resident of Minas Gerais, and also "miner" in Portuguese.

THE STONESTATEMENT EDITIONS PROJECT

This project derives from a relatively straightforward question: “Can an affective connection between people and the elements composing life of a given place generate a sense of protection and care, enough to lead a resistance against its destruction?” And: “Is the mineiro’s critical disengagement from the problems caused by mining (an industry that drains life and compromises the future of the next generations) not due to the loss of a deep and complex relationship with the place?”.



Figure 10. *StoneStatements Editions*. General view of installation at the 17th edition of Venice Biennale of Architecture, 2021. Logo: Gisa Bustamante. Photo: Rodrigo Martins.

Responding to the question “How will we live together?”, addressed by curators of the 2021 Venice Biennale of Architecture, I speculate about how we could live (differently) in relation to stones. Stones are seen as the very opposite of life, yet geology is not static, and minerals interact with everything else – they are part of living interactions.

My proposal included building a publishing house that is a platform inviting to collectively constitute knowledge, as a place from where to ask questions, dedicated to debates about non-extractive relationships.

The books announced are not published (yet), they contain an aspiration. Due to the postponement of the biennial, we managed to produce one of the volumes, with the participation of 26 collaborators. StoneStatements Editions is a work-project developed as an advertising campaign that is fictional, it is a potential publisher that announces provocations (statements) and also an invitation to collective action.



Figure 11. *Conscious Rocks*. Book cover in collaboration with NASK – Nadja Zimmermann and Skander Najar. Photo: Atelier Mabe Bethônico.

A COMPLICATED AFFAIR: BRAZIL AND ITS MUSEUMS AND ARCHIVES

Brazil is a country with a short memory, we have few archives and no incentive to study them. The neglect of the past allows material destruction to take place, such as the 2018 fire at the National Museum of Brazil, in Rio de Janeiro, or the destruction of heritage in general, due to the lack of maintenance of collections, as much as the carelessness and destruction of forests, cultures and knowledge. This is how the ignorance of historical facts, such as the violence (and even the existence) of the military dictatorship, is facilitated – a historical fact denied, for example, by the Jair Bolsonaro’s government. Archives are proof of this dictatorship, as much as people’s testimonies. A museum is a place to store and make different exhibits available, it guards residues that allow us to understand history, through them we review facts, thoughts, beliefs etc. It is actually a matter of belonging and the public does not always see it as such, as museums close themselves in their rooms. The challenging task of a museum is to open itself up and get rid of this vault-for-storing-goods feature, as if it was not part of the present.



Brazil has always been a 'developing country'. This is why administrations destroy forests: their disappearance is seen as an indicator of growth. New constructions overlap with other structures at a constant pace, on the paved land. For making way for the 'new', space is opened by destroying the 'old'. The 'old' is represented by ecosystems and the cultural past and this mentality sees preservation as an impediment to 'progress', which is a very problematic word, one that is emblazoned on our national flag.

UN-ROMANTICIZING THE DOCUMENT

An archive contains elements for questioning and argumentation, it does not give answers and has no value in itself if not activated. We have a real problem with memory today, starting with the illusion of storing archives on disks as backup. We generate and store information on an enormous scale and corporations profit from our data – this is the way we now understand how to generate value from knowledge about humanity. It was the absence of archives that led me to them, and they are very important for understanding the present.

For me, documents are instruments, I do not romanticize them.

If art is considered to be part of history, the question of the archive will live on.

Figure 12. *Wanda Svevo Archive Campaign.*

General view of installation at the pavillion Bienal de São Paulo, the 27th edition of the São Paulo Biennial. Curated by Jochen Volz, Lisette Lagnado & others. Photo: Roberta Dabdab.

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