

I ARRIVED IN RIO ON MARCH 5, 2008

— Interview with Leonor Antunes

What circumstances were at the origin of your stay in Rio?

I guess the idea of difference and identity was at the origin of my desire to visit Brazil. I've always wanted to visit this country, in order to encounter the context of the Neo-Concrete artists of the early 1960s like Ligya Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape, and later Cildo Meireles, who was always an important reference in my work. In the sense that their ideas did not exist outside their concrete manifestation, and combined with an extremely sophisticated handling of techniques and new materials. They represent the first generation that self-consciously shed their provincial identity and considered themselves cosmopolitans. Their works are situated between the frictional relationship of the social and poetic issues specific to Brazil and the heritage of the West. Questioning the models of problematics and the presence of art, and establishing a multi-sensorial approach to it.

I wanted to visit the modernist architecture that dominated Rio de Janeiro in the 1950s., an optimistic and utopian period, with its development impulses, as well as the radical thrust of the Brazilian neo-avant-gardes. An era that represents the most expansive decades of Brazilian history, the apex of optimism generated by the economic boom and the consequent development that followed Brazil's participation in World War II, which inspired hope that Brazilian culture could finally claim its deserved place on the world stage.

I was interested in this ascent and failure that represented two sides of an effort of unprecedented modernization.

On the other hand, as a political citizen with Portuguese nationality, I think it is ethically important if not essential for me to visit this country. From a more ethical position regarding what I believe the function of art should be in an increasingly refined world.

I work within a context but I also work outside that context. I received a grant from Spain to travel to Rio de Janeiro. That year I had a residency at Capacete Entretenimentos, which is a project by Helmut Batista. By coincidence, the invitation to exhibit in Rio at the Museu da República in Galeria do Lago

came before I knew I was going there. I was invited by the curator of that space, Martha Nikklaus, and at the end of my residency I exhibited the project I developed during my stay.

I believe in those kinds of things, as chance, and encounter—its part of the game. It felt as if everything was suppose to happen and it was the right moment to go there.

How did you feel when you got there? What did you find the most remarkable?

I arrived in Rio on March 5, 2008. My first impression of the city was very important; I think the first encounters are the most prolific ones.

The first encounter is the language. Although we speak the same language, the contexts are totally different. They reduce the usage of vocabulary to its essence, it becomes lighter so to speak, and decipherable to the ears of foreigners. The Portuguese language is rather complex and can be very dense... it has a very particular weight and texture. When spoken in a very light way it can become pathetic, without body or depth. But it's interesting to look at how a country uses its language and how they develop and transform it. When the Portuguese arrived in Bahia, they found the indigenes tribe of Tupinambá, who spoke Tupi, one of the many different dialects spoken in Brazil. During the occupation the Portuguese forbid the use of any other language but Portuguese. The effort of Pombal politics was in a certain way a crowned success. The different languages spoken in Brazil were silenced and Portuguese became the only spoken language and the only one to have the statute of the official language of the country.

After the independence, Brazil started to discuss the duality of the Portuguese language. Some tried to set boundaries between the language spoken in Brazil and the one spoken in Portugal. While others advocated the culture of the vernacular. If we look at Brazilian literature we can identify these two positions and the way they confront their culture. The Romantic period affirmed the singularity of the Brazilian modality of Portuguese. Later, with post-Romanticism, one doesn't recognize the heterogeneity of the Portuguese. They defended a purist

position. And again, the Modernist movement is amazing in how it radicalizes the Romantic Movement, using a "Brazilian" language.

Romanticism opposed to Classicism underscores the differences between the nations, the peculiarities of their reflected national languages and the traditions of each country, or the exaltation of what is new. The appearance of Brazilian Romanticism at the moment of independence was remarkable in its effort to create a national identity, spreading confidence in the future of the young nation. A duality that is present in the awareness of the vastness of tropical nature with its variety and its perpetual spring. As opposed to the nature of the non-tropical countries.

On the other hand, identification with this exuberant nature gave them courage and a freedom of spirit, and at the same time returned it to the primitive innocence of the "garden of Eden."

Every nation needs its myths as a heroic beginning. The indigenous people of the past did not constitute any danger against the effective order established during Black slavery.

On the other hand the idea that they didn't adapt to slavery served to constitute a myth of a man imbued with the spirit of freedom and courage, a necessary quality to be one of the founding heroes. Brazilian literature during the romantic period transmits a positive image of the Brazilian people, and it gives an optimistic language to the country.

And I think that is what I felt was the most surprising. A freedom and an extraordinary capacity of living day by day. One feels it in the landscape. It's exploding.

Did your vision change toward the end of your stay, after three months?

Before going to Brazil, I was in some way building a very ambiguous relationship with it, or I was mystifying my connection with the place. I read a lot about it before visiting it, so that the "meeting" came from a theoretical level. It became real, and more and more complex because I was experiencing it. I was occupying that place... and it took proportions far beyond what I'd expected. I think the more we get to know a place, the more obscure the read-

ing of it becomes, since it's not a familiar place to us our vision of it becomes more and more intricate. Familiarity comes with time.

It changed my perception of life in general. I went there with the idea that I was not staying, it was a momentary event and I knew at some point I had to go back. For example, I tried to adapt the construction of my work into the tropical climate. The climate occupies a lot of space... it's not easy as it's very imposing. This generates a unique experience of time which is different from the one I am used to. Time as a different length.

Passing through different social areas in Brazil—often frenetically—gave me an opportunity to reflect on certain subjects, and go deeper into them. I was aware of that, but didn't have the intention to produce work according to that sort of experience, or a response to it. I think it's a very problematic field. It can be quite demagogical. That's what I think is very problematic when I look at the work of some artists coming from abroad, with their aim to produce works in such contexts, and they end up by creating their "aestheticization" and fetishizing of the "poor"—it's not serious!

I tried the possibility of co-existing with the difference, a model of social harmony that runs throughout Brazilian culture, and to understand the meaning of this difference. A kind of exploratory machine that tries to penetrate different areas, different fields, to penetrate and at the same time to invent, because along the way, I had the impression of unleashing certain encounters, and perhaps even catalyzing certain microevents. In any case, it's impossible to foresee the effects of an encounter, however revitalizing it may be at the time it's experienced.

And I think the most surprising effect is discovering the possibility of uniting the parts of myself that are separated in my mode of functioning in Europe.

Is there some of Lisbon in Rio ?

I wouldn't say that there is some of Lisbon in Rio, but for sure there is the whole country of Portugal in one city. Rio is a city where we can discover the country's entire legacy. In the same square we can see different colonialist buildings from different parts of the country, from the south to the north,

from the baroque churches to a lot of the vernacular architecture that is still spread around the city. And in particular, I think the relationship to the port is rather similar. The relationship to the ocean is very particular as well...

But, for example, when I visited Mexico City I was impressed by the strange legacy of the vernacular architecture. When the Spanish arrived in Mexico they destroyed the old temples of the old civilizations, and with the same stones constructed their own monuments. The Mexican people had to construct those monuments according to what the Spanish had built in their empires, without the Spanish being able to show them any documentation of what they had built or what the monuments looked like. It's a mixture and an assembly of different cultures that most of the time doesn't coincide, and it's a specific interpretation using found materials—an architecture that "looks like," but isn't. Using stones that have their own history, and I think that's very conceptual.

It's interesting to think about this, it makes me reflect on the notion of counterfeiters, copying from a set of traces, using the "style" of what is to be imitated, counterfeited... But all Latin American culture has specialized in appropriating, then digesting. And in particular in Brazil with the notion of "anthropophagy," or cultural cannibalism, a term which was coined by the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade. But again the situation in Brazil is different, the Portuguese brought the Black people, the slaves, to build their own world throughout Brazil... and most of the time the main churches were built with marble brought from Portugal. So there is a lot to do with settling, placement and of course invasion.

What do you like and dislike about the city?

The question of "lack" and struggle. Class struggle. What Felix Guattari defined in terms of a "politics of culpability and castration that is particular to capitalist subjectivity." He also raised the question in the Brazilian context that we were led to reaffirm and legitimize the validity of social struggles, class struggles.

I was impressed by how the vegetation in particular and nature in general occupy the city by consuming it like a virus! Without control—that's so beautiful.

I think nature brings that quality of change to the city, everything is about to change, and will change. But in my opinion there is a kind of servile respect too, an active memory of the masters and the slaves... Again I totally agree when Suely Rolnik* argued that she had never come across a country where domination is so blatant and servitude so "voluntary." This divestiture of subservience appears both in small, everyday gestures, and the proliferation of social movements of the most diverse kinds and in the most diverse contexts.

I also like to think that there is still a lot to do, that this generates a constant energy. I think that nowadays people are beginning to demystify those rigidly hierarchic relations.

What was the project for your exhibition there?

As I said I was very impressed by how nature occupies space, and invades it. And I cannot think of it in terms of a project, in terms of a predefined project to be realized... this process of growing is so fast that it's proliferating and occupying space in other directions. I was very impressed by the Tijuca Forest, which is the main forest in the city, not only by what it is, but also by what it represents to the country.

This forest was a project of D. Pedro II, the first Emperor of Brazil after independence. This emperor was a very wise and cultivated person. He was of Portuguese descent and he was responsible for the abolition of slavery.

After the original forest had been destroyed to make way for coffee plantations, it was the Emperor who requested in 1861 that the Tijuca Forest be replanted in an effort to protect Rio's water supply. It was replanted using vegetation from Brazil, some that no longer existed locally but could be found in the Atlantic Rainforest and in particular in Amazônia. So to me it represents the greatest architectural project of the city.

I invited the Brazilian architect Washington Farjardo to work with me on this project, I asked him to analyze the forest and in particular a specific location to be used as an architectural project.

I wanted to measure the length of one particular liana that exists in the Tijuca Forest. To me, these plants represent structures in the forest, permitting animals to cross different parts of the forest canopy,

as an aerial space, which we don't have access to. These plants use the trees, as well as other means of vertical support, to climb up the canopy in order to get access to well-lit areas in the forest. They often form bridges between one part of the forest canopy to another, and again provide arboreal animals with paths across the forest. They have many different ways of growing, some plants start life in the canopy and grow down to the ground. They grow very slowly due to dry conditions in the canopy until the roots reach the ground and tap into the nutrients of the leaf litter. Creepers, for example, are among the many rainforest species that change their leaf structure as they grow, as in this forest. The plants start as shrubs on the forest floor and gravitate toward dark objects, usually tree trunks. When they reach the tree, the climbers grow vertically up the tree and are held fast by their triangular flattened leaves. The leaves are positioned to catch reflected light. Once the vine reaches the bright upper regions of the canopy, the leaves are modified to grow away from the tree in order to intercept more direct sunlight. Because lianas use the architecture of other plants for support, they offer relatively little structural support and instead allocate more resources to leaf production and stem/root elongation for rapid growth. Since lianas are rooted throughout their lives (except the parasites of lianas), they take nothing from the tree but support.

This idea of needing a structure to grow on and at the same time being a structure in itself, though constantly changing, made me look at it as a scientific object. I asked Washington to measure it as he would measure an architectural object.

Since I am interested in the notion of proportion and the measurement of something which I can physically relate to I chose a plant that we could have access to in the forest. We asked a team of topographers to go to the specific place and locate the nearby trees and define the precise location of the plant in the space of the forest. Washington and I measured the liana using threads, like vectors, as vertical lines, "pushing" these threads away from the plant and thus projecting points onto the ground, like a drawing, that defined a geometrical figure in a plan. It was pure geometry and maximum precision in the jungle. I also got help from Mauricinho,

an amazing tree climber who works with Helmut, and he climbed the trees in order to give us their actual length. So everything was very real, very physical, handmade...

Washington made beautiful technical, vectorial drawings, which were presented in a table. I made a sculpture using the exact length we got from the measurement we made, which came to thirty meters. I used sewing thread; I was interested in a specific length... and that length could be used as a measuring device for the exhibition space itself. So I used several threads, around 600, in order to modulate a thickness that I thought was enough to have a certain presence in the space. But without weight... as light sculpture, very fragile... and that could not stand freely on the floor. Like hairs, black hairs... The sculpture was made by fixing each thread on the wall, and walking from one side to the other side of the space, thirty meters... up and down... back and forth...

The exhibition was called *architectura*, the ancient Latin word defined by Vitruvius.

What other work did you make during your stay and how is it linked with your stay?

According to Friedrich Nietzsche, only by selective forgetting can we overcome a sense of helplessness in the face of historical destiny. He argued that only the ability to forget makes creative action possible. Monuments are nothing if not selective aids to memory: they encourage us to remember some things and to forget others. The process of creating monuments, as in the case of Brazil, shapes public memory and collective identity.

I am always intrigued by what monuments represent, and how they can reveal so much power by no means of scale. I am very interested in scale and gravity, but also very interested in the idea of classical sculpture. I am interested in the notion of proportion, enlargement, gravity, weight, and change. My work is very classical in a way. I often think about sculpture, classical sculpture, about matter, the notion of taking out and adding material.

One of the most beautiful things I find in classical Greek sculpture is the fact that many sculptures were destroyed during the wars. Many sculptures were melted to produce weapons. So in this sense they exist within another form, existing in the most

perverse way. Their "body" is not present, but all its power remains within its new form... I think this is an extraordinary concept. It's amazing this capacity to be transformed, the chameleon-like side of sculpture... the way to adapt according to the context... that to me is what is the most intriguing side of sculpture.

Then come the materials which are able to modulate and shape those concepts... which are also shaped by time. Gold for example, is an extraordinary material, so "elastic," and pure... and it exists without changing, doesn't oxidize... once re-melted one cannot date the exact time of that change from one form to another. I have been thinking about those ideas for a long time, and I have been trying to analyze them in many different contexts.

One day in São Paulo's Brazilian Sculpture Museum, I was surprised by a gold thimble displayed in a flea market in the Paulo Mendes da Rocha building. The space of the museum was totally empty, there was only the market on the terrace. I spotted a Portuguese gold coin, lying on the tabletop, dated 1763, during the reign of Joseph I. The booth owner, I was told, had a shop in Rio de Janeiro.

Herbert's shop was located in one of the first modernist buildings in Copacabana. A beautiful shopping mall, known for its selection of antique shops, with a church on its roof. I told Herbert that this coin had been minted after the great earthquake of Lisbon on November 1, 1755. At that time, the King had already placed effective power in the hands of the Marquis de Pombal. Facing the earthquake's devastations, Pombal gave orders to the Portuguese mint to buy all the gold and silver recovered from the debris and fires and to mint coins with that metal of King Joseph I. I bought the gold coin.

On May 26, 2008 at 15:16, I re-melted the coin that was 3.16 cm in diameter, 1.13 mm in thickness of 14.3 carats gold. Lúcia, a jewelry designer whom I had met in the plane from Lisbon to Rio, let me work at her studio located at Rio Comprido. A couple of weeks later, I was desperately looking for a piece of Brazil wood. This was the most precious commodity found in Brazil in the sixteenth century. When Portuguese explorers discovered those trees, they used the name "pau-brazil" to describe them. By that time, this name had been used to denominate a different species of tree which was found in Asia, and which also produced red dye. A

large portion of the exports, and the economy of the country which was to spring up in that part of the world consisted of Brazil-wood trees. Later, the country obtained its name from those trees and hence was called Brazil. The "pau-brazil" species is an endangered species, and in the early 1960s, this threat induced the government to prohibit the sale of Brazil wood.

One night over dinner, Helmut spoke about his neighbor, Tércio Ribeiro de Sousa, who makes precious handmade guitars and "cavaquinhos." That same night, I knocked on his door and surprisingly enough, he told me he had a small piece of Brazil wood stored in his cellar. I asked him to build a box for me from that wood. The circumference of the original coin is engraved inside the box. I placed the gold object I made inside the engraved circle together with the coin's certificate of authenticity. This work is entitled *1763-2008*.

* Suely Rolnik is a psychanalyst, cultural critic and professor at the Catholic University of São Paulo. Author with Félix Guattari of *Micropolitiques* (Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2007).

(INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY ELEIN FLEISS)