

BRIDGING THE ATLANTIC AND OTHER GAPS: ARTISTIC CONNECTIONS BETWEEN BRAZIL AND AFRICA – AND BEYOND

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London Snow Africa, London Hole Brazil 1998–99 consists of a pair of images captured by Milton Machado on the streets of London: a snow-covered map of Africa and a hole in the asphalt resembling the map of Brazil. Beyond questioning the political dimensions of cartography, the work provides an interesting means of access to connections between the visual arts and the question of Afro-Brazilian socio-cultural influences.¹ Its apparently literal title possesses a sonority that resonates with other meanings: difference, identification, domination. It leads us to consider how relations between Brazil and Africa are often forged by external mediators, artists not necessarily of African descent, establishing diffuse networks of meaning in the Atlantic and configuring unique images of Africa in Brazil. It also allows us to understand how, regardless of the fact that it is a constant in the process of Brazilian artistic modernisation, Afro-Brazilian [hybridity](#) is infrequently perceived and analysed, an absence that correlates with Brazilian society's more general silence regarding African descent.

AFROMODERNITY IN BRAZIL

Afro-Brazilian influences are both inherent in and essential to the understanding of Brazilian culture. However, these connections take place in different modes and with varying degrees of intensity over time and space, certain moments and places being of particular interest to the process of artistic modernisation. One such conjunction took place between the late 1800s and the early twentieth century in the academic milieu of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Bahia, within the context of the intensification of the abolitionist process, the end of slavery and the beginning of the Republican regime. Reflecting an intricate process of representation and self-representation even as they constructed images of themselves and of the other, black painters such as Estevão Silva, Antônio Firmino Monteiro, Antônio Rafael Pinto Bandeira, and the brothers João and Arthur Thimótheo da Costa navigated the genres of Western painting, avoiding Afro-Brazilian subject matter, which was left to artists of non-African descent – such as Belmiro de Almeida, Pedro Américo, Antônio Parreiras, Rodolpho and Henrique Bernardelli – to address, albeit in predominantly deprecatory interpretations that helped to establish a marginal place for blacks in society.

Another singular moment occurred around 1910 in São Paulo, Recife and Rio de Janeiro, with early expressions of another appreciation of the African component of Brazilian culture. Instead of being regarded as negative or degenerative, a social evil to be eradicated, ethnic miscegenation became a positive cultural value – a paradigm for artistic and cultural relationships. Continual references to women and

religions stand out as part of the artistic map of popular culture in Brazil. The figure of the Bahiana – whether in the guise of *mãe-de-santo*, or as an *acarajé*² or fruit vendor – drew the attention of Brocos, Anita Malfatti, Cecília Meireles, Oswaldo Goeldi and Cândido Portinari, among many others, and culminated in the international icon that was Carmen Miranda. The mulatta was elected as an emblem of miscegenation, and tribute was paid to her, particularly in Di Cavalcanti's pictorial elegies, which helped to transform her into a standard of Brazilian beauty, subverting Western aesthetic standards imposed by fine arts culture, on one hand, while perpetuating the sexual objectification of black women on the other. This process was criticised in a simultaneously monumental and affective mode by Tarsila do Amaral in *A Negra [The Negress]* 1923,³ and by Anna Bella Geiger's *Am.Lat. [Lat.Am.]* 1976, in which the mulatta is included in the artist's critical vision of Latin America as part of a subservient repertoire of sexuality and mysticism.

The 1950s brought a new approach to the subject, one that was simultaneously an ethnic-cultural development of Brazilian modernism and a formal artistic response to the process of building yet another perspective on African cultural influence in Brazil, as then outlined by the Black Movement. In Bahia, Rubem Valentim began to explore possibilities for synthesis between the principles and forms of Constructivism and Afro-Brazilian religions, a mode that has continued into the present day, having spread to other regions (Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Minas Gerais) as a result of both aesthetic and museological initiatives by Emanuel Araújo, Ronaldo Rego and Jorge dos Anjos, countering persistent threats to – as well as the marginalisation of – these religions by contributing to their positive public visibility.

Another important development began in the late 1960s, within the countercultural flux of that time. By the 1970s, the works of Antonio Henrique Amaral, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and Regina Vater were exploring particular connections with Afro-Brazilian culture, particularly with Afro-Brazilian religions as established in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. During this decade, the Afro cults experienced a revival of sorts in the arts (film, music, theatre, the visual arts) and in the social sciences.⁴ In the visual arts, dialogue with the Afro-Brazilian universe is easily perceptible in works by Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, Cildo Meireles, José Roberto Aguilar and Waltercio Caldas.

Since the 1990s, the exchange between visual artists and Afro-Brazilianness has gained new impetus, along with another wave of connections to African and Afro-Brazilian cultures in various cultural fields, particularly within popular music; at the same time public policies have sought new modes of social inclusion for Brazil's black communities. These accomplishments do not quite constitute a specific watershed, or even an immediately discernible cluster within contemporary Brazilian artistic output. They are dialogues established by artists in certain specific works, based on their own experiences of the many heterogeneous, often sporadic Africas present in a number of Brazilian cities, dispersed across Brazilian territory.

TOURIST MACUMBA?

This cluster of connections has occasionally been called 'Afro-Brazilian' art, underscoring the sense of a mixture formed in Brazil; at other times it has been referred to as 'Afro-descendant' art, emphasising a supposed African purity. Yet neither label has ever referred exclusively to art produced by Africans in Brazil or by black Brazilians. In addition to Brazilian artists not of African descent, such as Milton Machado, an abundance of artists from overseas (some of whom eventually became Brazilian citizens) engaged with aspects of Afro-Brazilian culture: Spaniard Modesto Brocos y Gómez, Mexicans Henrique and Rodolpho Bernardelli, Lithuanian Lasar Segall, Argentinean Hector Julio Páride Bernabó (aka Carybé), German Karl Heinz Hansen (aka Hansen Bahia), Frenchman Pierre Verger, Portuguese Maria Helena Vieira da Silva and Cristina Lamas, and North Americans Matthew Barney and Arto Lindsay.

Based on the expression [macumba para turista](#) (literally, '[macumba](#) for tourists'), which designates simulations of Afro-Brazilian religious practices for the uninitiated,⁵ one might speak of '[macumba](#) by tourists' in order to consider this group of artists. Recently, certain artistic, museological and historiographic productions have broadened the inclusive quality of this tendency: the native himself or herself might be the tourist, which leads one to reflect on the various modes of belonging triggered by works made from within and from without, for insiders or for outsiders of ethnic groups, Afro-Brazilian religions, or the Black Movement itself.

ARTIST MACUMBA?

Most artistic dialogue with the Afro-Brazilian universe in Brazil has focused upon Afro-Brazilian religions, dealing with their images and reinforcing the tradition of the representation of their practices that began when Brazil was a Portuguese colony. Whereas the works of Carybé and Verger are very often ethnographic in their focus on Afro-Brazilian material culture, rites and myths, Valentim's investigations explore the syntax and semantics typical of the symbols present in these religions. He refers to many religions, predominantly but not exclusively Afro-Brazilian ones, in hieratic and abstract arrangements with universalising claims. Araújo refers specifically to Candomblé, with a dynamism derived from lyrical constructivism as disseminated in Brazil and the power of the [orixá](#) Exu.⁶ Rego approximates the formalistic-ritual structures of these religions to modalities of contemporary art (object-paintings, installations). Dos Anjos, influenced by the Neoconcretists in his 'creole constructivism', explores the tension inherent in the reversibility and opening up of geometric abstract signs.

At the same time, it is possible to observe the immediate or transformed appropriations of images from Afro-Brazilian religions as outgrowths of research conducted directly in *terreiros* (literally 'yards', but more broadly, outdoor places of worship) and disseminated in the landscape or the history of art in Brazil. Arthur Bispo do Rosário's *Macumba* is particularly noteworthy for the simultaneous self-

representation and rearticulation of things and meanings in its synthetic representation of Afro-Brazilian religions through the free agency – at once raw and poetic – of multiple objects. Certain artists, however, have had considerable involvement in and experience with Afro-Brazilian religions without necessarily having been initiated into them. Some of the finest accomplishments in this field feed off both consonances and discontinuities among art, religion and culture, between the universal and the local. Usually, such works rearticulate procedures of dematerialisation that are typical of contemporary art – performances, *instaurações*⁷ and installations – towards religious practices in which rites and objects are crucially inseparable. Rituals rarely take place without the introduction or use of certain objects which, according to tradition, must be made and displayed according to specific conventions.

In *Nimbo/Oxalá* 2004, Ronald Duarte manifests a chemical/physical encounter with the deity Oxalá, presenting a brief and uncontrollable cloud generated by the expulsion of the entire contents of a number of fire extinguishers as an offering to the *Nagô orixá* of creation. This connection is reinforced through some of *Oxalá's* characteristics: the day of the performance (Friday); the colour of the smoke, which is also the predominant colour of the garments worn by the congregation (white); the temporarily formed element (a cloud) and one of its qualities (a diffuse omnipresence). In a work which doubles as an *ex voto*, the artist explores the semantic multiplicity of religions and the clandestine dissemination of their signs within Brazilian cultural codes. Similarly, without iconic representations and exploring the semantic breadth of the signs with a transitory performative intervention, Marepe realised *Pérola de água doce [Freshwater Pearl]* 2007, casting thirteen thousand freshwater pearls into São Paulo's Tietê River. On the borderline between the artistic and the religious, the performance was presented as a ritual offering to Oxum (the Afro-Brazilian deity most directly and powerfully associated with fresh water) and also as a manifesto against the pollution of the river and environmental degradation.

One might well ask whether some of art's dialogues with Afro-Brazilian religions ought not to be qualified as 'artist *macumba*': the deliberately 'exotic' exploitation of these religions in order to produce aesthetic effects. Undoubtedly, the recurrence of works linked to Afro-Brazilian religions is significant for the social incorporation of those religions. And yet, the aestheticising of aspects of these religions is a dimension of their spectacularisation through art, which may be linked to the 'ritual hypertrophy of the Afro-Brazilian religions', due to the emphasis placed upon their market and aesthetic values.⁸

MACUMBEIRO ART?

One must distinguish between an aestheticising of religious cults, which stems from a neglect of ethical values and causes a subsequent reduction of meaning to mere appearance, and the aesthetic dimension that is intrinsic to these religions, which leads us to think about the insertion of religious objects and practices into the world of art, in what might be qualified as '*macumbeiro art*'. The work of Deoscóredes

Maximiliano dos Santos, better known as Mestre Didi, present within art institutions in Brazil and abroad as early as the 1960s, bears witness to the possibility of preserving the qualities or attributes required by religion and its expansion into other domains. Although Mestre Didi's work and career herald more broadly influential and culturally inclusive transitions between the worlds of religion and art, establishing precedents for the works of Lena Martins, Wuelyton Ferreiro and Junior de Odé, these artists are still exceptions to the marginal status of Afro-Brazilian religious art within the art circuit. To come to grips with the invisibility of this artistic trend is to understand the social standing of black Brazilians and their cultural practices, which leads to a consideration of accomplishments associated with the black cause.

ARTIST ACTIVISM?

The articulation of art, politics and blackness in Brazil led to the actions of the Black Movement in the field of the arts and, consequently, to the intellectual and political militancy of Abdias do Nascimento in favour of Afro-Brazilian populations.⁹ Having been active in the fields of poetry and theatre, as well as in politics, when he devoted himself to the visual arts in the 1950s he strove to create a new public image for the black man, to establish a museum and disseminate knowledge regarding black art. When the military dictatorship drove him into exile in the United States and in Africa during the 1960s, Nascimento also began to paint Afro-Brazilian subjects. Although he defended [Pan-Africanism](#) in his writing, his paintings reflected an effort to achieve a positive public visibility for Afro-Brazilian culture by highlighting Yoruba myths. Araújo's case is a similar one, for he has been politically active within art's institutional field, especially as an editor of books, a curator of exhibitions and a museum director –activities that eventually culminated in the 2004 creation of São Paulo's Museu AfroBrasil, the largest and most important museological initiative dedicated to reflection on the participation of Africans and their descendants in the making of Brazil.

Artists who have sought to connect the Afro-Brazilian cause to the tradition of engaged art that denounces social exclusion, and draws attention to the plight of the socially abject, include Johann Moritz Rugendas, Lucílio de Albuquerque, Cândido Portinari, Antônio Henrique Amaral, Sebastião Salgado and Vik Muniz. Within this tendency, one must highlight Lasar Segall's critical representations of suffering or melancholy black men. *Banana! [Banana Plantation]* 1927 depicts the humble wisdom of elderly blacks, derived from the mixture of ancestral cultures and suffering, marginality and resistance generated by slavery, upon which is based the figure of the *preto velho*,¹⁰ relating the political predicament of the farm worker to the Afro-Brazilian religious universe.

Today's younger artists frequently reference works by Meireles and Pape that broach racial exclusion. Meireles' *Inserções em circuitos antropológicos: Black Pente [Insertions into Anthropological Circuits: Black Comb]* 1971–73 speaks explicitly to the politics of exclusion in Brazil, and is introduced thus:

A project for the production and distribution of combs for blacks at cost price. In the 'Insertions into Ideological Circuits' series, the essential fact is the observation of the existence of the circuit(s), and verbal insertion constitutes an interference in this circulatory flow; that is, it suggests an act of ideological sabotage against the established circuit. As for the 'Insertions into Anthropological Circuits' ('Black Comb' and 'Token'), the concept of 'insertion' is of greater consequence than that of the circuit: the purpose of the confection of the objects, elaborated analogously with those belonging to the institutional circuit, is to induce a habit and, from that point on, the possibility of characterizing a new behaviour. In the case of 'Black Pente' specifically, the project would affirm an ethnicity.¹¹

Black Pente represents a good-humoured attack upon the politics of devaluation of black hairstyles, bodies and cultures that is visible in society on a daily basis, participating in an appreciation of blackness and attacking social restrictions. Recently, certain artistic actions have engaged in this struggle by means of the insertion of ludic and good-humoured messages into urban circuits and practices, tackling more general issues of the Afro-Brazilian social condition. São Paulo's Frente 3 de Fevereiro [February 3rd Front] question the racism entrenched in Brazilian society with their *Ação Bandeiras* [Flag Action] 2006, carried out in soccer stadiums. This collective incite crowds into action, by leading them to unfurl and read huge flags that salute the visibility and reach of Afro-Brazilian identity with emphatic slogans such as 'Brazil negro salve' ['Hail Black Brazil'], 'Onde estão os negros?' ['Where are the Blacks?'], and 'Zumbi somos nós' ['We are Zumbi'].¹²

In her parodic and subtly incisive *Caixa Brasil* [Brazil Box] 1968, Pape uses irony to criticise the institution of art and the myth according to which the Brazilian nation was built harmoniously by the Portuguese, indigenous peoples and Africans. Representing the ethnicities by means of locks of blond, brown and black hair, she attacks the hierarchy of races represented by Brazilian society's 'appreciation' of straight, fine, light hair over dark, thick, curly hair, along with museological practices such as fetishism, accommodation, enclosure, control and voyeurism.

Along this critical/poetic path, another way into the Afro-Brazilian universe involves the use of ethnically accented materials with more or less circumscribed cultural references. In *Divisor 2* [Divider 2] 2001, made of three large glass boxes that contain salt, water and palm oil, Ayrson Heráclito goes beyond the literalness of those materials, exploring metaphorical dimensions based on their juxtaposition: water and salt are indivisible in the sea; palm oil is made from palm tree nuts, and the palm tree (*Elaeis guineensis*) possesses multiple meanings in Afro-Brazilian religions, while the oil of its nuts can represent human blood. The work therefore presents a concatenation of materials that refers to the Atlantic Ocean as a fulcrum for social processes based on the forced transportation of Africans to be enslaved in Brazil, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Remaining isolated, in layers, in a process of partial and conflicting interaction, these materials allude to the impossibility of considering the Atlantic without taking into account the stalemates of the [diaspora](#) and its consequences – the bloodless sea that was the means to so

much bloodshed. Thus, they symbolise complex connections and disjunctions of persons, social groups, religions and cultures between Africa and Brazil.

Nevertheless, one might question to what degree works that focus on Afro-Brazilian themes constitute themselves as artistic activism. To be sure, such works are linked to the Brazilian present and contribute to the greater visibility of issues around blackness in Brazilian society, one result of which has been the affirmative public policies for black Brazilians which have increased in recent years. The question is not merely one of measuring whether or not art can act effectively to transform the social field beyond its own domain; it is also a matter of perceiving how political action may currently be revitalised through art.

ART + RELIGION + POLITICS +

In most artistic dialogues with Afro-Brazilian themes, religion and politics are mixed together with other matters, whether artistic or belonging to other domains, times and places, for African and Afro-Brazilian references are rarely exclusive. The work of Rosana Paulino is an example of this range of expression. Living in São Paulo, she has played a pioneering role in the recent intensification of these dialogues, with an original outlook that spans the individual and the collective, drawn from her experience as a black artist. Her work makes use of printed materials and manufactured objects and alludes to fetishes and sortilege (divination or prophesy) that may be linked – albeit not exclusively – to Afro-Brazilian religions. Consisting of images of her ancestors printed onto grigris (African charms, fetishes or amulets), *Parede de memória* [*Memory Wall*] 1994 is about beliefs, memory, and the transmission of knowledge and practices from generation to generation that makes possible cultural survivals within adverse contexts. In other works – which refer explicitly to politics rather than to religion – she alludes to everyday prohibitions imposed upon black women, dealing with ancient and current social constraints, as well as to limitations to her activities and expression as a black artist and woman.

Situations of micro- and macro-power are also addressed (usually with a caustic humour that is light-years away from ‘political correctness’) in the interventions of Alexandre Vogler, who approaches the universe of religions in Brazil with a satirical perspective. In *Tridente de Nova Iguaçu* [*Nova Iguaçu Trident*] 2006, he openly and provocatively inserts himself into an ongoing religious war in a region densely populated by *terreiros* and other places of worship. With critical irony, he exploits the demonising of Exu by traditional Christian religions in order to propose the [*orixá*](#) as a patron of tactical media; he does so by whitewashing a trident onto a hillside in the Vulcão mountain range, behind and above the Mirante do Cruzeiro (the name refers to the cross at the summit, a powerful religious and cultural symbol that dominates the region’s landscape). Thus, he exploits the ambiguity of the sign that alludes to Neptune’s mythological sceptre and to the trident of certain Afro-Brazilian Exus, defying religious intolerance as well as the political populism that attacked work and artist, destroying the former and threatening to sue the latter.

The dialogue between art and Afro-Brazilian culture has not always been tranquil. Just as the Afro-Brazilian social condition continues in large part to be an unequal and unjust one, the ways in which it is depicted often result in myth, stigma or caricature. The challenge, which is met by artists with varying degrees of success, is the attempt to attain the critical/poetic status of art in response to Afro-Brazilian culture, without producing religious art, or artistic propaganda, although occasionally establishing itself as a religiously and/or politically engaged realisation – a dynamic and risk that has affected critics and historians alike, subject as they are to condescendence and ingenuousness in the name of faith or the black cause. Nevertheless, the dialogues between art and Afro-Brazilian culture constitute a branch of contemporary art production in Brazil which art criticism and history cannot avoid considering.

AFRICA HERE, THERE AND BEYOND

The recurrence of religion comes as no surprise, for it is above all by the religious (whether Africans, Afro-Brazilians or otherwise) that Africa has been internalised and experienced in Brazil throughout the *terreiros* – omnipresent spaces for the preservation of African cultural values. Mestre Didi's work is the finest example of the survival of African techniques, symbols and ideologies in spite of spatial and temporal gaps. Agnaldo Manoel dos Santos represents another exceptional instance of continuity in spite of rupture. In 1966, his prize-winning work was deemed a symbol of the 'universality of Africanism, preserved through the aesthetic expression of new cultures' at the first edition of the World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar, Senegal.¹³

Within this process, direct contacts with Africa have been sporadic. In their journeys to that continent and in works that exist on the borderline between art and visual [ethnography](#), Carybé and, above all, Verger emphasised cultural continuities on both sides of the Atlantic, the dissemination of which has had a powerful impact upon religious communities. Whereas their output generated perceptions of an African whole based on its parts, the recent work of Viga Gordilho is based on specific survivals between the African and Brazilian socio-cultural contexts, related to affirmative processes by ethnic groups in Brazil. As much a result of the scarcity of direct contact with Africa as of Africa's diffuse and pervasive presence in Brazil – never as widely considered as it could or even should be – Africa in Brazil, one might conclude, is incomplete: it is a future.

TRANSLATION BY
STEVE BERG

¹ By way of introducing his work, Milton Machado says: 'In ancient times these two portions of land – Africa and Brazil – were connected. They were parts of the Pangeas, the unified continent which was split by cataclysms that occurred in the Cambrian Period. London is where I mind the gap'. However, he was not the first – and will certainly not be the last – to have noted connections and gaps between Brazil and Africa from abroad. To be sure, these artistic connections are rarely made directly, having often been established from Europe and from the United States.

² Translator's note: *acarajé* is a dish made from peeled black-eyed peas formed into balls and then deep-fried in *dendê* (palm oil). It is found in Nigerian and Brazilian cuisine. It is traditionally encountered in Brazil's northeastern state of Bahia, especially in the city of Salvador, often as street food. The *acarajé* are served split in half and then stuffed with spicy pastes made from shrimp, cashews, palm oil and other ingredients.

³ Tarsila painted *The Negress [A Negra]* in Paris, where she discovered [Negrophilia](#) and remembered the blacks who lived on the coffee plantation where she had been raised. She was motivated and accompanied by Blaise Cendrars with whom she (along with other artists and writers) undertook trips to Rio de Janeiro and to Minas Gerais in which they explored areas, images and practices of popular culture, the affectively distant observation of which generated her somewhat ethnographic canvases of the 1920s.

⁴ See Yvonne Maggie, *Guerra de orixá*, Rio de Janeiro, Jorge Zahar Editor, 2001.

⁵ Editor's note: [macumba](#) is a word of African (Bantu) origin used in Brazil to refer to rituals or religions of African origin. It often has pejorative connotations referring to superstition, witchcraft and luck-related rituals and beliefs; but when used by practitioners of these religions, it is not necessarily viewed as having negative implications.

⁶ In the Yoruba tradition [orishas](#) ([orixá](#) in Brazil) are spiritual manifestations of a supreme divinity. In the syncretic religions of African origin (such as [Candomblé](#) and [Santeria](#)) dedication to [Orishas](#) has been conflated with the Catholic veneration of sainthood; individual [Orishas](#) thus retain characteristics of their Catholic counterparts.

⁷ Translator's note: the term is a neologism. *Instauração* (meaning literally 'to set up') is the name Antonio Mourão, better known as Tunga, has given to a recurrent strategy used in his work, which consists of incorporating people from outside the art world into the work as protagonists of a sort of performance, following a ritual with objects and materials suggested by the artist; the remains of the performance make up an installation that is kept on display. The whole formed by performance + process + installation 'sets up' a world.

⁸ See Reginaldo Prandi, 'Hipertrofia ritual das religiões afro-brasileiras', *Novos Estudos* CEBRAP, no. 56, 2000, pp. 77–88.

⁹ Editor's note: born in 1914, Nascimento was a prominent leader of Brazil's black movement. He was exiled by the military dictatorship in 1968 and subsequently became very active in the international *Pan-African Movement*. He returned to Brazil in 1983.

¹⁰ Translator's note: the figure of the *preto velho* is linked to Saint Anthony and/or Saint Benedict and represents the spirits of old slaves who died in captivity. These are very peaceful and kind spirits who possess great wisdom about suffering, compassion, forgiveness and hope.

¹¹ Cildo Meireles, *Cildo Meireles*, Rio de Janeiro, Funarte, 1981.

¹² Editor's note: Zumbi dos Palmares (1655–95), who became a national hero, was the last leader of the *Quilombo dos Palmares*, a [maroon](#) (fugitive slave) republic in Alagoas. He became commander-in-chief during its defence against the Portuguese and the subsequent ongoing rebellion, but was captured and executed on 20 November – celebrated in Brazil as a day of black consciousness.

¹³ See Clarival do Prado Valladares, 'África Nova: a busca do universal', *Jornal do Brasil*.