

# André Vargas: Black Conceptualism

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Patakori, writes André Vargas about a machete. The word refers to the gesture of cutting off the heads of the enemies, as in a passage from the stories of Ogum, the Orisha that his work reveres. With the gesture, and, above all, with the word, it is invoked the one who, when the world was created, carved a path in the dense forest with two machetes, allowing the arrival of the other Orishas.

Creating phrases and wordplays seems to be a central nod in the artist's work. In a painting, André Vargas pays homage to the same Orisha with the phrase "Ogum brings everything to iron and fire" (playing with the Brazilian popular expression "levar a ferro e fogo", meaning taking everything too seriously, or to the extreme), highlighting Ogum's character as the god of iron, of agricultural tools, and his impetuous and choleric personality. Here, one of the ways of understanding the artist's works can be seen: following the logic of the sentences, the syntax game, one approaches, at the same time, the outcomes of these works, since the sentences themselves open up in metaphors, palindromes, building potent apparitions. The artist creates images, chooses the colors red and blue, Ogum's colors in Umbanda and Candomblé (Afro-Brazilian cults), respectively, to compose the painting.

Poetry, in the artist's trajectory, has two biases. Coming from a family of musicians, André acknowledges his need to show artistic competence, since his siblings, Julia and Ivo Vargas, sing and play. His mother was a choir conductor, his father, a musician and composer, his grandparents, saxophonists and trumpeters, one of them performing with Orquestra Tabajara and playing with great artists like Sara Vaughan and Wilson Simonal. In this context, André decides to embark on poetry. On the other hand, with experience in mediating exhibitions, working directly with different museum audiences, André Vargas starts to create games, interaction devices in which quibbles already appear, such

as "benzadez" (wordplay with the expression "Benzadeus" - "God Bless" - and the word "dez" - "ten"): two decks, in which one finds the perrengues (problems) of the body and the herbs that might cure them. When a perrengue is placed on the table, the participant needs to fight it with a healing herb. André has always been dedicated to enchantments and mandingas (spells).

Fogo encruzado (Crossed fire), the artist's first solo exhibition, brings together part of his recent production, with mostly new works. Thus, André Vargas exercises an approximate observation of popular cults and invocations, while appropriating banal elements such as brown paper, banners, cabinets. His works are also prayers: "Oh Santa Bárbara, thou who are stronger than the towers of fortresses and the thunder's violence", writes the artist at the edges of a painting in which a flame is represented by the plant "sword of Santa Bárbara/lansã".

The artist devotes himself to thinking about the role of fire both in the cults of Exu and Xangô, as well as in the incorporation of elements of revolt and violence against a colonial past that is renewed every day. In *Retribuindo a Gentileza* (Paying Back Kindness), André repeats the word "flame", honoring the Prophet Gentileza, maintaining the typography of the writings of the poet who roamed the streets of Rio de Janeiro preaching love as a weapon and an antidote against the ills of the world. Referring more directly to Xangô, Vargas writes "Aquele que come brasa" ("The one who eats embers"), in a work composed of seven strings of red and white beads. Eating embers is one of the characteristics of the Orisha who came into the world with the mission of directing the thunders and who keeps the secret of swallowing embers and releasing flames through his mouth, destroying evils and enemies. On the other hand, in *Coquetel Marafo* (Marafo Cocktail), André uses common spirit bottles, placing tissues at the bottlenecks, as we

see in so-called Molotov cocktails, used in street demonstrations, which Brazil has experienced particularly since 2013. We also see references to the various names of Exu, in which the word “fire” takes part. The artist then removes the word, leaving only the complement of the names, such as Pomba (gira - turn) of fire and Exu Pinga (fogo - fire).

This method of dealing with the syntax of sentences with Afro-religious origins places the artist in line with what Lélia Gonzalez called “Pretoquês” (alliteration of “Black Portuguese”, something as “Blackguese”). In other words, it is a way of approaching the academic form of the Portuguese language accepting what would supposedly be seen as an error, such as the use of R instead of L, “framengo” (instead of “flamengo”), “pobrema” (instead of “problema”). Gonzalez conceives such appropriations as a political stance. And, here, we are reminded of the ancestral song of Clementina de Jesus, singing *Yaô*, by Pixinguinha, “Aqui có no terreiro/ Pelú adié” (lyrics that mix Portuguese and Yoruba terms), the Brazilian language and its Bantu and Yoruba incorporations. African words such as “abadá (tunic), banzo (homesickness), caçamba (contanier), cachaça (moonshine)”, as Margarida Petter<sup>1</sup> informs us, are now widely understood, while others have more informal uses, such as *cafofo* (currently meaning a modest dwelling) and *muquifo* (a dirty, chaotic room). In another work, André Vargas theorizes about the origins of *ocê* (the Brazilian word for “you”): “Vossa mercê”, “Vosmecê”, “Vancê”, “Você/you are a black invention”, stirring up even more the presence of the “pretoquês” in our language.

André Vargas comes from a family of relatives who were enslaved in a coffee and cotton plantation, Fazenda dos Saldanha, in Chiador, Minas Gerais. However, resisting the colonial logic, the following generations of the family have bought their own lands. Having his ancestry as a driving force, the artist’s work is full of reverence for the spirits and Pretos Velhos (Black Old Men, spiritual entities in Umbanda), his ancestors, vibrating in recoded altars and small chapels, where we read “Jesus is Preto Velho”, which puts us in line with the thesis that, being born close to Africa, Jesus could only be black, a fact that was confirmed in scientific reconstructions of his face, which are

at odds with the Aryan recreations produced in Hollywood. Floriano, Nazário, Carolina, Mariana, Adelaide are some of André Vargas’ ancestors to whom we pay our respects, and we ask permission to quote them here.

As a kind of black conceptualism, André Vargas plays with the logic of revenge when the subject is directed to the word “engenho” (the mills where sugar was produced during the colonial period), in what Jota Mombasa calls the redistribution of violence. André researches names of neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro in which the word “engenho” remained, and constructs sentences of revolt and retaliation against the atrocities perpetrated during the slavery years. In everything, a single idea, to set them on fire: “Engenho de Dentro will burn through the night”, “Fire walks through Engenho da Rainha”, “My fire will be cruel in Engenho de São Miguel”.

In a country where 56% of the population is black, the lingua franca, used in the terreiros (where the rituals of Afro-Brazilian cults are celebrated), in the slang, in the suburbs, should be called official and be included in dictionaries. André Vargas’ work is dedicated to this thinking of tautology in a black conception, in which, from the coldness of European philosophical games, we can “sprout” and expand the game, spreading the fire beyond, until it reaches many, echoing the history of our quilombos (communities of formerly enslaved during the colonial period, some of which still exist today). “Only Exu can defend me”.

<sup>1</sup>Petter, Margarida. *Línguas africanas no Brasil: vitalidade e invisibilidade*. In: Carmo, Laura e Stolzelima, Ivana. *História social da língua nacional 2: diáspora africana*. Rio de Janeiro: Nau editora, 2014, p. 26.