

VERMELHO

NO FIM DA  
MADRUGADA

CURADORIA DE  
LISETTE LAGNADO

*From brooding too long on the Congo I have become a  
Congo...<sup>1</sup>  
Aimé Césaire*

1 Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Translated by Clayton Eshleman & Annette Smith.

“At the end of daybreak” is taken from a verse in the *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, the first work by Martinican writer Aimé Césaire (1913-2008). This poem went through several editions between its beginning in 1935 and its 1956 definitive version and was soon acclaimed for its monumental lyricism. The verse inspired the curatorship of the exhibition, whose aim was to transpose to the Brazilian context the poetic subjectivity of a voice from the generation that founded the Negritude movement in the Antilles.

Following such thinkers as Lélia Gonzalez, the need to provide new narratives to fight “racism and sexism in Brazilian culture” has been increasingly mentioned. She would, however, question the use of the colonizer’s language herself. Thus, within a conceptual arc that at first only meant to address the use of photography as an instrument of domination, the exhibition began to examine all types of documentation. But how can we approach national amnesia if archives and museums store the heritage of looted cultures, when they are not actually consumed by fires?

For this exhibition, the disruption of historiographical knowledge and the expansion of personal albums determined the strategies that feed the ongoing counter-colonial debate. Through the “daybreak” leitmotif that structures Césaire’s poem, it was possible to unite artists from different origins and practices – and, not least, to make bold associations that might foster the flourishing of multiple species. “My people”, says Carmézia Emiliano, a Macuxi artist whose people have always known that nature has inherent rights. It is the title of a painting, in which more than two-thirds of the canvas is filled by a flutter of butterflies bursting from the earth’s humus and flying over the narrow strip of a village. The question remains: what can we learn from her notion of “people”, which embraces living beings and biomes?

The end of daybreak is about time awareness, but also a figure of speech. As a metaphor, it evokes whatever comes after collusions under cover of

2 Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Translated by Clayton Eshleman & Annette Smith.

darkness, and it embraces waves of indignation and anger. Among countless examples of manipulation and intrigue, one can mention the burning of the archives on slavery, under the responsibility of Minister of Finance Ruy Barbosa, on May 13, 1891. *I nourished the winds, I unlaced the monsters*<sup>2</sup> – persistent denunciations by social movement activists are finally making Brazil confront institutions founded upon structural racism.

In this work of resignification, Pero Vaz de Caminha's letter to His Highness The King of Portugal, in which he reported having "found" an expanse of inhabited land in 1500, becomes itself a record of extractivism and the gold rush in Brazil. The absence of iconographic documents on the invasion hence became Rosângela Rennó's pretext for inventing the dialogues of her 2000 film *Vera Cruz*. According to the artist, the "old, scratched and worn-out image on the film" reinforces the gap between photographic documentation and fiction.

Throughout the exhibition, one may realize the way the absence of images and information favored the attribution of incomplete citizenship – take for example the forced anonymity in the data sheets of the plaster collection stored at El Museo Canario de Antropología (Las Palmas, Canary Islands). What would be the common ground of a Hindustan woman, a Rochet Island man and a Zanguebar boy? They appear to be "remarkable beings" just because they do not belong to whiteness. To create this 2019 series, Rennó uncovers the information gaps in one of the largest archaeological collections in the region. The artist takes busts meant to represent "different races of the world" and responds to the violence of "nameless" bodies by printing them on marble-textured paper, like a "skin" that bestows upon them the barest semblance of the grave, hence a right to memory (a "monument").

A more radical methodology, however, is found in the composition of the project that bears the ironic "Universal Archive" title: the absence of a figure makes each entry in this invented inventory function as an image. *Almirante Negro* [Black Admiral], for example, describes the episode

3 On November 22, 1910, João Cândido Felisberto led a naval mutiny against the inhumane treatment of Afro-Brazilian sailors, who were frequently whipped on the orders of white officers despite the practice's ban in most other countries and the rest of Brazil. (Translator's note)

of a publisher who mistakenly replaced João Cândido's portrait with the face of another Black sailor and compounded his error alleging "doubts about the true image [...]". The image-text is therefore designed to question what is known about the hero who led the Revolt of the Lash<sup>3</sup>, as much as about any other Black body.

The scarcity of catalog sources in colonial museums, mainly on the origins of their heritage, would deserve a separate chapter. In Brazil, the negligence of public authorities has been endemic. Rennó made two albums in 2009 and 2013 to draw attention to unresolved files. She reproduced on the first one the back of the valuable photographs stolen from the Iconography Division of the National Library Foundation (FBN) and on the second one pages from the photographic albums left after the theft at the General Archive of the City of Rio de Janeiro (AGCRJ). The first album, named after the police investigation report, brings up the presence of a crime, but also absence as the essence of the photographic act; the second album's title is the system created by Augusto Malta and his children to organize photographic documentation. From a Platonic perspective, the image of the album pages corresponds to a mere projection of the mind.

Archives and documents on coloniality must have their categories reconfigured if we want to surmise hypotheses and produce reversals of meaning. Artist and educator bruno o., an active member of Acervo Bajubá, a "project recording memories of Brazilian LGBT+ communities", chose to highlight the story of Marcos Puga, "a transvestite and plant thief". The work on display is part of an ongoing investigation on cataloging, documentation and archive reorganization practices. Bruno considers other types of testimonies, recognition and activation of memories, places and bodies involved in gathering situated knowledge. He explains that "Marcos Puga's case questions the reproduction of the epistemicide colonial operations responsible for the indexation of life within monolithic orders". What was it like, under the Brazilian civilian-military dictatorship, to tell the story of a person whose only remains are material fragments... and rumors?

In his search for information, Bruno O. located a niece of Marcos Puga's, who defended him when he was illegally arrested and tortured in 2001 after an anonymous tip. She says Marcos had been a baby left on her grandmother's doorstep. A kind and beloved child, he found family care and, in turn, cared for his adoptive aunts and grandparents. His niece does not remember much about the fern thefts; she thinks it is a lie. She says that she knew he performed in a nightclub, but never saw anything, not even a wig; he probably left everything somewhere else. She only knows that he shaved his body. Marcos disappeared in 2002, and she was contacted years later by a São Bernardo do Campo police team who had found human remains they supposed were his – since he had been adopted, no identification was possible.

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There is no denying that images can mobilize public opinion and awaken it from torpor, indifference or ignorance. In the drawn-out demarcation process of the Yanomami Indigenous Land, the release of Claudia Andujar and Carlo Zacquini's photographs played a fundamental role in raising awareness. Despite this historic achievement, however, ongoing invasion waves by miners and businessmen in search of gold and cassiterite, with the direct or indirect support of the State and the Armed Forces, keep causing social and environmental disasters due to contamination by mercury and other pollutants. In the Vermelho exhibition, we decided not to expose the victims and to highlight the seductive aesthetics of imperialism. The language of the gold rush assimilates typical codes of touristic ads, with their (western movie!) chromatic scales and typography filled with subliminal messages. While Andujar's *Metais Ltda.* [Metals LLC] (1989) assembles a set of travel agency posters of Amazon charter flights, the scenes recorded by Zacquini are self-explanatory: in the heart of the Indigenous territory, you can see a tent belonging to the gold mining company and the helicopter runway. A photographer who has been a Consolata missionary since 1957 and moved to Boa Vista in 1965, he reveals that "the company owner

was elected and re-elected a federal representative for the Roraima state and was known as the ‘man with the golden gun’”. This documentation work was conducted during a trip of the Action for Citizenship, at the invitation of Senator Severo Gomes, to investigate crimes against human rights on the Yanomami Indigenous Land. Its truthfulness constitutes irrefutable evidence of the ongoing genocides, whose national and international repercussions are meant to reverse or, at least, control situations of abuse.

*That being so, how can artistic language abolish the rule of the lords?*

Pastor Ventura Profana’s research focused on the methodology of neo-Pentecostal churches. She was educated in Baptist temples and claims to be a prophetess “of the abundance of Black, Indigenous and transvestite life”. Composed after the liturgy of a true hymn to life (to “eternal life”, no less), the music video for the song *Eu não vou morrer* [I am not going to die] (2020) evades the Lord to honor the female Orixás (Yabás). Profana’s epiphanic release allows a vertiginous plunge into what has been the annihilation of ancestries, intelligences and utopias. One listens to a psalm praising people finally free from colonial policies of extermination, and one exults with the path from the furnace to the living waters in *Calunga, da Cruz à Encruzilhada* [Calunga, from the Cross to the Crossroads]. This work evokes intergenerational dreams and visions through a fabulous dialogue with matter (who does not want to learn how to fly?), ushering in the time of the Black trans women inside the white cube of the art “cathedral”.

Profana explains in several statements that this Lord transcends religious order and must be projected onto other patriarchal figures (the landowner, the gun advocate, the patron saint...). It is her pastoral mission to invest the insurrectional fury of peripheral bodies attacked by extractive capital against all the explicit and implicit patriarchy of a Brazilian state conceived through its enslavement history. The iron sculpture *Sentinela avançada, guarda imortal* [Advanced Sentinel, Immortal Guard] (2020) heralds the stormy encounter between the warrior lansã, materialized in the Senhor do Bonfim red

satin ribbons, and the colonial poison that drips from the premises of Christianity — *beat it, evil grigri, you bedbug of a petty monk*.<sup>4</sup>

4 Aimé Césaire. *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Translated by Clayton Eshleman & Annette Smith.

In the same room as Andujar, Zacquini and Profana, *Cultivo* [Tillage] and *Bancada* [Caucus] (2021), two photographs from the “Cotidiano” [Daily] series by militant transsexual artist and performer Vulcanica Pokaropa, expands the above agenda with the ongoing fight against the landowners’ congressional faction, which protects agricultural companies known for their deforestation and invasion of protected areas.

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The modern myth of a universal history spread by Europe appears in Clara Ianni’s *Segunda Natureza* [Second Nature] (2023), filmed inside the Maastricht Lutheran Church (Netherlands). The artist addresses the notion of capital accumulation (seeds, fibers, minerals...), uniting the themes of land exploitation and the exploitation of human labor. The result of the Christianized world, colonial extraction based its expansion on several separations. The split between (man’s) body and spirit for greater control over Nature stems from Western modernity. The Protestant principle *Soli Deo gloria* (“Glory to God alone”), by which not even life has meaning outside this order, defines other divisions: between the clergy and common people, and between true devotion and false beliefs. Yet, although the film expresses the yearning for the landscape outside the Church’s windows, it is at least an allusion to possibilities of regeneration through the qualities of interdependence and camaraderie.

Artist Eustáquio Neves’s *Sete* [Seven] (2023) lends a new breadth to the Catholic religion. We have before us six photographic enlargements (photographic emulsion on cotton paper and oil painting) along with a digital copy from an original file of the author’s first communion, now covered in countless layers of pigments and chemicals. From the depths of these nebulous surfaces, a Black boy draws our attention, wearing a white short-sleeved shirt, dark shorts, ankle socks and black polished moccasins. Despite documenting an event, the image hides several other worlds. The result offers

a diagnosis of the relations of power and domination that have always affected Afro-Brazilian citizenship. Several hands skillfully adjusted this small body to prepare it for the sacrament of the Eucharist and for the paper image to be proudly distributed among the maternal uncles. Placing the ethical status of photography under suspicion, Neves blurs his own portrait to display a torn childhood: the child's left hand holds an element of the imposed culture; his right hand, the instrument of his ancestral resistance.

Interestingly, popular memory holds ancestral knowledge and war strategy to be equivalent. After a trip to Angola in 2018, Ani Ganzala has researched the influence of botany on the Black Diaspora. Only an initiated look can apprehend the diversity of vegetation and identify the physical and spiritual healing possibilities of each species. Ganzala was certainly not indifferent to the story of the beatings inflicted by local resistance forces on Portuguese sailors with nettle-stalks. Even though no documentary evidence has been found on freed slave Maria Filipa's, her actions during Bahia's independence process live in the Itaparica islanders' imagination. In this critical dimension of historically marginalized bodies, the Black feminism of artist-activists like Ganzala joins a growing chorus, along with studies aimed at recognizing Bahia's legacy in the formation of contemporary Brazil.

5 Untranslatable words. The trick is to join parts of different words to produce a recognizable, albeit non-existent expression. "Sujeitupi", for example, joins "sujeito" (subject) to "tupi" (a Brazilian tribe). (Translator's note)

It is important to say that for Aimé Césaire *négritude*, a term that first appeared in the magazine *L'Étudiant noir* [The Black Student] in 1934, is a concept that is simultaneously literary and political. By reappropriating a racist term from the dominant colonizing language, he intends to promote Africa and its culture. A similar fate runs through the series of small black and red canvases on which André Vargas invents "his" Africanizations of the Brazilian Portuguese language. Mirroring Lélia Gonzalez's *pretuguês* ["Blacktuguese"], it is a somewhat surrealistic and random play on words that seeks to trace approximations through sounds: "*fomnologia*", "*preticado*", "*ilêitura*", "*caciqnificado*", "*perónimo*", "*sujeitupi*", "*pluhaux*"<sup>5</sup>. Like the image-filled Creole language, this speech



emerges from the slave ship's hold to honor the linguistic branches that encompassed more than 600 languages forcefully removed from the African continent.

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6 *Quilombo* is a term of African origin to designate a community of freed or runaway slaves, or their descendants. It is a territory of resistance and its dwellers are called *quilombolas*. (Translator's note)

"The end of daybreak" guides its sympathizers towards the birth of a day meant to be unique, not just any day. Preceding dawn, this space-time is simultaneously the middle and the beginning, night and day, a border where bodies cross, whether to fight or also to dance and become a crowd. Resistance to the plantations and their continuity in private property spanned the centuries asserting its *quilombola*<sup>6</sup> wisdom – which is the origin of the ritualization of certain dates.

An artist engaged in the formal investigation of sculpture, Rebeca Carapiá has shown rare caution among the artists of her generation, in her way of bypassing sacred contents of black spirituality and eluding religious figuration. For this exhibition, she revisited a photographic essay she produced in 2018, which could not be developed without prior problematization: given an evident folkloric bias, how could she overcome the exotic effect inherent to the representation of a tradition?

7 Just to mention two recent installations, see *Sumidouro - Wata Go Lef Stone [Da perpetuidade do àkàrà através dos oceanos]* e *Sumidouro n.2 - Diáspora Fantasma*, by Diego Araujá and Laís Machado, and *Floresta de Infinitos*, by Ayrson Heráclito and Tiganá Santana.

*Quem tem medo de assombração? (As Caretas do Mingau)* [Who's afraid of hauntings? (Mingau's grimaces)] is inspired by the women's procession that fills the streets of Saubara, in the Bahia Reconcavo, and begins every year in the early morning of July 2 to celebrate the struggles of 1822-23. Carapiá has decided to confront the genre of ethnographic documentation by proposing an immersive experience. She draws our attention to the recurrence of what we could call a "theatre of apparitions".<sup>7</sup> These are artistic installations that invoke (and awaken!) personalities, "dead people who are not gone forever" (*Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung*). As immaterial as it is enchanted, the ghost returns to claim his right to memory, the imaginary fold that joins being and non-being. In other words: remembering the expulsion of the Portuguese colonizer means not letting the dead die.

André Vargas's masks complement this dissident perspective on the place of fear in the social imagination of whiteness. *At the end of daybreak, the*

8 Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*.

9 A fanciful disguise, typical of the suburbs during Carnival. (Translator's note)

*morne forgotten, forgetting to erupt.*<sup>8</sup> In *O Terror da Sul* [The South Terror] (2018-19), the artist refers to the introjection of racism and its relationship with social classes, more specifically the division of Rio's cultural scene that separates the populous suburbs in the Baixada Fluminense neighborhoods from the so-called "Zona Sul" (the Southern District). His masks address the costumes used in the Clovis tradition (from the English word "clown"), whose groups are made up of masked men roaming the streets dressed as "*bate-bola*".<sup>9</sup> As in the "Caretas" (Grimaces) demonstration, joy and terror characterize customs in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro. Identity issues concern the preservation of traditional practices, especially in communities based on oral transmission. One should bear in mind that the Register of Cultural Assets of Intangible Nature was only created in 2000 by a decree from the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute (Iphan).

The Rio de Janeiro samba institutions (the Cacique de Ramos carnival group is always mentioned) are one of the assets in the Iphan collection. Yet beyond its ethnographic interest, one should pay attention to forms of recording bodies that relinquish the division of the Christian world and reaffirm their plenitude by parading in the urban public space.

Alair Gomes's *Carnival* photo essay (1967-68) is part of the artist's thematic interest that continued throughout the following decade. Now, in this set of images, filled with Pasolinian reminiscences, the revelers do not belong to the aesthetic universe of the "*bate-bolas*". Here, it is important to highlight a sequential (almost cinematic) quality based on the observation of body language, raised arms or twisted breasts, with a strong pagan connotation, a kind of celebration of a harvest festival. Unlike the ethnographic look, participants and observers are mingled.

The photographs are arranged on a horizontal plane, a device that counters the reverence for the religious icon on the wall. A top to bottom look at the series reminds us of a material that might be in the editing process and reconnects Gomes with mass communication, i.e. the printmaking medium. For André Pitol, one of the main scholars of

Alair Gomes' relationship with the American scene, the artist's photographic interventions in the graphic field (news-papers, magazines, posters, etc.) still lack contextualization, and were eclipsed by a fixation of critical essayists on images with more clearly homoerotic content.

While playful bodies punctuate several works in the exhibition, it is in Vulcanica Pokaropa's *Mambembes* [Carnies] series (2022), that their protagonism takes on an interpretation inseparable from the darkness of dawn. A transvestite and circus artist for Cia Fundo Mundo, Pokaropa was raised and received her Confirmation upstate São Paulo, a region dominated by monoculture (soy and eucalyptus) and agribusiness. The word "*mambembe*" refers to an artistic expression that plays with its derogatory connotation ("inferior", "poorly done"). These records intend to boost the precarious visibility of the LGBTQIAP+ population in the circus world, and certainly also in theater and performance.

Next comes Sala Antonio, at Vermelho, where Yhuri Cruz presents his short film *O Túmulo da Terra* [The Tomb of the Earth] (2021). Imbued with the dark and unsettling rhythm of a nightmare, the film is entirely shot in black and white and takes us to a tropical landscape where we follow the journey of a man haunted by his subjectivity. As is usual in expressionist language, the work conveys a mix of anguish and dread. What could seem like a fantastic setting is actually a place that houses the ruins of a sugar mill from Imperial Brazil, with the Laundry of the enslaved. From this perspective, it is interesting to see how the artist subverts the European canon into Afrofuturism through an identity-based dramaturgy involving Black protagonists. The fear of death haunts the *Flash do Espírito* [Flash of the Spirit] granite sculptures, inspired by Robert Farris Thompson's book. Engraved on tombstones, the dominant image is the drawing of the smile filled with white teeth, which is also a mask and a grimace that return a fraction of the afterlife... made motionless by the photographic act.

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Last but not least, Vermelho's façade features a counter façade designed by Tiago Guimarães. Definitely the longest wall expanse in the gallery, the front of the building incorporates six wooden batten structures that present its backside. An architectural gesture of almost simple assertiveness: maintaining that there is no neutrality, even in the design of the container, the habitat or the combat tank; everything has its reverse and its bottom. Every hidden version a counter version. Inversion, contravention and vice versa. At the police station, Marcos Puga is still reported missing; at Vermelho, his remembrance involves taking care of some stolen ferns (and some gossip, as we learned!). Here's to another wish of the exhibition: to fabulate together.

VERMELHO

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