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ARTFORUM

April 2009

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Cildo Meireles



IT IS NOT DIFFICULT to like Cildo Meireles's work. It is, as he has said he wishes it to be, "instantly seductive"—intelligent as well as sensual, playful yet unsettling. And thanks to an excellent installation, this exhibition of the Brazilian artist's work (organized by Guy Brett and Vicente Todolí) even managed to breathe life into Tate Modern's often forlorn galleries, suddenly infusing them with a new, pulsating energy. A remarkable example of Meireles's mathematics of

seduction is the dramatically lit *Mission/Missions (How to Build Cathedrals)*, 1987, which consists of two thousand bones hanging from the ceiling and connected by a thin column of eight hundred communion wafers to a shimmering carpet of coins. Referring to the Jesuit missions to convert indigenous tribes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the work neatly encapsulates Latin America's long and painful colonial history in one elegant formula.

Meireles's work certainly supports the general argument that Brazilian Conceptual artists have tended to adopt a more sensual and accessible vocabulary of forms than their British and North American counterparts, even while pursuing a more politicized practice. Yet their art is of course political in many different ways, and Meireles's approach is distinct from (if clearly indebted to) the politics of self-discovery and liberation embodied by the 1960s sensory experiments of Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. The early series "Physical Art" and "Geographical Mutations," both 1969, on view here, already mark Meireles's shift away from immediate experience. In these works, the concrete reality of the Brazilian landscape is overlaid with such abstractions as boundaries and displacements, as he extended a rope along the coastline of Rio de Janeiro, or dug up earth from each side of the border between the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

One of the most-often-cited examples of the role of politics in late-'60s and '70s Latin American art is Meireles's 1970 series "Insertions into Ideological Circuits." Conceived as a clandestine tactic to bypass officially controlled modes of communication, the "Insertions" that intervened within existing circuits of distribution by stamping subversive messages—

such as YANKEES GO HOME!—on banknotes or printing them onto recyclable Coca-Cola bottles. When lined up on a plinth, as in this exhibition, however, these bottles seem to regain their status as commodities to the detriment of their original function. (In fact, even at the time of their conception, their political efficacy was already being debated. For example, Frederico Morais, a critic and friend, filled an entire room with unmodified Coca-Cola bottles and placed a single one of Meireles's on top of them, thus suggesting that the "Insertions" were no more than a drop in the ocean.) Two works absent from this retrospective that contrast with the cool sensibility of the "Insertions" offer alternative models of political engagement. In 1970, in homage to Tiradentes, the martyr of the Brazilian struggle for independence, whose legacy was being appropriated by the dictatorship, Meireles set fire to chickens tied to a post; another "hot" performance, *The Sermon on the Mount: Fiat Lux*, 1973–79, involved a construction of 126,000 Fiat Lux-brand matchboxes surrounded by security guards and the amplified noise of visitors' shoes rasping against a floor of match-striking paper. Was the tension experienced by viewers any less explosive than the gasoline in the recipe for a Molotov cocktail inscribed on some of his Coca-Cola bottles?

Potential danger lurks in many of Meireles's works—it is part of their seduction. In *Volatile*, 1980–94/2008, I could not smell the gas scent that allegedly permeated the room where a single candle was burning, but panic set in when I almost choked on the fine powder floating in the closed cell. A sense of menace is articulated differently in *Red Shift*, 1967–84, a work in three sections in which visitors walk from a living room decorated exclusively with red artworks, knickknacks, and furniture onto a black floor onto which a large puddle of red liquid appears to have spilled out from a disproportionately tiny flask, before facing a wall on which a faucet pours red liquid into a slanted sink. The effect is strikingly cinematic—you can easily imagine the ominous sound track—but I was left unsatisfied by the narrative repetition of the visual motif.

Accumulation turns out, in fact, to be a double-edged sword in Meireles's charm offensive. The repetition of different kinds of barriers in *Through*, 1983–89, conjures an evocative space of boundaries, freedom, and knowledge, but the clicking, ticking mass of black-and-white folding rulers and clocks in *Fontes*, 1992/2008, or the tower of radios in *Babel*, 2001, are little more than fun but facile metaphors. Perhaps this impression is bolstered by the increased spectacularization of installation art more generally: *Red Shift* in particular seems to prefigure recent practices combining fiction and design—exemplified during this exhibition by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's commission for the Tate's Turbine Hall. The looming presence of the Tate's monumental nave made me look back with nostalgia at Meireles's earlier portable objects and quasi-invisible interventions. In an interview last September, artist Francis Alÿs suggested to me that the best work for the Turbine Hall would be Meireles's *Southern Cross*, 1969–70, a tiny 9 x 9-millimeter—less than 3/8"—cube, which was on view here in the antechamber to *Red Shift*. Made out of oak and pine, the "humiliminimalist" work (as Meireles calls it) refers to the Tupi Indians' belief that a divine presence became manifest when they rubbed these two woods together. If compression, in Meireles's universe, implies explosion, this cube just might contain enough energy, history, and memory to blow the whole edifice up.

Pictured: Cildo Meireles, *Desvio para o Vermelho: I. Impregnação* (*Red Shift: I. Impregnation*), 1967–84, white room, red objects including carpet, furniture, electric appliances, ornaments, books, plants, liquids, paintings. Installation view, Tate Modern, London, 2008.