

37 MINUTE CONVERSATION

Marepe in conversation with Mariana Cánepa Luna



Since the 1990s the Brazilian art scene has included artists working outside the São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro axis. Marepe (born Marcos Reis Peixoto in Santo Antônio de Jesús, Bahia, 1970) bases his meticulous research on construction materials found in domestic environments and quotidian objects made by the popular sectors in the region of Bahia, where he was born. He participated in the 8th Istanbul Biennial (2003) and the 50th Venice Biennale (2003), as well as in exhibitions such as 'Gambiarras' (Gasworks, London 2003) or 'How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age' (organised by the Walker Art Center, 2003). After weeks chasing Marepe (e-mails that he never received, faxes delivered to broken fax machines, etc.), I managed to speak to him over the phone. Our 37-minute conversation took place in a sort of 'Portunhol', a mixture of Portuguese and Spanish used as an 'exchange language' by inhabitants of those regions of Brazil that border on Spanish speaking countries. Marepe was at the local carpenters.

Mariana Cánepa Luna: I would like you to talk about Santo Antônio de Jesús, Bahia, where you were born and grew up. The city has been the source of all your work. Could you define what the city offers you, and what a foreigner might encounter?

Marepe: Santo Antônio de Jesús is a city of the 'interior', as we call it. It's 50km away from Salvador the capital city of the region –not too far. Bahia is a very rich region in terms of religious and cultural syncretism. My culture is here, so this area offers me things that I just couldn't find in big cities like São Paulo or Rio, I live and feed myself from this land. I lived in Salvador for 12 years but I moved back six years ago. I just found it easier to be here, you know? I can find tinsmiths, carpenters, seamstresses easily. The people that help me to make my work.

MCL: On many occasions it's been said that you borrow the notion of the Duchampian readymade. However, I have the feeling your work is somehow detached from the coldness and the mechanical nature of his work. I'd like to believe, as Agnaldo Farias wrote, that your aesthetic is more of a 'Duchampismo tropical', more human in a way.

M: Yes, I'm aware of that. I think that my work definitely deals with human beings –not to say that Duchamp didn't – but I'm more interested in speaking about a specific culture, the Bahian culture, about the difficulties I see here. On the other hand, I did the *bancas* [Itinerant merchants series, 1996] and I guess they have a bit of the object appropriation that critics talk about. Those works reproduced objects that were very close to reality. I photographed the objects sold by the merchants and reproduced them so that they looked as similar as possible. I was talking about human realities: economic issues of the past and present. This work also relates to my own family, in this case my father and my grandfather. Dad was a small shop owner. So I started by making a work based around their lives, their modes of survival and the forms of marketing that they invent.

MCL: In recent years you've been incorporating the direct participation of the audience into your work, in pieces like *Brinquedo Cego* (2003), *Embutidinho* (2001) or even action-performances like *Lasque um nome aí* (2001). Considering that works by Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica have been replaced by replicas and the originals are kept in museum cases as 'dead objects', how do you think these works will be presented in a few years time? How can we maintain direct contact with the objects?

M: Mmm...It's a problem. I just hope that the people that see my work understand how it was conceived.

MCL: I'm saying this because I saw *Cabeça acústica* (1996) in the 'Gambiarra' exhibition and I was quite disappointed when realised I was not able to try it on

M: So you couldn't touch it!? People should interact because it was made for that purpose. I actually didn't know about this situation. I guess it's always a problem.

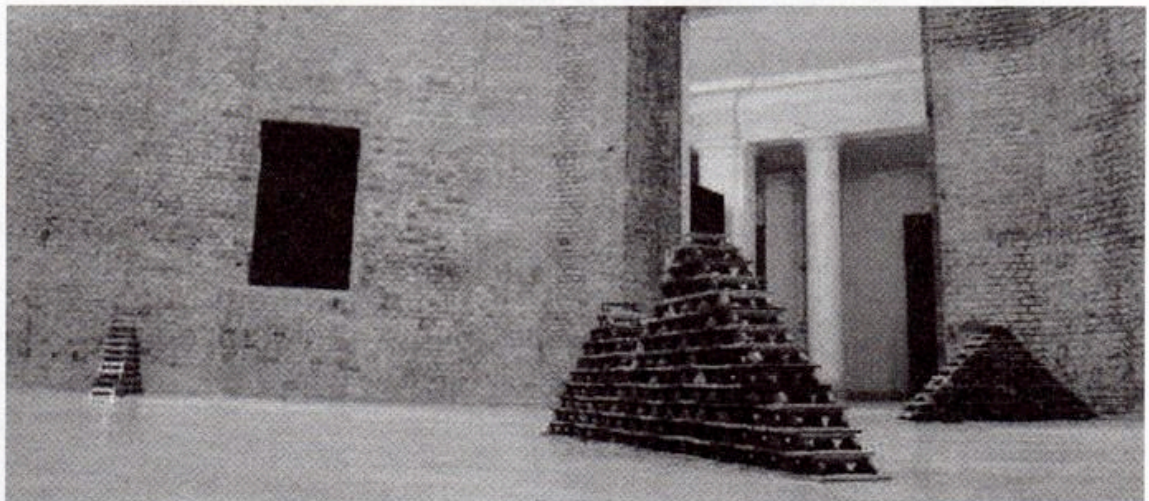
MCL: Did people interact with the *Embutido Recôncavo* (2003) at the Venice Biennale?

M: Yes, they did. It was planned so that a monitor would be there to explain the actual function of the house to visitors and how to manipulate the object. I guess it's one of those things that I cannot really control. Maybe one solution is to make a document or a documentary explaining how the work relates to direct response from viewers. But I'm afraid I can only worry about the integrity of the work itself.

MCL: Going back to your native environment I see Marepe as the artist/anthropologist or artist-sociologist or artist-ethnographer of Bahia. Do you feel there is a link to these sciences or on the contrary, do you think you're far from these interests?

M: [Giggles] Yeah, I see what you mean. I share all the preoccupations that you mentioned. But I'm not a scientist, I'm an artist. Like them, however, I think there are certain things that need to be kept and remembered. Stuff that was part of my father's life - the things he worked with and for. Our relationship with objects helps us to understand our relationship with life.

Marepe, *Desempoladeira --Desemboladeira*, 2004, Courtesy Galeria Luisa Strina, Sao Paulo



MCL: And in the anonymous workers pieces, right? Does this kind of work helps you understand the society we live in?

M: Absolutely. As I said, I inherited all these things from him and also from my mother, like the value that certain objects have for us. I'm speaking here of the affective value that objects attain for humans.

MCL: Yes, but how can you show that value? It seems to me that the aesthetics of your work may suffer when shown in white cube galleries like Galeria Luisa Strina [the gallery in São Paulo that represents Marepe]. As a matter of fact Rodrigo Moura wrote that about your show there in 2002. Does this contradiction between aseptic environments and personal affections worry you or on the contrary, does it help you consider things differently?

M: I don't see that as a problem, this contrast is part of my work as well. It shows very different and distant realities, but that's just like real life, isn't it?

MCL: This kind of specificity is even more difficult to translate when your works travel to New York or Venice.

M: Certainly. I guess it all depends on what the visitor knows about my culture or my life. But I think that's also part of the magic of working in the arts, there are certain things that are common to all of us in some way.

MCL: The value of objects and the dignity of anonymous workers you talked about relates to the piece *Desemoladeira* (2004) that you just showed at Pinacoteca do Estado in São Paulo. How did you come up with the idea?

M: I tried to speak about construction materials. When builders [pedreiros] from my region move to big cities they are immediately nicknamed baiano. I just wanted to talk about those individuals –the people that construct cities– that build the urban landscape day after day, and not only now, but for many years past. People that are part of that reality but that are often forgotten. As someone from the Northeast I wanted to reflect this situation, where all the people from my region leave to become anonymous builders in the big city. However, I think my work was linked to the city. It was a commemorative piece to celebrate its 450 years and to talk about how the city was made, built and thought out. The city owed a level of recognition to all these people.

Marepe, *Algodão Doce na Palmeira*, 2001, ,Courtesy Galeria Luisa Strina, Sao Paulo



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MCL: Tell me about your collaboration in the project *A Quietude da Terra* [The Quiet in the Land, 1999-2001], how do you remember the experience with the children of the Bahian NGO Projeto Axé?

M: I knew about Axé as it's very well known both here in Bahia and, I believe, abroad. It was great to know that people were very sensitive to the social problems here in Brazil. Working with the children was an amazing experience.

MCL: You worked at the same time as Rivane Neuenschwander, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Vik Muniz. Were they doing workshops there as well?

M: Yes, it was very intense to share that experience with my colleagues. It was a very strong experience in general. Axé believes children have an authority and a potential despite their very hard living conditions. Investigating that idea, what I did was to try to make two candyfloss machines. I went around the city and its merchants to find materials because I wanted to work with electricity and mechanics as a metaphor for energy, the children's energy.

MCL: Did you keep in contact with the children of Axé that you worked with?

M: Not really, I didn't get to know them that well. However, the *Palmeira Doce* [Sweet Palmtree, 2001] project I did later on was a direct consequence of that experience.

MCL: Do you think art has a real capacity to create a membrane between people and ideas? For instance, can art educate, as Axé claims, and can art really change things?

M: For sure, art can help in many ways, art can change things. I don't want to lose faith in that. I mean, if your reality is work and you find yourself in situation where things don't move, art can introduce you to other values when you get stuck. Not only material values, but new and affective view points that can expand and perhaps transform you.

MCL: Tell me about your show at Anton Kern Gallery, New York, next June?

M: It will present various situations relating to my culture, a presentation of my work and my life. I don't know America, so I see it as a sort of mutual exploration.