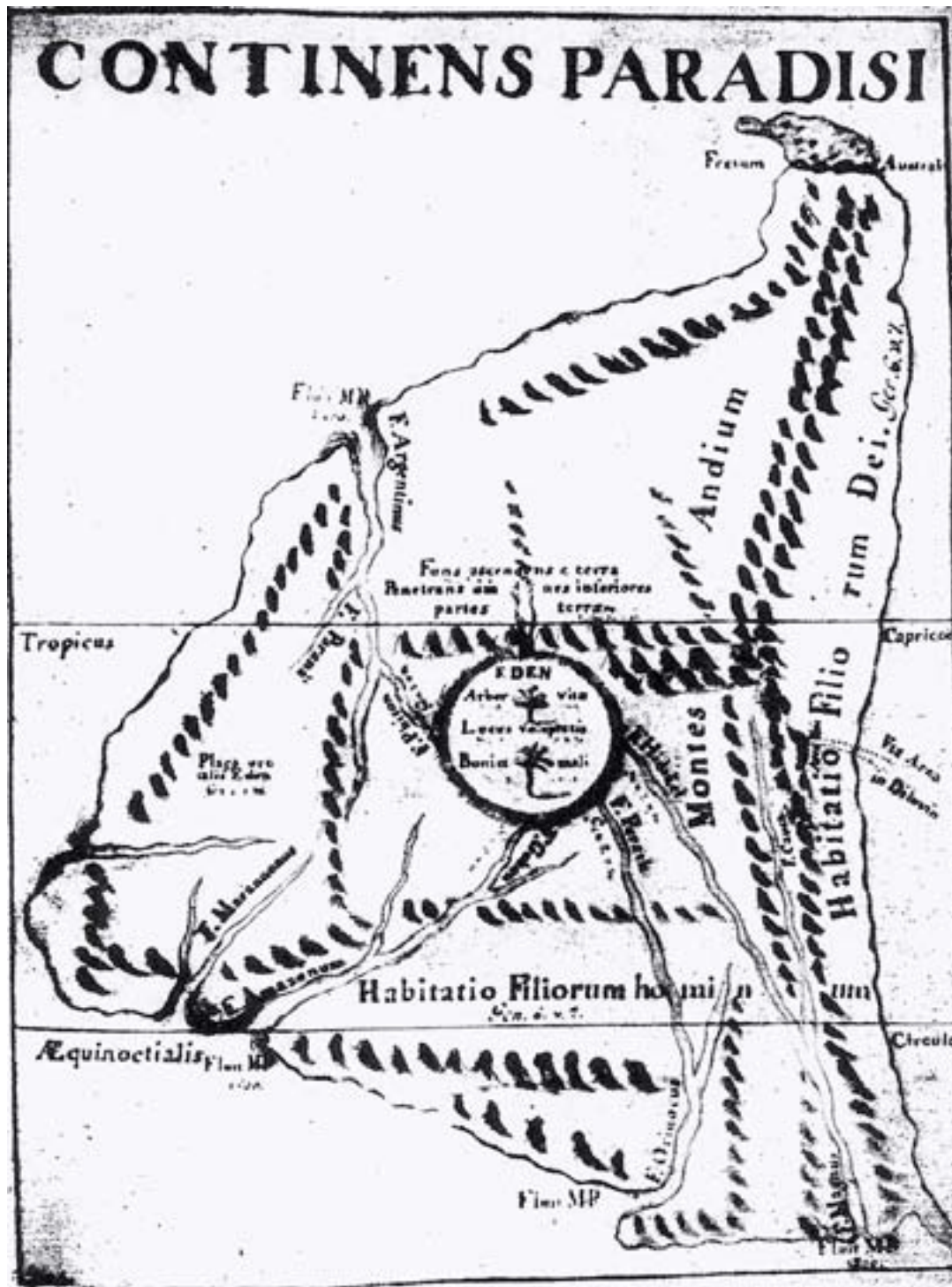




RETURN TO PARADISUM VOLUPTATIS

AN INTERVIEW WITH SERGIO VEGA BY MARIANA CÁNEPA LUNA



MARIANA CÁNEPA LUNA: Following the writings of the Spanish historian Antonio de León Pinelo (1589-1675) and the ideas of a paradise in a New World that you have been researching for a few years now and that you placed in Mato Grosso in Brazil, I was wondering what is left of that 350 years after?

SERGIO VEGA: There were several myths of paradise being in America that began with Columbus' discovery. He saw the Gulf of Paria and thought he had entered the Garden of Eden based on Marco Polo's description of a place in Asia, so the confusion continued until Pinelo. His theory marked the climax of this mythology. He was obsessed with demonstrating that paradise had been in South America, responding to the expectations of the European imaginary.

MCL: And subsequently it became your obsession ...

SV: Indeed! My embrace of his project and theory is because of this futility of trying to establish that paradise was a real place – such a romantic topic.

Borrowing [Hélio] Oiticica's phrase, 'we live out of adversity', I'd say that a big part of my cultural interest has to do with laughing about our own misfortunes, looking at utopia and the impossibility of it.

MCL: In the newly produced video *Paradise on Fire* (2007) presented for *Sharjah Biennial 8*, you continue looking into paradise, but with a more social twist...

SV: It has always been about looking at the social conditions as a dystopian paradise. The video begins in Cuiabá, where the government built a power plant supplied by a gas pipeline coming from Bolivia. In Bolivia the project was extremely controversial, so the video explores those controversies. What interested me was the disparity of discourses among the social actors of the conflict, their contradictions and how they justify their position.

One of the interesting aspects of ecology these days is that it cannot be discussed outside of social issues anymore. By starting with the environmental problems we end up addressing the social conditions and exploring the models of political action.

MCL: And paradise as social place...

SV: The culture at large has revisited the subject of paradise since the early 1990s, when I was starting this project. Perhaps its resurgence has to do with a sense of nostalgia for our lost connection with nature. Our alienated urban condition somehow limits our sense of being in harmony with nature, often making us act as if we were outside of the natural world.

MCL: There is a completely reverse situation in a place like this in the desert (Dubai, United Arab Emirates) where the transformation began around 20 years ago. It's now creating fake environments like The World, islands in the shape of a map of the world. If you ask any person, they will tell you that paradise is here: the planned Dubai Land park with life-size dinosaurs, the palm-shaped island projects offshore in Dubai where everyone has a private beach with views of the sea, etc. The roads are crammed with kilometeric billboards selling locals and tourists the idea of a never-ending luxury life with lush vegetation, eco-housing, blonde women having fun on paradisiacal beaches, or having a drink in the luxurious Burj Al Arab hotel near the biggest fish tank you have even seen... In your travel diary you say that in Brazil modernist architecture made a detour from the Cartesian logic 'as a result of a heat stroke', and I think the same thing happened here...

SV: There is always a complicated marriage between capitalism and the environment. I think ecology and the often contradictory discourses of environmentalism provide an interesting breakthrough in the way we have been thinking about politics. Let's face it, the socialist countries of the 20th century were terrible at handling the environment – the first thing that springs to mind is Chernobyl. That accident made the Soviet Union fall apart as the Ukrainians subsequently realised they were left alone to deal with the catastrophe.

MCL: It's of course an interesting moment for this debate now. Ecological issues appear daily in the news. The 'Stern Report' on the economic effects of global warming was published in the UK recently, and Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* triggered a wave of journalists to write about these issues and how politicians might try to deliver answers and solutions.

SV: The largest thing we have dealt with until now was the Cold War, nuclear weapons and the dismantlement of the Soviet Union. Mircea Eliade, the professor of comparative religion, once compared the Cold War to certain initiation rituals where tribes would put the teenagers in caves and tell them monsters would attack them during the night. And that's how they became adults and brave men, by enduring the night expecting the worst. That night for us was the fear of nuclear holocaust. Now we wake up to daylight and the realisation that global warming is here to stay. That indicates a kind of paradigm shift in terms of collective fears. Global warming's apocalyptic scenario, the end of petroleum, and the slow realisation that we will have to change our modus vivendi, all those things indicate a change of direction, the necessity of doing things differently.

MCL: How do you think art can approach sustainability? Which modes are you interested in?

SV: I'm interested in the relationship between sustainability and the ideas tackled by art around concepts like site-specificity and the 'anthropology of the near', where instead of going to an distant land to study tribes, anthropologists study groups in urban neighborhoods, learning about their social structures, forms of exchange and ritual behaviors. So **I think sustainability will be based on the specificity of the site in terms of production and its capacity to reproduce the conditions of production.**

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MCL: How do you think you are dealing with sustainable production when it comes to your work?

SV: My next project deals with the tragedy of this paradise in Mato Grosso. It's a huge territory that since the 70s has been continuously deforested for lumber, cattle ranching and agriculture, and also polluted by gold mining. In the mid-90s, big business began planting soy to supply the demand from China. There is an incredible perversity in burning down a pristine forest to plant other things, and to see the effects of all those chemical fertilisers and pesticides placed onto an incredibly fragile substrate of land. People have been very mindless, hoping to get rich fast, and don't realise what a bad business they are doing. In that context, I will explore the alternative models of sustainability that are being tested in the region.

MCL: Is there any environmental initiative taking place to inform those farmers about the consequences of the bad use of their land?

SV: There are initiatives where environmentalists educate family farmers by demonstrating possibilities for cultivating local plants that suit the climate and don't need pesticides or fertilisers. They also show them how to sell their produce in the local markets and avoid the damaging effects of shipping it to far away areas and using more fuel. These farmers have been abandoned by the government and are not part of the statistics. They are hopeless and have no other means of moving forward. Then there are people like Blairo Maggi, the current governor of the region (who may well become the next president of Brazil), who is the biggest rancher in the state, owns soy plantations, and promotes big business. He thinks of the environmentalists as a stone in his way. What he is doing is almost like putting Astroturf on the moon. It's like what you were saying about the Arab Emirates, the level of insanity is extraordinary ...

MCL: When entering your installations the feeling is of having reached an oasis, a chill-out lounge with an explosion of primary colors, exotic animals (crocodiles, parrots), Bossa Nova music and even a few objects that recall Lygia Clark's sensorial objects. But in your installations everything is usable and touchable ...

SV: I'd like to take the opportunity to clarify those works as I think some people have misinterpreted them. What I was doing there was actually based in this part of the Garden of Eden in Mato Grosso called the Portal do Inferno (The Gate of Hell) where the military used to bring prisoners during the dictatorship to execute them. They had bags put over their heads to conceal their identities and were thrown down the cliff in the middle of a thick jungle. When I saw that place I made connections with [Lygia] Clark's and [Hélio] Oiticica's works as it was from the same period. The erasure of the sensorial was employed by artists and the paramilitary in completely different ways. *Waiting Room* (2005) became exactly the recreation of that. It included the objects in *The Void (Interactive)* (2005), with objects to wear and explore your sensations which you can manipulate to recompose the sense of your own body in the fashion of the Neoconcretists' propositions. Here, as the title indicates, you are also jumping into the void and making a leap of faith. The objects, titled *Vision of Paradise 1, 2, & 3*, consist of viewing devises, two models of sunglasses and a bag to wear over your head. **These represent in some way the three different positions you can adopt today in environmentalism: one pair of sunglasses is made from a plastic bottle run over by a car (not a very optimistic position); the second pair has plastic bottles sticking out from your face providing a distorted kaleidoscopic view (reaching out for options); and the last one is a bag to be worn as a mask with a funnel attached for viewing from one eye, narrowing your focus and point of action. Some people thought I was purely making fun of Neoconcrete art when I intended to find interconnected meanings. The irony is just in the surface when indeed an elliptical association that cuts transversally through an historical period could be drawn between techniques of torture and the kind of experiments that artists do to provide a sensorial liberating experience for the art viewers.**







MCL: And your *Global Warming* (2005) piece with the crocodile, is it also another commentary on environmentalism?

SV: I saw a few wall paintings in an archeological site in Chapada dos Guimarães. In a big rock I found a painting that represented a man becoming a lizard, and then I thought maybe it was a comment on the physiology of the brain. That brought me to the speculations by the American astronomer and astrobiologist Carl Sagan and the 'reptilian' part of the brain called the hypothalamus – and which I called the crocodilian brain. **What if the increased rate of sun radiation we are exposed to is affecting our brain and we are mutating into different species? So I speculated on the mutation of the hypothalamus as the cause of fundamentalism, since the instincts of self-preservation, aggression, territoriality, predatory sex, cannibalism and war are regulated by the hypothalamus ...** Basic instincts are confused with God's orders and religious ecstasies are achieved by acts of war. The myth of final purification by fire ... The crocodile in the installation is standing like a human (because he was a human) and is watching sports and violent programs on TV, the implication being that what he consumes over stimulates his hypothalamus.







MCL: Generally speaking I think there is a huge misunderstanding as to what 'the environment' is. We humans are in the environment, it's not something outside that doesn't belong to us. Ecology is formed by an interlinked system of humans, animals, the biosphere... Or as Guattari would put it: an 'ecosophy' with an interrelation of the three spheres of ecology – environmental, mental and social. Isolation is a misconception as much as thinking of the artist isolated in the studio.

SV: Current environmentalism has recuperated the idea of living with dignity for the disadvantaged. A degraded society creates a degraded environment and when you improve one you improve the other as they are interconnected. There is a splitting now in behaviors: there are those who drive huge SUV cars and live to shop in huge chain supermarkets and those who bike to work and grow their own vegetables. Sustainability requires community formation as in agrarian societies. Isolation is not a good idea for anyone, not even for the rich.

SERGIO VEGA is an artist based in Gainesville, Florida, where he is Associate Professor of Creative Photography. He has recently shown in the *Crocodilian Fantasies* at Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2006) and *Tropicalounge* as part of the Momentum series, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2007).

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