



Cynthia Marcelle et al.

A morta

November 26, 2019 – January 18, 2020

We are in the mixed ruins of a world.

—The Hierophant

A great deal of our existence is about a negotiation with death. How to stay alive, to live longer, to be healthier, to be better, to sustain a moment or simply to survive it, to bring back what has disappeared inside, to somehow keep on, even when everything around you has slipped away. Death is the only promise that is always kept, and it surrounds us—at the abusive hands of the government and the police, by the machines and systems of our own invention, by the water that has depleted from our oceans and from our bodies. The earth is on fire, children are in cages, opioids are poisoning our towns, and the Amazon is turning to ash. Amidst it all, we may forget that we are still amongst the living.

One could argue that it is our proximity to death that helps us know life. The bleakness of this statement is not lost on us, but we are, after all, living in bleak times. Living is excruciatingly beautiful and violent, irrational and mundane. A bruised sonata. To be alive is to have *endured*.

It is unnecessary to state the multitude of events that have occurred in the last 400 days, never mind the last 400 months or 4000 years. We enter into this space with the acknowledgment that we are entrenched in a wave of political, economic, and environmental crises (here and everywhere), and social inequality is on the rise. Here, we recognize that to overturn an institution, to overturn a system, to overturn ourselves, we must surrender to an unbearable life. We are in agreement that we have seen the dead, and we know the dead, and as they encroach the gates, we make a choice to *live*.

& we understand that we are, first and foremost, a *we*.

Because rather than a statement, this place is a proposition for the living. One that is contingent on equal parts chaos and collectivity and intervention and disorder. Hierarchies of upstairs and downstairs, inside and outside, in the know and out of the know, are elided. Just as there is no beginning, there is no discernible end. There is no distinct outcome nor is there a creation of a *thing*. The act, as a process, is consigning ourselves to the unknown. There is no leader, no singular author, and no space for refusal. We participate because we can and because we *must*.

Under current rulership, law and order is apocalyptic and punishing. Instead of conceding to (or replicating a space of) authority and control, here we yield to (or wield) the unexpected and the illogical. Will we be polite? Or kind? Incendiary? Absurd? Who will be lured by the promise of a platform or enthralled by the captive audience? Will moments of competitiveness be met with acts of generosity or escalation? What knowledge systems will be revealed and which will be upended? What coded messages can be delivered between a cadaver and a mortician or a marionette and the wife of a parliamentarian? And what becomes of us, when we leave the life of a hierophant to embody the poet?

Much has been discussed about the capacity for art to exist in a time of devastation and unrest, and what the expectations are for its utility. A number of these conversations carry a false air of escape; as if for many activism is optional, or that living is divorced from life. Or that there are two realms, one to contain our concerns and another to hold our thoughts. Cultural production *can* function as provocation—to alter the way we see and think, how we imagine, what we believe, and perhaps even change the way we are. But we can, however, also accept it as one of the dead.

Similar to this room, Oswald de Andrade's 1937 play *A morta* (*The Dead Woman*) begins in a mostly empty space. The first scene unfolds in a darkened theater, with two characters on one side and another two sitting in the first row of the audience. As they recite their lines, they watch their own performances executed onstage by four large-scale, spectral, mute marionettes, propped on high thrones. A performance of a performance, an explicit split between actor and character. We are witness to a scene that may be a hospital vigil, a wake, an autopsy, or even the scene of a crime, a detail that never becomes clear. As the play unfolds, we learn that our protagonist, The Poet, has an urgent desire for a more immediate engagement with the world. Under the guidance of a peculiar cast of characters—including a Sleepwalking Nurse, Edgar Allen Poe's vulture, a Precocious Tourist, and a Polyglot Police Officer—The Poet struggles with untangling himself from his lover Beatriz, a defiant corpse who refuses to stay dead.

The play coincided with a period of extreme political engagement for Andrade, a poet and polemicist who integrated his radical ideals into his artistic output. A central figure in the Brazilian modernism movement, Andrade is best known for his manifesto of Brazilian nationalism, *Manifesto Antropófago (Cannibal Manifesto)* (1928). He argued that the greatest strength of Brazil's history was its penchant for "cannibalizing" other cultures, and urged the intellectual community to employ cannibalism to assert itself against European postcolonial cultural domination—incorporating, reappropriating, and regurgitating other cultures in order to forge a new identity for itself. Even though it spurned European models of art to champion local production, Brazilian modernism still proved elitist. It was a movement that shut out, suppressed, and exoticized the Indigenous and Black cultures of Brazil, premised on a problematic theory that it was necessary to *swallow the outside to produce the inside*.

Andrade saw in the theater the power to communicate to the masses, and it became the medium in which he explored art's potential role in social change. *A morta* is as much a call for opposition to—and liberation from—existing societal structures as it is a cynical warning. Andrade implores artists to consider the political implications of their work, to release themselves from the "lyrical catacombs" shaped by a legacy of aestheticism, to locate a language rooted in the street rather than in spectacle. At the crux of this argument is the belief that this vernacular is established through collectivity over individualism, with The Poet, the artist of the play and its *heart*, designated as the "coordinator of all human action." Artistic work, to be revived from the dead, must be imbued with a sense of political responsibility.

Andrade's dead represents sterility of tradition and lack of movement, the canonized narratives that reinforce power and control in order to suppress protest and revolution. In this place, we can extend these definitions to consider the dead as all fundamentally violent systems—from the historical conventions of exclusion within our institutions to the state sanctioned racial gendered-colonial dominance that informs our existence. To the fascist regimes that have seized power across the globe, to mass incarceration, police brutality, and political corruption. To empire, occupation, and the heteropatriarchy. To the white walls of this room and the stolen land in which this building rests. The list of the dead is endless. We see it and we know it.

Living in and of itself is rebellion, and a messy one at that. It is persisting in the face of this world's brutal obscenities and paradoxes, while subscribing to a praxis of resistance that is imaginative and generative, where the creation of community is foregrounded in the process of dismantling patriarchal and capitalist structures. It is an attempt at decentralizing space and experience and subverting current configurations of subjectivity and justice to commit to a radical

repositioning of life itself. Futurity that is achieved through interruption and insurgence and living as a form of abolition.

We return to this stage, where the distance between audience and artist, artist and character, between street and spectacle, and sunrise and sunset is both fluid and hazy. A room as a cacophonous body, with organs that play, beat, and pulsate. Together, narratives are constructed and deconstructed, overlapped or severed, where the strictures of a judge grow into the song of a child. Where the notion of poet as man and muse as woman is rejected, where anger gives way to love, and love submits to grief. We imagine the fragile earth becoming sky or the sensation of ground transforming into water below our feet. If being closer to chaos and calamity is to understand our own mortality, then it is possible that if we were to pause, to be in silence, we may just stop breathing altogether.

So instead we stay here for awhile, and feel everything, in this room.
One more, next, another,
 another
 & another after that.

A continuous script for an unbearable life.

When death slips us by, life becomes wonderful.

Accompanying the exhibition will be a series of public programs with aarea.co at Ocupação 9 de Julho, Animalia/Casa Chama, Chris E. Vargas/Museum of Trans History & Art (MOTHA), DJ Lynnée Denise, PJ Gubatina Policarpio, and Radio Yandê, among others.

*Programs occur throughout the exhibition. Check wattis.org for details.

Cinthia Marcelle: *A morta* is on view at CCA Wattis Institute from November 26, 2019 to January 18, 2020.

Cinthia Marcelle (b. 1974, Belo Horizonte, Brazil) lives and works in São Paulo. She has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions internationally. Recent solo exhibitions have taken place at Modern Art Oxford (2017); Logan Center Exhibitions, University of Chicago (2017); MoMA PS1 (2016); and Secession, Vienna (2014). She represented Brazil at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017), winning a Special Mention. Her work has been included in significant group exhibitions and biennials, including Desert X (2019); Berlin Biennale (2018); Sharjah Biennial (2013 and 2015); Bienal do Mercosul, Porto Alegre (2013); Istanbul Biennial (2013); Auckland Triennial (2013); New Museum Triennial (2012); Bienal de São Paulo (2010); Biennale de Lyon (2007); Bienal de Havana (2006); as well as *Soft Power*, a major group exhibition that opened at SFMOMA in October 2019. She was awarded the first Future Generation Art Prize in 2010. In 2019, Marcelle co-founded Casa Chama, a LGBTQIAP+ cultural care association dedicated to creating more spaces for research, discussion and action for transgender communities in São Paulo.

Cinthia Marcelle: *A morta* is curated by Kim Nguyen and organized by Leila Grothe. The work is developed in partnership with aarea.co. Special thanks to Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo. The artist thanks Calen Barca-Hall, Livia Benedetti, Eduardo Brandão, Diran Castro, Gustavo Delonero, Adriano Ferrari, Eliana Finkelstein, Jacqueline Francis, Rodrigo Franco, Jeanne Gerrity, Leila Grothe, Anthony Huberman, Eungie Joo, Anna Juni, Kaitlyn and Mike Krieger, Clarice Lacerda, Scott Minneman, Ava Miranda, Marcia Miranda, Camila Motta, Kim Nguyen, Cristiane Quercia, Mauro Santos, Christopher Squier, Marcela Vieira, Enk te Winkel, Cafira Zoe, and all the participants.

The CCA Wattis Institute program is generously supported by San Francisco Grants for the Arts; Wattis Leadership Circle contributors the Westridge Foundation, Penny & James Coulter, Lauren & James Ford, Jonathan Gans & Abigail Turin, Steven Volpe, and Mary & Harold Zlot; and by CCA Wattis Institute's Curator's Forum. Phyllis C. Wattis was the generous founding patron.

Design: Companion-Platform, www.companion-platform.org

Typeface: Wattis by David Reinfurt, and Zipper by Philip Kelly

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