

Manto Tupinambá: Memories

Lygia Pape in conversation with Angélica de Moraes, 2000

Angélica de Moraes: When the German philosopher Edmund Husserl analyzes our experience of the here and now—primary perception, at the moment when it happens, in which we see—it reminds me a lot of your work. **(1)** We can come to a deep appreciation while completely ignoring, for instance, what you did before and after. Just the work in front of us is all we need to grasp its poetic density; all perception lies within that exact moment of looking, which has a great power of synthesis.

Lygia Pape: Yes, that's Husserl's phenomenology. The French philosopher [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty follows it to support his philosophical reading of neoconcretism. **(2)**

AM: Do you consider that reading applicable to your work? To me, it seems that we don't need to check a chronology of your works in order to activate in us, fully, the poetics you propose.

LP: [Yes.] Because each one of them is a kind of closed universe. My works have their own references, and, at every moment, I think I create a reality that is not metaphysical: it is itself, in itself.

AM: Your work creates relationships of space, volume, color, composition . . . direct relations, which you observe and create a dialogue with, through seeing. There's no need for the perception of time. That's what I think . . .

LP: I think so too.

AM: Although, of course, the context can offer some extra insights. There is a very powerful work that you made in tribute to Mário Pedrosa **(3)**—

LP: Ah, yes . . . the *Manto Tupinambá* [Tupinambá Cloak]. When Mário returned to Brazil, after his exile in Paris, he wanted to make a large exhibition about the Brazilian Indian. I worked with him on this project, for the Museu de Arte Moderna (MAM-Rio). There was a fire in the museum, **(4)** and the project came to a halt.

There are two works that I made in honor of Mário. The first was *O Olho do Guará* [The Ibis's Eye], which I made with neon. You stare at the neon and then look at the white wall to the side and see the color of the other eye of the *guará*, **(5)** which is inside your eye: a configuration that completes the rainbow.

AM: It's a beautiful tribute to Mário's way of seeing; that is, his profound perception of the formative elements of Brazilian visual culture . . .

LP: Yes, but it's also a law of physics. When you look intensely at a color and then look at a white wall, you will always see its complementary color. That is the other eye of the *guará*: you see one eye here [in the work], but you don't see the other (on the other side of the bird's head). In *O Olho do Guará* the color of this other eye is the one that is inside your own eye, because that's where the retina joins the two complementary colors.

AM: With *O Olho do Guará* you created a powerful metaphor for Mário's perception of Brazilian art: the introjected presence of indigenous ancestral Brazil, prior to the cultural destruction promoted by Portuguese colonial invasion (or "discovery"). We propose the incorporation of that vision into our reading of Brazilian art.

LP: It was during his exile in France that Mário discovered the Indians and took another look at Brazil. Then, when he came back, he wanted to make an exhibition showing the plastic [artistic] contribution of the Indians, which no one talked about. Anthropologists, ethnologists . . . they all talk of the Indian from another perspective.

AM: And your personal approach to indigenous cultures? What was it?

LP: I am very interested in the material culture of the Indians; I always have been. I have extensive documentation on the subject. I have books on the first European travelers to Brazil. **(6)** I even lent some of them to [director] Nelson Pereira dos Santos for the making of his film *Como era Gostoso o Meu Francês* [How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman, 1971]. **(7)** Among those books, I have one by the anthropologist Alfred Métraux, **(8)** which is a fundamental study of the Indians of Brazil, especially the Tupinambá. I find their culture and spirituality fascinating. Oswald de Andrade **(9)** took the idea of anthropophagy from the Tupinambá. The devouring of the prisoner comes from the Tupinambá. They would crack the prisoner's head with a *tacape*. **(10)** Not any prisoner: it was always a chief or a warrior who was devoured. There was an entire ceremony to deal with that death; it was a glorious death. The prisoner would spend seven or eight moons with the tribe, be given a woman to live with, learn the whole ritual—what to say when he was tied by that rope with the two caught ends. . . . To have an honorable death, there was a whole ritual that the prisoner had to learn.

AM: It was the Tupinambá from whom Hans Staden escaped. **(11)**

LP: Yes. Hans Staden managed to save himself thanks to a French pirate, because the pirate ships came here a lot to trade goods. Staden went through all the preparations for this death ritual, but was saved. He later recounted that experience in two books published in Europe—that's why the Tupinambá ritual is so well known. What is interesting about the books is that the illustrations were done by a European. Indian women are fat, blond, with thick braids hanging down. It's an idealization of the Brazilian-Indian. The images show the Indians opening the body of the deceased, and making the *moqué*m (that is, the roast of meats on the grill). Staden then explains which are the noble parts. The arms and the legs were for the chiefs, for the men; the guts were left for the old women. Fried or roasted, whatever . . . there was a whole hierarchy of body parts that were devoured by the tribe.

AM: Are there still Tupinambá peoples?

LP: In Rio de Janeiro, they were exterminated. In the state of Maranhão there are still some left: the Urubú Ka'apor tribe, which has the most delicate, the most exquisite and sophisticated feather art. So, I wanted to make my *Manto Tupinambá* an extremely beautiful thing, like original Tupinambá feather art, and at the same time capture the terror of death. Because both are present all the time. I have incorporated a few bones, but not many, so it's not an illustrative thing. They are there to disrupt the beauty of the red-feather art a little—which was made with feathers of the *guará*, the mythical bird of those tribes.

AM: That work seems to indicate that the devouring was done by Whites in relation to the Indians . . .

LP: Certainly, because there was an inversion. The Tupinambá tribe was extinguished, liquidated. (There is only that small remnant in Maranhão.) But I think that the idea of devouring remains. What I am going to say now is a conclusion of my own, personal: I think that the Tupinambá spirit endures in the Brazilian person.

AM: In this work [*Manto Tupinambá*, 2000] there are geometric shapes articulated with figurative fragments. That is rare in your work.

LP: I like geometric shapes a lot. I wanted to make a square from fabric used in ships' sails, a fabric for sailing on the high seas, even on the ocean, because it is the most resistant material . . . I commissioned a sailmaker. The balls [inside] are covered with very delicate feathers, with bones sticking out of those balls. In some, beneath the feathers, there are cockroaches—which are a bit like the Indians, in how they are treated: as despicable, unimportant, insects. But yet, if an incisive study were made, [it would find that] the presence of the Indian in Brazilian culture is very strong. It is present in cooking, farming, in formal conceptions. . . . The *caboclo* (12) is heir to the Indian; an accultured Indian.

The geometrization of indigenous body painting is something directly connected to the idea of the geometrization of shapes. Everyone likes to say that Brazil is baroque. I don't think so. I think that, if you remember the Brazilian Indian, he precedes the arrival of the White man, who brought with him European baroque. . . . Fundamentally, we are constructivists. If you go to any inner city, you will notice that in the decorative details of a door, of a popcorn cart, a house, everywhere. If a popular author starts painting, he makes a geometric painting, never a figurative painting. That is something that is ingrained in Brazilian culture. The baroque comes later.

AM: So, your fascination with indigenous culture comes from the essentiality of form those peoples have achieved?

LP: I admire that culture, which works with shapes; [it is] extremely sophisticated.

AM: Would the geometrization of concrete art come from there as well?

LP: I think there is a connection. Since I was little, I've always been very fond of geometric shapes, but when I found Indian painting, body painting, ceramic paintings, the fabrics . . .

AM: You have made several versions of the *Manto Tupinambá*. How many?

LP: This is the third version. . . . The first was that one I made for a solo show at the Centro Cultural São Paulo, in 1996, which had a mirror with cockroaches on top and a rope falling down inside the mirror (not the *Caixa de Baratas* [Cockroaches Box, 1967]). As they got closer, people could project themselves inside it. The second is a red smoke which covers the city of Rio de Janeiro as if it were an immense Tupinambá cloak. Now [2000] I made this third version, for the *500 Years* exhibit. (13)

AM: The *Manto Tupinambá* with smoke is a computer-generated image of an ephemeral artwork, not yet realized?

LP: Yes. I really wanted to make this work. I had the idea in Rio de Janeiro, while looking at *Christ the Redeemer* from the perspective of Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon. Looking at that forest under the [statue of] Christ, I imagined red smog hovering there, floating over the city. People don't understand it, but Rio de Janeiro is where the Tupinambá lived. Where the *cacique* Cunhambebe lived. **(14)** It's a mythical part of the city and no one talks about it.

But it's so complicated to make this work. . . . You have to have the army's authorization to import the material, which they use as a safety signal; I would need a couple of hundred of these smoke guns, which are activated when opened. It's not toxic. [Curator] Nelson Aguilar wants me to make it for the *500 Years* exhibit, but I need the Bienal de São Paulo to fund it and get the permission to import the smoke. **(15)**

AM: How did you meet Mário Pedrosa? Was it when you were part of the Grupo Frente [Front Group], in the early period of the concrete movement? Did Ivan Serpa **(16)** introduce you?

LP: Do you know, I don't remember how I met him? It must have been at the Museu de Arte Moderna [MAM-Rio] in the 1950s. I always had great admiration for Mário and, when he came back from exile, in 1978, with the idea of making that big exhibition about the Brazilian Indian, since I was already passionate about the topic, I offered to work with him on that project. Then we both started researching in museums. We spent months at the Museu Nacional in the Quinta da Boa Vista, at the Museu do Índio. . . . Then we went to São Paulo, to the Museu do Ipiranga [Museu Paulista]. Mário created the project's name, which was "Alegria de viver, alegria de criar" (Joy of Living, Joy of Creating). Because the Indian creates with joy. That's a very beautiful thing about him. We split up and took notes about all the pieces that were going to be part of the show. We designed the whole exhibition. There was going to be a big *oca* **(17)** inside the museum, in the area with high ceilings. It was meant to open in late 1978. But, in July of that year, MAM-Rio caught fire. It was a tragedy and Mário closed the project, because he was unable to raise funds. It was a big disappointment. **(18)**

AM: What was Mário Pedrosa's influence on your work? At that time, had you already begun to acquaint yourself with indigenous culture?

LP: I started working with him because there was that common ground. I always had a great interest in indigenous culture. I don't know from when—but I guess since I was little, when I used to read adventure books about Indians and started to distinguish the Brazilian [Indian] from the others. At that time, there was no [written] history about our Indians. I think that's when I started to understand that they were different from the others.

AM: Can we say that you studied philosophy because of Mário?

LP: No. I studied philosophy because I was very interested, and still am, in the concepts behind the artwork. I almost forced myself to study philosophy; to read, for example, the Thomist texts. (I wouldn't willingly have read Saint Thomas Aquinas.) So, it gave me a certain discipline of thought: that's why I studied philosophy.

AM: You were one of the first artists in Brazil to understand the importance of concepts and philosophy in the formulation of works of art.

LP: I always had that need because I never developed [a work] with my hands—even when I was using my hands, there had to be an initial concept. For instance, when I conceived the *Livro da Criação* [The Book of Creation] . . . the book was ready in my head when I executed it. It's like this third version of the *Manto Tupinambá*. I took about six or seven months pondering what this work should be like. Suddenly, the whole idea popped into my mind, fully formed; it was just a question of making it. All my work has always been done from a concept and an image that emerge in this way.

AM: Isn't the process of creating the work affected by the materials in the moment of its making? Don't you change direction at that moment?

LP: I can change some details, but not the direction. For example, this third version of the *Manto*. . . . The fabric was more porous and elastic, but then I realized that it was going to be too responsive, so I switched to sailcloth—the sail of the high seas, which is the strongest there is. Even so, even with those extremely light polystyrene balls, the sailcloth didn't resist and distended as well.

AM: And with that, you added richness to the reading of the work.

LP: The idea of using this sailcloth also has a little to do with the "Discoveries," it's the interference of the White man, the arrival of the European. There's a series of more complex readings within the work. It's not simply a question of looking and finding it attractive.

Notes:

1 Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) was the principal founder of phenomenology, a philosophical discipline that emphasizes the description of phenomena as they are experienced by the individual and draws meaning from that experience.

2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) was the leading academic proponent of phenomenology and existentialism in postwar France.

3 Prolific writer Mário Pedrosa (1900–1981) was also a left-wing political activist. He is considered Brazil's greatest art critic. Hailing from Pernambuco, he was the director of the Museu de Arte Moderna in São Paulo (MAM-SP); in Rio de Janeiro, he collaborated in the creation of MAM-Rio. Pedrosa played a decisive role in the emergence of both the concrete and neoconcrete movements.

4 On July 8, 1978, a fire, apparently caused by a fault in the electrical system, destroyed ninety percent of MAM-Rio's collection, and the entire solo exhibition of the Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García. More than a thousand works were burned, including paintings by Picasso, Salvador Dalí, Giacometti, and Henri Matisse. The building, an icon of modern architecture designed by Affonso Reidy, survived the fire. With the donation of seven thousand works of Brazilian art by the Gilberto Chateaubriand Collection, the museum reopened in 1993. In the 1950s, it was a meeting point for a young artists, a platform that launched and supported several ruptures within the visual arts—including neoconcretism. From 1965, the museum was also a place of resistance against the Brazilian dictatorship.

5 The *guará* (*Eudocimus ruber*, the scarlet ibis) is a shorebird, with a long beak and wide-set eyes, that is native to Brazil.

6 European artistic and scientific expeditions to Brazil began in the seventeenth century, during the Dutch dominance of the present State of Pernambuco, and intensified in the nineteenth century, after the Portuguese court moved from Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro.

7 Nelson Pereira dos Santos (1928–2018) was one of the pioneers of Cinema Novo (New Cinema) and one of the most important filmmakers to come out of Brazil. Lygia Pape collaborated with dos Santos as a graphic designer, working on title sequences and posters for such films as *Mandacará Vermelho* (Red Cactus, 1961), and *Vidas Secas* (Barren Lives, 1963).

8 Alfred Métraux (1902–1963) was an anthropologist and ethnographer who specialized in the study of the indigenous peoples of Latin America. Born in Switzerland and raised in Argentina, he became a major figure in twentieth-century French anthropology and later worked at UNESCO. Métraux's classic text *La religion des Tupinambá* was published in 1928.

9 Poet and activist Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954) was a leading figure in Brazilian modernism, and a member of the Grupo dos Cinco (Group of Five).

10 A *tacape* is a type of club, an indigenous weapon.

11 Hans Staden (c. 1525–1576) was a German adventurer who was serving as a gunner in a Portuguese fort when he was captured in 1550. His dramatic first-person *True History* was first published in Germany in 1557.

12 A *caboclo* is a mixed-race Indian–White person.

13 The show *Brasil +500: Mostra do Redescobrimento* (Brazil +500: The Rediscovery), was produced in 2000 by the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, under the curatorship of Nelson Aguilar.

14 Cunhambebe (d. c. 1555) was a famous Tupinambá *cacique* (indigenous chief) and leader of all Tamoyo Indians on the seacoast of the current State of Rio, and part of the State of São Paulo. He was an ally of the French colonizers who settled in Guanabara Bay, between 1555 and 1570, as part of France Antartique. He fought against Portuguese rule in the region.

15 This project remains unrealized. Nonetheless, *Brasil +500* showed the latest version of *Manto Tupinambá* by Lygia Pape, which was made especially for the occasion.

16 Artist Ivan Serpa (1923–1973) was a founder member of Grupo Frente. His works are mainly geometric abstractions.

17 An *oca* is a circular house of the type built by indigenous peoples.

18 See note 4. Another fire in Rio de Janeiro destroyed the Museu Nacional in 2018; reconstruction and salvage are underway.