



Elen Braga – Ich bin wie du

„Before I was an artist, I was a gospel singer. I sang in evangelical churches (...). In addition to singing, I also preached or, as it was said, I ‘delivered the word.’ (...) So I learned that if I wanted to speak well, I had to know how to tell stories, but not give everything away. We connected the stories to ourselves, because we liked to hear about ourselves. Maybe not everything was true, but there was a truth to be told (here and everywhere).“ – Elen Braga¹

NAK Neuer Aachener Kunstverein is pleased to present *Ich bin wie du* (*I am like you*), the first institutional solo exhibition by Brazilian artist Elen Braga. As a multidisciplinary visual artist, Braga works in the fields of installation, sculpture, and performance, exhibiting not only in exhibition spaces but also in public spaces. Her often large-scale installations frequently incorporate performative elements, usually involving the use of her own image. She consciously embraces the challenge of working with new materials and techniques, including textile, ceramics, and metal. In her artistic practice, she engages with themes such as strength, resilience, and identity, often through self-imposed tasks and intensive, labor-driven processes. Braga draws on mythological narratives to explore how they persist in contemporary behaviors and belief systems. Her works often respond to the specific contexts of their presentation sites, while simultaneously playing with the paradoxes of materiality and experimenting with materials beyond their everyday use.

In the foyer of the NAK, visitors are immediately greeted by Elen Braga herself—in the form of an oversized head with fabric arms, the work *Bababuá*. On the way to the first exhibition space, one passes the hand-tufted textile sculpture *My Grandmother and 50 Years in 5*. The work is modeled after the artist's grandmother, cooking over an open fire, holding a chicken in her hand that, like countless chickens before it, will soon lose its head. Childhood memories of the artist emerge, accompanied in the background by the constant static of a radio broadcasting the voice of former Brazilian president Juscelino Kubitschek, dreaming of a better Brazil.

In the first exhibition space, visitors' attention is immediately drawn to a six-meter-wide piece *Amanhã será outro dia* (*Tomorrow will be another day*): colorful, figurative, and interspersed with loosely arranged text elements, disrupted by mythological narratives and symbolism. The large-scale textile piece combines various episodes in recent Brazilian history into a dense whole: religious and political themes intersect with desert landscapes, which in turn intersect with Brazilian presidencies and their missteps, intersecting with COVID graves and the 2014 World Cup final between Germany and Brazil. And a duck. *“Before I can clearly identify the content of what I want to say, I must know how to say it. I use language, but I cannot easily identify this concept with words alone,”*² says the artist, who juxtaposes text and image in her works, inviting viewers to decode them. The result is an entanglement of utopia and dystopia—a fiction (or perhaps history?) that renders the wishes and dreams of migrants visible as reality, while simultaneously raising the question of what identity and home actually mean: *„The future was such a distant thing, that it was possible for me to construct the most beautiful narratives. Today I have the feeling that when I think about the future, it has already passed. I am the future and I am writing about the past.”*³

By incorporating his own history and chronology into his work—thereby transforming the private into the public—Braga charts a nonlinear path through the exhibition space; while this allows different scenarios to converge within individual works, it also weaves a continuous narrative throughout the entire exhibition. *Sunday with the family* depicts her parents' living room, with a Brazilian soap opera playing and life-size sculptural replicas of our

¹ Pieter Vermeulen: „Prologue“. In: Pieter Vermeulen, Hrsg.: Elen Braga. Gent: MER.Books, S. II.

² Elen Braga: „VROOM“. In: Pieter Vermeulen, Hrsg.: Elen Braga. Gent: MER.Books, S. VII.

³ Elen Braga: „VROOM“. In: Pieter Vermeulen, Hrsg.: Elen Braga. Gent: MER.Books, S. VII.

own family, including their differing political views, which are visible here in the characters' eyeglass lenses, or the *Papagaio americano* (*American parrot*), a yellow-green parrot perched on a blue-and-white starred floor lamp, initially appear positively charged in their colorfulness, idealizing the past—as childhood often is. Yet what is shown also reflects the artist's own life journey, which ultimately led her from Brazil to Belgium. Or perhaps now to Germany for the exhibition at the Kunstverein, a country whose language she does not speak, but which, like so many migrants, she is learning through its purely phonetic sound by mastering the first ten German numbers, noted here in the form of the staircase-like work *One to Zen*. Or does a final path even lead into space? In any case, the spaceship in the form of the work *Original blue* stands ready, the hopeful escape route for all aliens, all strangers, all foreigners.

However, works such as a suitcase placed beneath a sign reading as well as being titled *No Re-Entry*, or the aforementioned staircase rising toward the ceiling of the room—whose supposed numbers also function as catchphrases like “ICE,” “FEAR,” or “NOISE,” point to the challenges facing global society, increasingly threatened by a rightward political shift and the accompanying rise in xenophobia worldwide. Braga explicitly references the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the work that gives the exhibition its title, *Ich bin wie du*, installed in the stairwell of the Kunstverein, questions U.S. politics with the phrase “OFF WITH THEIR HEADS.” For it is not only the chickens at the Kunstverein that have lost their heads: the budgies in the painting have also been decapitated, and it is no coincidence that the textile sculpture of a decapitated self-portrait of the artist is situated on the top step of the work *One to Zen*.

Regarding the gradual thematic shift within the exhibition, Braga explains: „*The title is Ich bin wie du. It is a reference to a 1976 song by the German singer Marianne Rosenberg. The song is about recognition between two people, a sense of equality that transcends differences. In my work for NAK, however, the song takes on a more critical meaning. It raises questions about empathy, alienation, and the difficulty of forming authentic relationships in a world shaped by inequality, migration, and cultural hybridity.*”

The wall piece *Ich bin wie du* also marks the beginning of Braga's exploration of Germany. Not only can the iconic disco hit that lends the exhibition its title—which is played over a radio on the upper floor and thus makes its way into the space—be recognized as a German motif, but so too can references to Otto Dix, arms exports, oil imports, and the depicted half-timbered houses found in the tapestry; however, these deny the equality of all people when they state “NICHT WIE DU.”

On the upper floor, Braga's engagement with Germany becomes particularly evident. In the foyer, three textile kebab skewers rotate, alluding to what Braga has ironically identified as typically German, complemented by overly hungry pigeons on the floor of the installation. Nevertheless, *Burn Char Roast* also carries a dual political meaning, reflecting xenophobic attitudes toward immigrants. In the exhibition space, visitors are immediately greeted by *The Goldsmith with Red Beak*, set against a golden background featuring the German federal eagle, alongside fabric dolls dressed in gray military uniforms. With vacant stares, the soldiers gaze at a large-format red-white-black tapestry, *Winter in Germany*, a sort of historical mirror, its duality referencing German history as a reminder that nationalism and right-wing populism remain ever-present despite the culture of remembrance. Braga has aptly titled this fragile, almost collapsing collection of uniformed, conformist soldiers—who thus follow the motto *I am like you to the letter— Sir, No, Sir!*—and thus advocates individualism over any form of collectivism.

The exhibition at the Kunstverein is complemented by video works by the artist that explore her originally purely performative practice and are thematically aligned with *Ich bin wie du*. Thus, *Original blue* and *One to zen* are linked to Braga's video works. In contrast, the poetic, large-format black-and-white video *Nevermore* shows the artist in Death Valley, USA—in a foreign land—struggling against her fate and against nature, while *Flesh, Stone, Iron and Clay, part 1* combines militaristic step sequences and gestures with dance culture, yet breaks the original uniformity of movement, liberating the individual from the crowd.

Elen Braga (*1984 in Maranhão, Brazil) completed her postgraduate studies at a.pass (Advanced Performance and Scenography Studies) in Brussels in 2018 and undertook residencies at AIR Antwerp (now MORPHO) (2016), ISELP (2020), and Buitenplaats Brienenoord (Rotterdam, 2021). Her work has been shown at the Cerveira Biennale (PT), Frac des Pays de la Loire (FR), WIELS (Brussels, BE), KIOSK (Ghent, BE), CC Strombeek, and KANAL-Centre Pompidou (Brussels, BE). Braga lives and works in Antwerp, Belgium.

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