



Suely Rolnik

A Shift towards the Unnameable¹

West of Tordesillas, metaphor has no value of its own. It is not that I dislike metaphor. I want all works to be seen some day, not as objects for sterile flights of fancy, but as marks, memories, and evocations of real and visible conquests.

CILDO MEIRELES²

HAVING DECIDED to experience Cildo Meireles's *Red Shift*,³ I take the first available flight to Belo Horizonte. Arriving at Inhotim,⁴ I head straight for the work, installed in a building especially constructed for the installation and conceived by the artist himself. A fourth wall has been added to the structure that did not exist in previous versions, which allows a separation from the external space. This is no trifling matter: free from the distracting murmur of exhibitions and with no time limit, I enter the installation, shut the door and let myself go.

First environment: furniture, domestic appliances, carpets, paintings, but also porcelain penguins on a fridge, fish in an aquarium, parakeet in a cage, and all types of knick-knacks and trinkets cluttering the space. Not to mention an LP spinning endlessly on the turntable, a constantly illuminated television and just a few books, all pompously bound, displayed on

the shelf as if they too were trinkets. Signs of the passion for consumption propelled by industrial modernity mingled with nostalgia for everyday objects of pre-modern existence. Were it not for a computer, this would be a typical Brazilian middle-class living room of the 1960s and 70s. The ordinary scene of ordinary lives.

Two elements, nevertheless, diverge from this condensed normality: one is the colour (everything is red, in different tones; one cannot help seeing it), the other is the sound (the constant flow of water which composes the soundtrack of a video of the installation itself, playing in a loop on a television; one cannot help hearing it). I let myself be guided by the sound and follow on.

Second environment: in some sort of nonspecific in-between space a thick red liquid has apparently been spilt from a small glass bottle fallen to the floor. It spreads through the rest of the house in an immense stain totally disproportionate to the size of the flask. I let myself be guided by this colour that inundates the floor and move on.

Third environment: the colour is lost in pitch-blackness. Beneath the beam of a light installed precariously at the back of the room, a single object can be seen in the impenetrable darkness. It is a white sink, tilted as though falling; from the tap gushes a red liquid that splatters over its entire surface. As the only scene fraught with drama, it seems to suggest there is a hidden narrative, which if deciphered would reveal a supposed meaning of the work. Complete mistake: as my intimacy with the installation increases, this expectation disappears.

In search of the “Shift”

The artist did not give the red in the first environment to the objects it arrived along with them.⁵ Colour constitutes these objects to such a degree that it seems to emanate from them, contaminating the atmosphere of the room and of my own body: my eyes, my ears, my skin, my breath ... my subjectivity. It is not by chance that Meireles calls this first space *Impregnation*. Little by little, I begin to lose the references that the objects offered when I first arrived. In the second environment (called *Entorno* in Portuguese), the red seems to have detached itself from things in order to present itself as such: a dense redness that overflows to occupy the entire environment. It was with the double meaning of *entorno* in Portuguese – “overflowing” and “environment” – that Meireles named this part of the work, where I can no longer hang on to any certain reference. There is

nothing logic here: between the bottle and the spilt liquid there is a total disproportion; it is impossible to find any recognisable function for this space in the normal residence I had supposedly entered. My disorientation intensifies.

In the last environment, *Shift*, the colour finally merges with the sound. If from the start and till that moment there is a strong presence of both, even they run parallel but with no relation between them, from the gushing tap at the centre of that precariously balanced sink they articulate to each other, making some kind of meaning: the incessant noise of a flood of red water that nothing can staunch. The relief is short lived; the topsy-turvy logic that would unite these elements does not hold up, it dissolves beneath the impact of the deep darkness. What takes place, in fact, is a *Shift* – as the artist calls this last room and the installation as whole.

Each time a logic appears to take shape, it is deconstructed at the very next step. There is a process that functions as a loop, like the video transmitted on the tv in the first space, through which the installation itself eternally returns, as does our disquiet for as long as we are there. Cildo himself summed it up by saying “The work works in circles.” And with regard to another moment in the work that is signaled by the same logic, he says, “The stain in the second space contains a plausible explanation—in this case a literal one—for the red in the first space. At the same time, the stain introduces a separate aspect: the question of the perfect horizon that results from the surface of the liquid at rest. With this horizon in view, you walk toward the third and final part, the detour, to be specific, which undoes the previous part, since it becomes doubtful that one has found oneself on a flat surface. In the end, nevertheless, the red is reintroduced and is united with the beginning.”⁶

With rigorous precision tempered by subtle humour, the artist plays with elements susceptible of recognition, either in terms of meaning or of form (the ‘extensive’ dimension of the work). These elements promise tranquillity, just as, simultaneously, the artist pulls the carpet out from under our feet, leaving us ungrounded and thrown into the chaos of the field of forces that are actualised in the work (its ‘intensive’ dimension). This paradoxical back-and-forth movement seems to constitute one of the essential elements of the thinking poetics that permeates *Red Shift*.

But it doesn’t stop there. During the afternoon I spent in *Red Shift*, after several comings and goings within it, I begin to feel the pulse of a

diagram of forces, vaguely familiar and yet strangely inaccessible. Might this not announce the shift that operates in the work? Yet still I know nothing about it. I must wait until the experience settles.

Some days after my visit, the disquiet gains its first words: fainting... desolation... despondency.... collapse... paralysis... fear... An endless sense of apprehension, absolute impotence, exhaustion. What gradually takes shape is the daily sensation of living under Brazil's military dictatorship – precisely the period in which the diverse ideas that led Meireles to conceive the installation first crystallized and came together. This has nothing to do with a metaphor of the regime's brutality in its visible and representable face (which is the usual interpretation, hackneyed by repetition according to the artist himself).⁷ Instead, it relates to the sensation of an invisible atmosphere that impregnates everything – the regime's intensive diagram of forces – more implacable in its subtlety and intangibility. The impression is that under or behind that excessive pathological 'normality' permeating life in those decades of state terrorism, an incessant bleeding of the vital flows of Brazilian society is in process, day after day. All is overtaken, as the sound and color of flowing red liquid takes over the whole installation.

It is well known that colours are fields of forces which affect our bodies. Red has the smallest frequency and the longest wavelength of the spectrum. These qualities make it shift less as it moves in space and give it the capacity to attract other colours, imposing itself upon them. Indeed, red in this installation imposes itself onto the singularity of things and makes them uniform. This physical experience of the work actualises within my body the sensory mark of the omnipotence of military power over subjectivities, which homogenises everything under the impact of terror, restraining the vital movement (understood here as the potential of creation, differentiation, shift). There is no single space that escapes such omnipresence – no home, school, workplace, street, bridge, square, bar, restaurant, shop, hospital, bus, taxi . . . not even the air itself. An arc of tension is formed, extending itself to the limit: nerves standing on end, a state of permanent alert. A total impossibility of rest, but also of making 'shifts' as we move through space/time.

It is no easy matter to connect with such sensations and overcome their denial; more difficult still is to actualise them, whether visually or in any other language: verbal, cinematic, musical or even existential. And yet exactly this is required to re-appropriate and activate the vital flow that

has bled away (or in less serious cases, has been been staunched). If any artistic effort in this direction is effectively worthwhile – and if it is equally worthwhile to let oneself be contaminated by its creations – the aim is certainly not to remain within the memory of the trauma, to substantialize and historicise it, glorifying oneself in the role of the victim. On the contrary, such an effort is valuable because it becomes a way of reactivating and re-inscribing in the present what was there before the trauma, and has been drained away on account of it – a ‘real and visible conquest’ that overcomes the toxic effects inscribed in the body’s memory. In this installation, Meireles manages to materialise such a shift towards the unnameable, actualised here as ‘marks, evocations’ of this conquest. If we are able to let ourselves go, this shift can become equally possible in our own subjectivity.

Politics & poetics

The wider context in which Meireles’s ideas for this installation originated was the movement of institutional critique that developed internationally in art during the 1960s and 70s. The major focus of that movement – the nerve center of its poetics – was to problematise the power of ‘art system’ over the work. In general, elements that are questioned include everything from the spaces given over to artworks to the categories based upon which “official” art histories judge them, touching also on the media employed and recognized genres. As such, in South America during the same period, a political dimension was added as a central element

Cildo Meireles, Red Shift, 1967–1984. Courtesy MUAC [UNAM]



within art's institutional territory that needed to be problematized. Art history points to the specificity of such practices by grouping them within the category of "political and/or ideological conceptual art." That said, this doesn't mean—as "that" history supposes erroneously—that the artist has become the militant transmitter of ideological content. What makes him or her incorporate a political dimension into his/her poetic investigations is the fact of having lived repression within the very marrow of his/her creative activity. The most obvious manifestation of this constraint is censorship of what emerges from the creative process. Nevertheless, the impalpable inhibitory effect that emerges from this very process is much more subtle and disastrous, a menace that hovers in the air because of the inexorable traumas that come from the experience of humiliation. This nodal aspect of tensions mobilizes the need to create in a way that can take form in an artwork.

The 'basic core' of Meireles's work, according to the artist himself, "is an investigation of space in all its aspects: physical, geometrical, historical, psychological, topological and anthropological."⁸ Effectively, it is an artistic action that inserts itself into the transversality that makes up the territory of art, upsetting many of its layers, including the political (but understood in this case in a sense radically distinct from the ideological, the pedagogical or the militant, that insists on assigning value to the artist's work, wherein the artist does not even recognize himself.⁹ [Soon we'll see to what other meaning of the political we are referring to]. Such is the case with *Shift to red* where the diffuse and omnipresent experience of oppression becomes visible and/or audible through a medium in which State Terrorism's brutality provokes a voluntary blindness, deafness and silence, as survival reaction".¹⁰

Within this context, the conditions for overcoming the excisions that exist between the micro and the macro political are present, which are reproduced as excisions between the classic figures of the artist and the militant.¹¹ A compound of those two types of action imposed on reality would seem to be sketched out in Latin American artistic projects from this period. "Official" Art History has not yet arrived at this. Before considering the implications of this lapsus, it become necessary to ask ourselves what it is exactly that differentiates micro and macro political actions and why their integration is of interest.

Let's start by pointing out what they have in common: both start out from the urgency of facing tensions in human life in those places where

its dynamic has become interrupted or at least weakened. Both also have as an object the removal of obstructions from vital movement, which makes them essential activities for the “health” of a society, i.e., makes them the affirmation of an inventive force for change when life requires it as a condition of its continuance. Nevertheless, the order of the tensions each one faces are different, as well as the operations drawn in in their confrontations and the subjective faculties involved.

On the macro political level, we find ourselves facing tensions arising from conflicts in the “cartography” of the truly visible and utterable, i.e., conflicts of class, race, region, gender, etc., or the effects of an unequal distribution in established parts of a given social context. This is the stratification plane that delimits subjects and objects as well as relationships between them and their respective representations. On the side of the micro political, we find ourselves before tensions between the aforementioned plane and the plane that announces itself in the perceptible diagram, invisible and unutterable real (this is the plane of flows, intensities and becomings).

The first type of tension is accessed through perception, the second through sensation. The first approaches the world as a map of forms on which we project representations, attributing them meaning; the second as a diagram of forces that affect our senses in their capacity for resonance. The irreducible paradox between these two capacities of the sensible provokes collapses of meaning and forces us to think/create. The classic figure of the artist tends towards the side of micropolitical action while that of the activist tends towards macropolitics. It is this separation that began to dissolve in Latin America during the 1960s and 70s. Acknowledging this, we can begin to answer the question about the damage caused by Art History’s lapse with regard to this type of practice.

Ideological conceptualism?

Right from the start, official history failed to do justice to these practices by designating them as ‘conceptual’. A different name would have distinguished them from the artistic practices thus categorized essentially in the United States and Western Europe furthermore because what is understood by concept in each of those contexts is different. Worse still was to describe such a conceptualism as ‘ideological’ or ‘political’, as has been attempted in certain accounts (not coincidentally, by North American or Western European authors who did not live through this experience). The

fact is that we find in these artistic proposals the seeds of the integration between politics and poetics, experienced and actualised in artistic creations, but still impossible to label. To call them 'ideological' or 'political' denies the state of estrangement that such a radically new experience produces in our subjectivity. The operation is quite simple: if what we experience there is not recognisable as art, then in order to protect ourselves from the disturbing noise we categorise it as politics, and everything is kept in its rightful place. The abyss between micro and macropolitics is maintained; the process of their fusion is aborted, along with all that might have come forth (though in the best of cases, the seed remains dormant). In reality this state of estrangement constitutes a crucial experience because, as I suggested above, it is the symptom of the forces of alterity reverberating in our own body. These reverberations put into crisis the current cartography and lead us to create. Ignoring them means that the problematising potential which fundamentally characterises artistic action will be blocked.

Artistic interventions that preserve the political strength that is proper to them would be those that are undertaken based on the way in which the tensions of the present affect the artist's body; this is the nature of the relationship with the present that such actions can convoke in its "preceptors."¹³ The formal rigor of the work in its physicality here becomes impossible to divorce from its rigor as a manifestation of that which creates tension such as it is lived in the body. The more precise the form, more pulsating is its intensive quality and the greater its power to insert itself into an environment. When such an insertion occurs it creates a new politics of subjectification; perhaps this politics can proliferate and generate new configurations of the unconscious in the social arena, in a break with dominant references.

What this kind of practice can revive is not simply an awareness of what is causing the tension (in the case of enslaving oppression), or its visible, representational face, but as well, the experience of this state of affairs in the body itself, its invisible, unconscious face, that intervenes in the subjectification process in the place where it has become imprisoned and depotentialized. In the face of such an experience, it tends to become more difficult to ignore the malaise provoked by the current cartography. What is gained is a greater precision of focus, which otherwise grows murky when the faceoff between everything pertaining to social life is

reduced exclusively to the macro political, making the artists who act in this field into mere scenographers, graphic designers and/or advertising executives for activism. All that has its purpose, and, no doubt, characterized a certain kind of practice from those same decades, which could effectively be classified as “political” and “ideological.” But therein resides for me the key to Art History’s unfortunate lapsus: having generalized that classification with regard to artistic actions proposed in the 1960s and 70s in Latin America and thus missing the irreversible detour that was produced in that context. Cildo himself insists on such a distinction on a number of occasions, such as when he writes, for example, that “I had problems with political art where the emphasis was on discourse and the work ended up looking like propaganda.”¹⁴ Or when he states that if indeed his work is permeated by a political bias, he himself is unaware of it.¹⁵ Or even when he recounts that when he asked artists for work for the rooms in *Impregnación*, in its first version, Raymundo Colares brought him a button with an image of Che Guevara. The only white object placed in the china cabinet, it stands out from the rest not just due to color, but also for its reference to an external, metaphorical representation.¹⁶ The image of Che symbolizes political resistance, placed in an extensive dimension, and contrasts with the rules of politics in its intensive dimension, integrated into the poetics that characterizes this work and in which resides a problematizing potential for the artistic environment. Isn’t that what Cildo is pointing out when he characterizes his work’s political bias as “unconscious”?

Cildo’s work is certainly one of the most resounding manifestations of this kind of practice. Its strength lies beyond any representational content based on a referent that is external to its poetics (ideological or otherwise). But this first kind of interpretation is abetted by a certain number of false clues, placed by the artist as an anecdotal dimension that the work supposedly contains but whose function is, on the contrary, to negate it: looking toward the irremediably implausible, an apparently plausible imaginary articulation is created, that upon being revealed as inoperable is able to propel us toward a confrontation with what is intolerable. They are clues that derail our insistence on remaining at a distance—blind, deaf and mute—from experience.¹⁷

If indeed the mistake begins here with the idea that we are in a landscape of symbols, metaphors and narratives, neither is the work’s vigor to be found in the physicality of form itself, supposedly autonomous and

separate from the experience of the world. In both of these interpretations—“sterilized lucubrations” (as Cildo himself would have it)—the body of the interpreter is absent in its vulnerability when faced with the forces of the world, and as such, the force of the work; the world is absent in its potential to affect that body. In sum, it is the work itself that is absent in its quality as a potential contagion of the person who interprets it—its power to interfere in the status of things.

Going against these “absences,” the strength of Shift to Red is found in the intensive content characterized by a concentration of the world’s forces exactly as affects the body of the artist and, inescapably, in the work’s extensive ways of reifying this. The work’s “state of having happened” emerges from this. If there is a politics there, and if there is a poetics there, these are absolutely inseparable in the precise formation of a single, unique gesture and an intensive diagram of its potential for flame throwing. For this reason, Cildo’s work—like that of many artists from the same period in Brazil and Latin America—has the power to keep our bodies alert. The rest depends on our desire.

The equivocation starts with the idea that we are within the domain of symbols, metaphors and narratives. But neither does the work’s vigour lie in the physicality of form itself, supposedly autonomous and disassociated from the experience of the world. In both these interpretations – these ‘sterilized flights of fancy’, as Meireles would no doubt call them – the body of the one who interprets is absent in its vulnerability to the forces of the world and thus of the work; nor is the world there in its potential to affect that body. The work, in short, is not there in terms of its potential to infect its interpreters, nor in its power to intervene in the state of things.

In contrast to these absences, the vigour of Meireles’s Red Shift will be found in the intensive content of world-forces as they reach the artist’s body, and indissolubly in the extensive form of their actualisation in the work. Hence its status as ‘event’. If there is politics here and if there is also poetics, they are absolutely inseparable within the precise formation of one single gesture and in the intensive diagram of its inflammatory potential. This is why Meireles’s work – as many other works of Brazilian and Latin American artist of the same period – possess the power to keep our bodies awake. It depends only on our desire.

[Translated from the Portuguese by Brian Holmes]



Notes

¹ Translation from the original in Portuguese and uncut from the published text of the catalogue of the exhibition by Cildo Meireles at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MacBa), 2009 (the published translation in that catalogue was based on the translation to English by the Tate Modern).

² Cildo Meireles, "Artist's Writings". In Cildo Meireles. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999. Translation to Portuguese: "Textos do Artista". In Cildo Meireles, São Paulo: Cosac & Naify Edições Ltda., p. 106. Originally published in the catalogue *Information*, Kynaston McShine (Edit), New York: The Museum of Modern, 1971; and in Brazil, in *Cildo Meireles*, Coleção Arte Brasileira Contemporânea. Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1981.

³ *Red Shift* results from a long process that starts in 1967, with two ideas that emerge simultaneously with the first projects and models of *Espaços Virtuais: Cantos* (*Virtual Spaces: Chants*) that Cildo Meireles developed at the time. The first one consisted in imaging a person that, for any reason (an irrelevant one), decided to accumulate the largest number of functional and decorative objects in different tones of a particular colour all gathered in one space; a sort of collector of the same colour (at that time the artist thought of the colour blue). The second one consisted in establishing virtual planes from a cut on objects and mobiles normally assembled in any given room of a house. Both ideas had a certain link between them, but as this was not the issue of his then current investigations, they remained latent until 1981. For the XVI São Paulo Biennial, they reappeared when he was invited by the Texas museum to create a new large-scale work based in *La Bruja* (*The Witch*), exhibited at the Biennial. The notes of both 1967 ideas came together and met with other two thought in 1978 and 1980, when the artist came back to Brazil. The first one consisted in a tiny bottle from which blue liquid dripped in large amounts, forming a stain with no proportion at all; the second one, consisted in an oblique transparent sink, whose tap gushes a vertical water flow. At the end, the exhibition didn't take place but Cildo entitled the first piece (the one with the two same colour objects) *Impregnation*; based in false logics, this would articulate one with the other to put together an installation, and the colour red substituted the blue. The piece was mounted for the first time in 1984, at the Museo de Arte Moderno of Rio de Janeiro (information taken from a phone call with the artist in April 2008).

⁴ INHOTIM – Centro de Arte Contemporaneo. Brumandinho, Minas Gerais, Brazil.

⁵ All the objects Cildo selected were originally red.

⁶ This remark took place during the same telephone conversation, when Cildo mentioned that he would articulate the three projects with false logics.

⁷ The decantation time of ideas that take body in *Red Shift*, is also the decantation time of the possibility to embody sensations moved by traumatic experiences of the State Terrorism and, from there, find strategies to reactivate the vital movement interrupted by trauma. 1967, when the first ideas emerged, is the year before the Acto Institucional N. 5 (the moment the power of dictatorship is absolute), the period between 1978 and 1980, when Cildo conceived the other two ideas, coincides with the return to Brazil from his voluntary exile (decision usually taken at a time when the trauma is sufficiently elaborated, so you can still live the

intolerable and its effects are not devastating). In 1982, when the installation is conceived (although it was only exhibited in 1984) is the year of an intense collective process of reactivation of democracy, as well as of the poetic power within the Brazilian society, what authorizes and bases the reactivation of the vitality of both. In a conversation with Cildo, about his work he affirms that he is not conscious about the political changes present in his work. We could say that they are equally unconscious of the above-mentioned decantation, as well as the self-timing of each.

⁸ Same phone conversation.

⁹ Cildo Meireles, "Artist Writings". In *Cildo Meireles, op. cit.*, p. 136. Translation to Portuguese: "Textos do artista". In *Cildo Meireles, op. cit.*, p. 118.

¹⁰ *Idem.*

¹¹ Perhaps it is not mere coincidence that among the ornaments of the livingroom in *Shift*, we find the "three monkeys wisdom". Each one plugs, respectively, its eyes, its ears and its mouth.

¹² This division is at the core of the conflict that characterized the troubled love-hate relationship between artistic and political movements during the Twentieth Century, part responsible of frustrated intents of collective change.

¹³ The term "perceptor" is a suggestion of Sao Paulo's artist Rubens Mano to characterize the roll of those who get involved with this kind of artistic proposals, that require the effects of such subjectivity. Terms such as receptor, spectator, participant, user, etc., become inadequate to describe this kind of relation to art.

¹⁴ Cildo Meireles, "Artist Writings". In *Cildo Meireles, op. cit.*, p. 136. Translation to Portuguese: "Textos do artista". In *Cildo Meireles, op. cit.*, p. 136.

¹⁵ Above-mentioned phone call.

¹⁶ *Idem.*

¹⁷ The choice of red, instead of blue as thought in the beginning, can be as well understood as a poetic strategy of the "lead that misleads". According to Cildo himself (in the same phone conversation), red is the colour with more symbolisms, which allows a larger amount of possible associations (not only to violence and blood –here taken as example of a metaphor related to this work and in encasing it– but as well as to menstruation, love, passion, anger, courage, etc.). The proliferation of meanings denaturalizes each one of them, destabilizing this way the use of the metaphor in the interpretation of the piece.