

THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA ART CONTEMPORARY

THE
COLLECTION
BOOK

VERLAG DER BUCHHANDLUNG
WALTHER KÖNIG, KÖLN

RIVANE NEUENSCHWANDER

*1967 IN BELO HORIZONTE, BRAZIL.
LIVES AND WORKS IN SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL.



A MAP, A DAY, A LETTER, A WISH

by RODRIGO MOURA

GLOBOS
2003

Vinyl paint, adhesive tape on 240 balls; dimensions variable

WHEN Rivane Neuenschwander first showed her *Globos* (Globes) in the highly intellectual context of the exhibition *Delays and Revolutions*, at the 50th Venice Biennale, impending risk filled the air. The installation consisted of 220 balls of different sizes, materials, and original provenances placed in a room in the Italian Pavilion with short flights of stairs at each of its corners. These balls could easily roll down the steps, and thus jeopardized the installation's complex and already unstable geography. The inattentive feet of the visiting crowd that swarmed Venice under scorching heat like that found in the artist's Brazilian homeland were unaware of their capacity to set off a global war, albeit one of merely symbolic reach. On each and

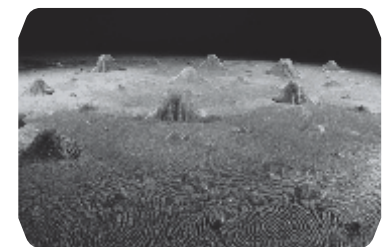
every element of the installation, the artist had painted the national flag of a different country featured in the world map in effect at the time. In fact, she not only painted a national flag on each ball but also reinterpreted these symbols in accordance with the support, choosing different countries and their respective flags for different balls on the basis of the latter's characteristics, and finally gathering the *globes* together in the same space. In so doing, Neuenschwander aimed to offer the viewing public the possibility of voluntarily or involuntarily altering the relationship between the balls. It was as if she were stating, in Venice, that each country was a separate world potentially affected by the shifting of the others, as if the sum total of all the balls/globes convened in a conceptual rather than physical manner represented one more of the semantic and political convergences of that installation. A neophyte in Venice, I witnessed a few instances in which the balls came close to rolling a little farther and exiting the room—nearly causing a global imbalance duly prevented by a diligent gallery guard. What if the United States or Iraq were to roll down the steps?

The year 2003 is particularly significant in the recent history of international politics. Over the few weeks that preceded the Venice preview, the United States had invaded Iraq, thereby starting a long and still unconcluded war under the official claim of *disarming the country and freeing the Iraqi people*. This unilateral action, endorsed by Great Britain, represented the onset of one of the most blatant acts of aggression against a sovereign country in current times: it was like a large globe clashing with a smaller one. At that specific historical moment, and within the context of the oldest major international art exhibition—which, however, is still far from bringing together representatives from all the countries in the world—Neuenschwander's work seemed keenly and critically appropriate. Her legion of globes transformed countries into satellites of one another, thereby developing new and improbable combinations of scales and orbits among them. Through touch and through the kinetic nature of the work, the spectator was asked to propose new cartographies for our planet, despite the rigid arrangements outlined by world borders as a result of numerous treaties. Painting was the medium that the artist embraced to modify the balls and endow them with new identities. Once applied on the ball, the paint layer played the role of a border between inside and outside, just as with national borders. In fact, it constituted an extremely fragile protective membrane. In Neuenschwander's installation, the tension and hazard inherent in the global political game were manifest in an *analogous manner*.¹ ➔

Ultimately, however, *Globos* proposed a playful and colorful gesture at a dire time of bloodshed in the world. Iraq, for example, appears as a somewhat awkward juggler's ball and the United States as a haughty volleyball with tailored sections to accommodate the Stars and Stripes. In the end, Neuenschwander's installation proposes to us viewers, in a generous and welcoming manner, the possibility not only of *making* the work together with her but also of playing at making and remaking the world in the manner that, we suppose, global leaders do. At a time when the mechanisms of political representation grow more and more unreachable by the ordinary citizen, this possibility—even if framed by the art world—is not to be *disregarded*.¹¹ ➔

I Notwithstanding the work's clear prominence within that context, Neuenschwander found her initial experience with *Globos* in Venice to be frustrating, as ideally the work should have been installed in its own space so that it could be viewed without interfering with other works, and vice versa. "Showing a work like that requires a commitment on the part of the institution in terms of maintaining a piece that is delicate."¹

II In the recent history of Brazilian art there is a precedent for Neuenschwander's *Globos* in the work *Glove Trotter* (1991), by Cildo Meireles. Albeit also comprising a collection of balls of different origins, colors, and sizes, Meireles's work includes spheres covered with a metal mesh that imparts a static character to them and allows the viewer only a glimpse of their differences. According to Meireles, viewers have never attempted to reconfigure his work, notwithstanding the lack of restrictions to this end. Here the superimposition of the materials is performed as *the mesh imposes itself*.²



CILDO MEIRELES, *Glove Trotter*, 1991

1 From the artist's statement to the author on July 28, 2008.

2 Cf. MEIRELES in GUY BRETT, ed., *Cildo Meireles* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), p. 160.



Globos

THE early production of Rivane Neuenschwander, during the mid- to late 1990s, is characterized by her evident focus on materials taken directly from nature to create works of urgent ephemerality: fragile constructions made with garlic skin, roots, fruits, dried leaves, and insects. The artist's talent for handling these materials seems to have been the first manifestation in her practice of a keen attention to small and delicate gestures. Although these materials did not accompany her through to the more recent period of her career, they most certainly taught her about the unpredictability of nature and a permanent exchange between chance and intention that has informed her practice to date. Unpredictable models of system evolution and an inclination toward experimentation are notably present in the artist's way of renewing a tradition of participation within Brazilian art. While recovering the lineage that began with *Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark*, ► and continued with Cildo Meireles, Neuenschwander often places spectators at the center of the work, offering them ways of interaction that lead them to interfere in, and to some extent modify, not only the final work

but also their interrelations with it. Such is the case with [...] (2005), in which spectators are invited to use typewriters whose letter types have been replaced with dot types. Eventually, by resorting to pointillist writing to create drawings and words, the spectator manages to circumvent the muteness that the artist had tried to impose. And in the series *Zé Carioca*, viewers are prompted to write and draw on a wall painting inspired by the eponymous Brazilian cartoon character that Walt Disney created in the 1940s. Here the blank space of the speech bubble is not always observed: the editing of the text is entrusted to the public, thus each participant is allowed to erase and interfere in someone else's writing. In both installations, the spectator challenges to a certain extent the instructions received and turns his/her participation into a group gesture, thereby creating a space for negotiation in the works.



INVENTÁRIO DAS PEQUENAS MORTES (SOPRO)

2000

Single-channel video projection; 5 min., b/w, silent

A SIMILAR interrelationship involving chance and intention arises in a series of videos and films that the artist has been producing since the early 2000s, most often in collaboration with the filmmaker Cao Guimarães. One of the earliest of these creations is the film *Inventário das pequenas mortes [sopro]* (*Inventary of Small Deaths [Blow]*). Shot in black-and-white with a Super-8 camera amid a landscape typical of the Brazilian scrublands, this epic-like film features the trajectory of giant soap bubbles in the air. The editing interrupts the course of the moving bubbles just short of their bursting, splicing the take with that of another bubble moving in space, thereby suggesting a permanence that is not expected from such highly precarious structures. Their motion, shown in a loop projection, depicts a sort of resistance that questions the viewer about the deaths mentioned in the work's title. Here *small deaths* are connected to the French expression *la petit mort*, connoting sexual orgasm, in reference to the series of small explosions that are never shown but constitute a significant part of the film's narrative.



LOVE LETTERING

2002

Single-channel video projection; 6:32 min., color, sound

IN this same context, *Love Lettering* is a collaborative work captured directly in video by the artist and her brother, the scientist Sérgio Neuenschwander. The footage depicts fish bearing fragments of a love letter taken from an e-mail message written in English. Expressions such as *Love, news, come, hotel, oh, my dear, Rio, and 12:34:21* were attached to the fishes' tails with special surgical glue. In the staging of the love letter, which is partly random because the fish swim randomly, and partly a narcissistic assertion of a distant love, the language is radically fragmented to the point that it becomes *liquid*. The content of the text reveals a coveted relationship that is rendered distant by the notions of letter and fragment.³ In his *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Roland Barthes states that a love letter is "both blank (encoded) and expressive (charged with longing to signify desire)."⁴ The meaning of Neuenschwander's letter is not totally clear to us—it conveys our feeling at the onset of a new passion.

3 A few reflections on *Love Lettering* were first presented in a collaborative essay with ADRIANO PEDROSA, published in the brochure that accompanied Neuenschwander's exhibition curated by Pedrosa, held at the Museu de Arte da Pampulha in 2002.

4 ROLAND BARTHES, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. RICHARD HOWARD, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).
Translated by IZABEL MURAT BURBRIDGE.

EU DESEJO o SEU DESEJO
2003

Colored textile ribbons printed with people's wishes;
dimensions site specific

ON a Sunday morning in the spring of 2008, I waited a few hours outside the Carnegie Museum of Art, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, before the museum doors opened and I could see its international exhibition that day, so I was able to watch from a close distance the early arrivals interacting with the installation *Eu desejo o seu desejo* (*I wish your wish*). For this work, Rivane Neuenschwander sought inspiration in the devotional pilgrimages to the Church of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim in Salvador, Bahia. Bahia is a state in northeastern Brazil with a strong religious background that remains as the country's main custodian and practitioner of African Catholic spiritual traditions. Possibly for this reason, the public's first approach to this work holds a few similarities with a devotional gesture, a search for a *wishing wall* within an exhibition of contemporary art. In the Bahia tradition, multicolored ribbons are either handed out or sold; they are meant to be tied with three knots around a person's wrist or ankle, each knot representing a wish that will come true only when the fabric disintegrates and the bracelet falls off. Tradition has it that the ribbon should not be removed: it is supposed to fall off spontaneously, signifying the wish's fulfillment.



In her creation of a polyphonic panel for wish exchange, Neuenschwander drew inspiration from the beauty and power of the Bahia ribbons, which over the years have become, above all, a popular travel souvenir among the younger Brazilian generations. The installation takes up one wall of the exhibition gallery with hundreds of ribbons affixed to small holes, creating a great color field. Originally, the artist asked forty people to contribute their personal wishes, which she printed on different-colored ribbons. At the inaugural showing of this work, in a solo exhibition in São Paulo in 2003, viewers were encouraged to take one or more ribbons, thereby showing empathy with other people's wishes. In turn, they could contribute their own by inserting small paper cylinders into the emptied holes. As the installation is presented again and again, in different contexts, other wishes are added to it, in a seemingly endless process, creating an encounter of anonymous voices as well as of different historical places and times—from Recife, Brazil, in 2003 to Beirut, Lebanon, in 2007. In this way, to more general and perennial wishes—whether they be universal or extremely intimate, such as “my daughters’ happiness,” “more time for myself,” “I wish your wish”—other, more politically oriented or localized wishes are added, including “that democracy was real,” “I had a big flat and studio in the center of a big city,” and “Peace in the Middle East.”

Even the emergence of a strange desire expressed by one viewer seems coherent within this context. In an ambiguous manner, “I wish the end of all wishes” seems to ask for the end of our capacity to wish, or the end of the idea proposed in the artwork. An old question then comes to mind: Don't we all run the risk of losing our most precious asset—that is, our capacity to wish—the moment we have all our desires satisfied? Here I reveal my secret wish posted on a forgotten afternoon at the first showing of this piece in São Paulo: “I wish to wish.” Years later, on the morning I went to the Carnegie, exhibition visitors seemed to be magnetically attracted to that panel transformed by their own actions. As viewers removed some wishes and added new ones, the work's colors changed, rendering a painting in motion. Pens were passed from hand to hand as new wishes were added to the panel under hopeful glances. Outside the art world, the make-believe of wishes is liable to burst as suddenly and perversely as a soap bubble. From the remains of such a blast, we shall collect something that we might find useful: generosity, hope, exchange.



Eu desejo o seu desejo