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HOW TO BUILD CATHEDRALS. CILDO MEIRELES: A SENSORY GEOGRAPHY OF BRAZIL

Taking Cildo Meireles's installation, Mission/Missions – How to build cathedrals, as a starting point, this article will discuss artistic procedures in the artist's work and their enunciations in social structures, taking land as an artistic and literary topos. Within Cildo Meireles's Mission/Missions – How to build cathedrals (1987), there are points of intersection between artistic, philosophical, and literary forms of knowledge that ceaselessly and reflexively give rise to new questions. In this work, a sensory and schematic knowledge arranges the pillars of economy, the sacred, and animality around an architecture that is elaborated using coins, communion wafers, and animal bones. In Mission/Missions, Cildo Meireles creates a space at once geographical and historical that exposes the internal fractures of Western civilisation in its expansion on the South American continent. Working from this installation, we will revisit the artist's previous works to find material and conceptual elements that have been decisive for the realisation of Mission/Missions. Reading the installation through the materiality of previous works helps to orient us conceptually in an intertextual network that the very installation summons through the space created by Cildo Meireles.

Keywords: Installation; land; economy; literature; materiality

How to build cathedrals?

In *Mission/Missions – How to build cathedrals* (1987) the materiality of the space created by the artist turns the work's subtitle into a question: how to build cathedrals? This question enables an analysis that finds its discursive expression in an equation of coins, communion wafers, and bones. Its schematic arrangement presents a visual irony that goes back to colonial practices in which the symbolic and the material acted on a converging axis between the economy and the sacred. This visual irony does not hide a nascent economy – that of the Western world's expansion – that unseated a previous economy and that privileges manufacturing and the trades necessary for the construction of cathedrals. Building cathedrals was a key problem in the Middle Ages, as constructing a building of such dimensions posed the challenge of aligning the workforce and the architectonic plan in order to represent the Christian world.



Figure 1 Cildo Meireles. *Missão/Missões (Como construir catedrais)* [Mission/Missions (How to Build Cathedrals)], 1987. Media: 600,000 coins, 800 communion wafers, 2,000 cattle bones, 80 paving stones, and black cloth. Height: 235 cm, 36 m². 81 × 54 mm. Photo: Zoe Tempest. Courtesy of Daros Latin America Collection – Zurich.

As regards labour, a construction of these dimensions was almost equivalent to the tower of Babel, as projection into the sky, the choice of site, the search for the right light conditions, and the shaping of stone demanded the construction of a structure that, to be erected, required a well-developed system of engineering and geometry, in addition to specific forms of craftsmanship involving materials such as glass, steel, iron, and woodworks, to contextualise the continuous migrations to which artisans were subject (Hislop 2013). In these painstaking techniques, there is a close relationship between the economy and the sacred, which transformed throughout the course of maritime exploration. In *Mission/Missions*, it is notable that the question of *how to build cathedrals* traverses historical time, as is its persistence throughout transformations of the relationship between the economy and the sacred.

Cildo Meireles exhibits the details of previously invisible, interconnected structures of power, basing his work on the fundamental question that traverses the decline of the European Middle Ages. Two points from Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* are salient here: first, for the population of medieval Europe, in a society saturated by religion, temporality was practically indistinct from spirituality, and, second, religious emotion was a driving force for new forms of visual representation of the Biblical mysteries (Huizinga 1996). Many travellers who crossed the seas in the name of territorial expansion brought this imaginary with them, such that even historical documents like the letter of Pero Vaz de Caminha to the king of Portugal attest to the need to expand the Catholic faith to save those who had neither land nor religion. Here, agriculture – the working of the land – would become a defining element of the relationship between the sacred and the economic within a Western temporal framework.

Availing himself of what remains of this temporality, Cildo Meireles architectonically organises a space which upholds its fundamentals through a clear design of its

social-political-religious structure. When we suggest that Cildo Meireles employs design, it is because the installation bears the traces of someone who has an eye for design, on the one hand, and a wider engagement, that can be defined as the material reversal of historical time, on the other.

In *Mission/Missions*, there is a *physical* dimension to design and to its elaboration of territory that manifests itself differently than in other works by Cildo Meireles. This acts as a force that lifts the routes taken by missionaries and all kinds of adventurers from maps and navigation charts. These lines, rather than being abstracted, take on a minimal material dimension that accumulates in such a way as to turn the contingency of historical time into a material event. Historical modes are translated into a geography, in which the artist does not erase the original, but lays it over the geographical immensities of the South American continent, and above all its “emptiness”, which fed the imagination of many travellers. This emptiness must be expressed through the sign of land, and its absence in terms of graphic – and sacred – representation. Unmapped spaces would later become, at the expense of various conflicts, a field for internal and external colonisation, that entailed the imposition, throughout these conflicts, of systems of belief emerging from, and expanding, the economy. Retelling this story by reading the artistic procedure of *Mission/Missions* makes its materiality and reflexivity exhibit the intermediary layers between land and territory.

Physical handling, apprehending the agency of materials, transforms design into installation and has led Cildo Meireles to define the artist as a juggler, as one who administers three objects in a territory meant for only two. Thus, as Cildo Meireles argues, the artist, like a juggler, “must introduce the concept of time. The juggler finds a place in time” (Meireles 2001, 21). As such, in *Mission/Missions* there is a precise intersection of space and time. To the two circuits that should exist by themselves, religion and economy, the juggler-artist introduces a sacrificial animal element that is incorporated into these.

If, in *Mission/Missions*, Cildo Meireles employed the image of the juggler to create a space, in a colonial and post-colonial context, the sacred and the economy remain united in active tension and permanent conflict. This is the place of a symbolic mechanism that allows a first reading of *Mission/Missions*: the realisation of an art of counterconquest, to update a concept derived from the baroque in Latin America and invented by the Cuban writer José Lezama Lima. Cildo Meireles’s installation, by participating geographically in history, becomes a “tissue bestowed by the imago” (Lezama Lima 1993, 7). Counterconquest, in this case, consists of making visible the internal mechanisms of the physical and spiritual forces present in the installation.

The imago represents an imaginary survival, whose existence is materialised and transmitted through images. The installation, a space created by Cildo Meireles, is one whose spectatorial engagement establishes a temporality that is best understood through description of *Mission/Missions*. It consists of a space of 36 m² surrounded by a black veil, filtering a diffuse light to those outside of the work. The interior light grants a theatricality to the objects of which it is composed. Having passed through the translucent black curtain one finds a square concrete base on the floor, on which one can walk around the central part of *Mission/Missions*. It is also

possible to walk on the coins, and the closer one gets to the centre, the closer they are to a column of communion wafers. The three planes of the space are occupied: the bottom, by the coins, adding a sonorous dimension to the work when someone steps on them; the middle by the pillar of communion wafers, and the top by ox bones hanging from steel wires.

In *Mission/Missions*, the artist magnetises the symbolic field, simultaneously producing signifiers with the objects in question. The signifiers brought together hold irony and tragedy in suspension and discontinuity. The irony comes from of the subtitle's suggestion of an instruction, "how to build cathedrals", and the tragedy from the material itself that theatrically – and not literally – occupies the interior space. In this way, for a fictitious spectator, the work's materiality expands the temporalities opened up by art histories of the baroque and of minimalism. In *Mission/Missions*, the baroque's intersection with minimalism does not result in practices typical of conceptual art, as Cildo Meireles's work evokes another problematic, that of an engagement with simple forms produced in the complex of Brazilian social relations.²

To affirm that Cildo Meireles's work pinpoints contradictions in Brazilian society is not to reduce the resonance or reach of his works, or to reduce the form achieved by the artist to such a label. Rather, it only implies that Meireles's aesthetic concerns are the product of a dynamic that, schematically speaking, is established between the baroque and minimalism. This dynamic engages economic aspects, such as colonisation and underdevelopment, behavioural aspects, as underscored by Meireles's discussion of "anthropological circuits" and "ideological circuits", as elaborated at the beginning of the 1970s, and material aspects, present in *Southern Cruzeiro* (1969–1970), a small wooden cube made of oak and pine that measures 9 × 9 mm. These aspects contribute to a reading of the artist's presence in and historical belonging to Latin America, and his ability to absorb, without merely replicating, other artistic manifestations, which is infrequent in Latin American art, where concepts generally consist of a performance of a poverty of materials and the precarity of life. The very narrative of *Southern Cross*, a text published in the catalogue of the exhibition, *Information*, in the MoMA, in 1970, explores the fables and myths of the people who live west of the line of Torsedillas, since, as the artist concludes: "a people whose history consists of legends and fables is a happy people" (Meireles 1999). The search for legends and savagery conceptually connects the installation and the narrative, as the choice of oak and pine wood was carefully considered. For the "savage" people west of the line of Torsedillas, the friction between the two woods produced fire and, through this action, contact with the sacred world. This is a differed trace of the conceptual or minimalist aspect of Cildo Meireles's work,¹ as the artist condenses allegory into minimalism such that we can affirm that in his work there is both a baroque minimalism and a minimalist baroque. In his work, Meireles succeeds, from the perspective of design, in conceiving and creating virtual spaces through the elaboration of discrete details. On the one hand, his work possesses a specificity of form, and, on the other, its reflexivity is developed through simple forms, from which it can be affirmed that Cildo Meireles's work is minimal in its form and baroque in its force. In any case, his simple forms do not foreclose economic,

anthropological or aesthetic resonances, without which there would not be an opening of historical time through the continuous juggling of material and concept.

Cildo Meireles does not compromise the concrete and banal aspect of his work to communicate a concept, metaphor or allegory, or to maintain a symbolic scale. The installation *Mission/Missions* is precise, clear, and eloquent without being literal. The very perspective of its materials facilitates the reading of texts which evoke distinct temporalities, be they historical or geographical. For example, in the semantic field, critics can find a relation between Cildo Meireles's installation and the sermons of Antonio Vieira, among many other connections. In this sense, Vieira's "Sixtieth Sermon" (in Vieira 2001) offers a critique of the art of writing sermons which allows us to visualise the clarity with which Cildo Meireles organises and deploys objects. Antonio Vieira elaborates a poetics of the sermon, which must have a single colour, object, and material (in Vieira 2001). The importance of Vieira's sermon for a reading of *Mission/Missions* has its basis in the work's unity, in which the sum of its parts creates semantic and visual coherence, producing the installation's reality. On the one hand, *Mission/Missions – How to build cathedrals* does not compromise its materiality to achieve its symbolic effect. On the other, its idea retains the clarity of one of the sermons written by Antonio Vieira.

If Vieira delivers a sermon with precise images through a "chess game of words", Cildo Meireles obtains precision through design. He puts into perspective belief in and calculation of design. In 1987, Cildo Meireles was invited to Rio Grande do Sul for the exhibition *Missões 300 anos: a visão do artista* ("The vision of the artist. 300 years of missions in Brazil"), by curator Frederico Morais. His journey to São Miguel das Missões and meetings there were key components of the architectonic project born of this trip. The process of transforming the design or plan of *Mission/Missions* into an installation renders the work an engineering lesson on how to build a cathedral employing baroque constructivism. This lesson shifts ways of looking at Brazil's colonial history, such that the work modifies the current, conventional definition of "contemporary art". From the title of the exhibition organised by Frederico Morais, one might surmise that the artists involved would do nothing more than create contemporary forms of the colonial world. Indeed, there is a mechanism within the contemporary form of Cildo Meireles's installation that translates and transmits people's memory. As a space of memory, *Mission/Missions* materialises an imperative that echoes as a kind of visual sermon: "let's build a cathedral".

It is necessary, however, to pause at an aspect of the question of the cathedral in contemporary art that precedes *Mission/Missions*. Organised by Jean-Christophe Ammann, *Let's build a cathedral* is the title of a work that brought together a conversation between four artists in the spring of 1986 in the Kunsthalle Basel. The product of a conversation between Joseph Beuys, Enzo Cucchi, Anselm Kiefer, and Jannis Kounellis, *Bâtissons une cathédrale* (*Let's build a cathedral*) finds the limit of the artist in the act of cathedral-building. This discussion is rooted in models of nomadism, which are, therefore, more horizontal, and the role of the artist in building a *monument*: "we can no longer build a cathedral like that of Cologne and install it next to it. It must be different. We must be able to believe in it. We can't repeat anything, that would not grant us any credibility" (Beuys et al. 1986,

99). The question of belief appears reconfigured by the weight of a space's history and the impossibility of repeating an architectonic model. Cildo Meireles knew that building a cathedral was not a question of imitating history, but of creating history, just as economic and religious power, as they establish themselves, co-produce empty spaces. This perspective is only sketched out in order to illustrate how, in *Mission/Missions*, Cildo Meireles occupies and constructs a cathedral in the many empty spaces of power, some of which Meireles occupied over the course of two years. In these spaces, Meireles identifies an ideological meta-circuit whose principal signifier is land. In *Mission/Missions* everything, from its coins to its bones, is impregnated with land. Land is the absent element that persists like an imago, as territories are constituted, but simultaneously fragmented and abstracted for autochthonous peoples directly linked to the land. This absence is configured by the coordinates of maps, the delimitation of borders, and the politicisation of space as a means of constituting States and, consequently, of territory for some and of land for others.

From a geo-political perspective, Franco Farinelli establishes a distinction between land and territory, whereby "territory, in fact, is not a word that only derives from land, as is normally thought. In it, there is also terror, that terror that only political power can exercise" (Farinelli 2012,84). Consequently, under the optic of the State, instituting a territory for people that belong to the land becomes difficult. The conflictual origin of territory occupies the centre of Cildo Meireles's cathedral. However, it is important to understand that the political question of space also originates in design. If, in the first instance, the signifier "land" is negatively configured in the constructed space of territory, design, in Cildo Meireles's work, constitutes a negative space. As such, *Mission/Missions* can guide us through Cildo Meireles's work, in order to understand his relationship with design.

Design shift: generating negative space (Corners, 1967–1968)

Cildo Meireles's works tell stories without requiring that the visitor seek out concepts to illuminate them. On the one hand, there are "simple forms" that can be understood in terms of André Jolles's work (see note 2); on the other, precise design lies at the root of Cildo Meireles's work. At the end of the 1970s, more specifically between 1967 and 1968, Meireles conceived of a means of turning design into space in *Virtual spaces*. An enthusiast of mask design, Cildo Meireles explains that he produced a dialogue between masks that immediately became an action. Taking his observation of the internal corners of the walls of houses as a starting point, the artist produced 44 projects that offered a means of overcoming Euclidean space, or the three planes of projection related to angles and distance, elaborated by the Greek mathematician Euclid in 300 BCE. Cildo Meireles sought to give shape to *Virtual Spaces* through the perception of place.

According to Cildo Meireles, virtual space does not absolutely depend on the point of view of the spectator, but on the degree of abstraction of the corner of the walls. It was a common, domestic environment in which the artist discovered

space. This discovery and conquest of space through graphite and pencil designs on graph paper led him to create *Corners*.

So, what exactly are these *Corners* like? According to the artist, they are places where action is non-existent, a “place of negative space”,³ demarcating a refuge. The construction of a space of refuge was inherent to the installation’s conception. In all of Meireles’s installations, corners and edges generate virtual negative space. In *Corners*, however, negative space emerges from its extreme opposite: road crossings, street corners, crossroads, localities that synthesise places in action. Negative space, in this prolongment, is the result of neutral or suspended space. Solely emphasising this aspect of the space of corners, the artist carries out minimal dislocations, even managing to elaborate a narrative about his own body’s loss of motor control. Simple forms emerge from design, and are also the means through which the artist tells of a “vision” and makes a reference to a readymade:

Two events explain how this work came about. The first is an episode that happened when I was eight years old, in my grandma Otília’s house in Goiânia. I was a very active child: the first to wake up and the last to go to sleep. But one day, after lunch, I decided to have a nap and went to lie down in a room. I laid on the bed and suddenly I wanted to get up. I tried to move a leg, a foot, but I couldn’t. I thought it was very strange. I tried to move again, but nothing happened. I was paralysed, but my senses functioned completely: I could hear the sounds from the yard, the kitchen, voices, the cockerel. But I couldn’t move or make a sound. Whilst I was in this state, hands with painted fingernails, followed by a woman, began to emerge from the corner more or less diagonal to the headrest. She then came slowly and completely out of the corner. She seemed to be very old, but I couldn’t tell her exact age. Wearing a lot of make-up and smiling, she walked towards me, put her feet on the bed, levitated and seemed to lay her toes on mine. I said all the prayers I knew, but nothing worked. I remember that as I said “Hail Holy Queen”, the woman moved away, smiling all the while. And when she returned to the corner, I remember that I regained motor control. There was another time in 1967, when I went to the bathroom in a bar, in Laranjeiras, a neighbourhood in the city of Rio de Janeiro. There was a urinal – resembling the model of Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain of R. Mutt* (1917) – in a dark corner. The place was dark, but light from the ventilation flap projected my shadow into that corner. (Fernandes 2013, 70–71)

In Meireles’s work, narrative and materiality generate negative space: firstly, by means of graphite, coloured pencil, graph paper, wood, cloth, ink, and wooden paving. Indeed, in *Comment bâtir une cathédrale* (How to build a cathedral), Malcom Hislop underscores that design was an indispensable skill to the medieval master, even becoming a method of conceiving the details of buildings (Hislop 2013). Secondly, negative space is generated through the perspective of Cildo Meireles’s *virtual* observer whose motor control is suspended, but whose senses remain active. The way the artist narrates his childhood maintains a search for past phenomena, pictorially discovering the practice of shade and the readymade from Duchamp. The combination of elements of simple forms, found in and gathered from popular and oral Brazilian culture, and conceptual post-Duchamp art is at the root of *Corners*. Its conceptual formalism must be freely read as coming from a familiar, oral narrative in which apparitions and prayers are verbally organised and meticulously projected onto paper. This is the invisible part of Cildo Meireles’s work that is geometrically buttressed by its rectangular framework and the corners created by its walls. Nonetheless, the artists’ account helps to unveil an “emotional

charge” that it invites the observer to recreate, even if it does not exactly match, the author’s memory.

Another example of this, as regards the invention of space, dates from the same period, when, in 1967, Cildo Meireles began to make one of his most well-known installations, *Red shift: Impregnation, spill/environment, shift* (1967–1984).

This work is divided into three spaces. The first, “impregnation”, consists of a room containing a monochromatic collection of objects, all diverse shades of red, including a bird. In the other two spaces, which the artist calls “spill/environment” and “shift” – in Duchamp’s anecdotal way – colour is material, even a character: “Spill/environment” consists of an amusing operation whereby colour abandons its receptacle, a wine bottle, and runs along the floor like a trail of ink, down a dark corridor that leads to another room. In this room, entitled “shift”, the visitor is immersed in darkness and a “shift” can be made out: a white ceramic sink and a metal tap, installed at an oblique angle, from which flows a red liquid. *Red shift* is thus one of the ways in which Cildo Meireles has managed to escape Euclidean space, such as he projected at the end of the 1970s, in *Virtual spaces*.

Our revisiting of Cildo Meireles’s earlier works has sought to find a way of looking at *Mission/Missions* that allows each work to illuminate ways of looking at others, revealing details about the “reflexivity”, execution, choice of material, intermediation, even conquest of space of each work. *Mission/Missions* generates negative space, or a space of refuge which is demarcated by concrete, located between the curtain that separates the 36 m² work from its coin-covered floor. The installation’s corners, located on its concrete floor, are empty. *Mission/Missions*’ virtuality resides in its concrete paving, which allows participants to silently walk through the space that fills the work’s architecture: the observer is a virtual participant. Once this limit is passed, the participant becomes a virtual observer walking over the coins, abstracting them from the sound produced by the movement of the observer’s feet. As the artist described in relation to the origins of *Virtual Spaces – Corners*, *Mission/Missions* creates a polarity between fixed, or immobile, observation and the visual participation of the spectator.

As regards perception, *Mission/Missions* bears testament to the cathedral as an architectural document on three levels: the isolation produced by the black fabric, the virtuality of the corners between the concrete floor and the fabric, and the relatively unstable floor of coins. The first level of perception, the black fabric, bears a formal resemblance to that used in a 1970 installation entitled *Introduction to a new criticism*. In it, fabric partially conceals a white chair, whose seat is covered with white nails. In each of the works there is a transformation, in which design acts as a kind of impulse to formally manifest “negative space”.

The space that the artist creates through design and, subsequently, through installation, manifests the history of material exchange not just among men, but between men and gods and men and animals, turning its continuous transformations into beliefs and fables that continue to resonate in Cildo Meireles’s installations and projects. One way of reading Cildo Meireles’s work is as an artist who plastically avails himself of history. His work creates historical spaces that are – far from geometric lines – topographical works. In Cildo Meireles’s production, the history of material exchanges remains in play, overlaying the economies that

precede them following colonial formulas. Continuing our inquiry into “how to build cathedrals”, the “how” present in Cildo Meireles’s title is a way of balancing three objects (coins, communion wafers, and bones) in the architecture of cathedrals. *Mission/Missions* does not exactly profane the idea of a cathedral (Agamben 2007), rather it underlines the effort, notion of work, and expense of energy required to erect a sacred space and awakens an awareness of the existence of the angular stone of all cathedrals. If land is the absent element of *Mission/Missions*’ structure that is nonetheless present, its supplement is the very workforce of cathedrals. The artist emphasises a world that sacralises work. Ultimately, the sacred returns to land in the form of work itself. Faced with discourses present in many societies that hold forms of production to be sacred, the artist accesses the *ethos* that combines accumulation, work, and salvation. Effort and work, placed on high, with what remains of animals, elevate and commit to collective memory the precarious lives of those peoples who were killed *like* animals.⁴ In the work, this fact is not exclusively symbolic, it is material.

Through this materiality, and more precisely through the singular-plural term, *Mission/Missions*, Cildo Meireles occupies a place in time. From a philological point of view, a mission denotes the fulfilling of a request, or an order. A mission can also bring together a group of people and lead them on a voyage overseas, not to mention the intrinsic relationship between missions and the act of preaching sermons. Here, however, missions are inserted into another context: that of the semantic homology between the communion wafers used by the artist in the installation, and the sacred time that the communion wafer, as part of the sermon, institutes. Given that the artist’s bringing together of materials exhibits his clear desire to express a concept of time, we relate the mission to the sermon through the central material of his work: the communion wafer. The circular and temporal structure of the communion wafer appears in the work of Antonio Vieira, an author whose textuality dialogues with the plastic dimension of the cathedral created by the artist. In part IX of the *Sermon of Our Lady of Ó* (1640), Vieira interrogates the circular form of the communion wafer:

Why should you care that the Church instituted that the form of the Consecrated Communion Wafer be circular, as it was in the beginning and has been ever since? Some in Greece wanted the shape of the Communion Wafer to be square, to signify the four elements of which Christ’s body is composed, and the four parts of the world, over which He has supreme dominion. But the circular form prevailed, not just because the circle also represents the roundness of the world, but as Pope Gregory I says, being a shape that has neither beginning, nor end, no other form expresses more clearly the eternity, the infinity, and the divine immensity enclosed in that miraculous circle. (Vieira 2001, 482).

If infinity, eternity, and divine immensity are enclosed in this fragile substance that dissolves at the slightest contact with saliva, the use of eight hundred communion wafers exposes the finitude of this degree of infinity, drawing a line with the symbolic circularity of the world. Intertwining science, economy, and religion, the title of one of Cildo Meireles’s works makes mention of the Latin phrase “Eppur si muove” (“and yet it moves”) attributed to the Italian Galileo Galilei, who, in 1633, was forced by the Inquisition to deny his theory that the earth moved around the

sun. *Eppur si muove* (1991) gathers banknotes, Canadian coins, and receipts in three transparent piggybanks. The artist exchanged a thousand Canadian dollars for French francs and subsequently for English pounds. After one hundred currency exchanges the artist was left with four dollars and a few cents. In the first piggybank, the artist placed the initial value, in the second, all the transaction receipts, and, in the third, the money that remained from the operations (Meireles and Todoli 2014).

Thus, in *Mission/Missions*, infinity is vertically reproduced, forming a line and a link between coins and bones, or rather, on the symbolic plane, capital and the animal condition. The coins, despite their roundness, contradict the inquiry into eternity of Antonio Vieira's sermon, the absence of a beginning and end. The artist's choice to use coins of low value in the work allow it to tell a story about Brazil's postcoloniality and how this relates to its underdevelopment. Indeed, the artist relays how he managed to exchange five dollars for six hundred thousand *crus*, Brazilian coins, to make the installation. Here, an artistic economy avails itself of an act of currency exchange, even if the artist does not want to tie himself to the Brazilian context of economic inflation.

As part of our discussion of the limits of the economy in peripheral countries, it is necessary to draw attention to the term "underdevelopment", which was pertinently used throughout the 1960s and 1970s in Brazil by economist Celso Furtado. Furtado summarises what he terms the "phenomenon of contemporary underdevelopment" as the displacement of economic borders: "the development of European economic borders almost always translated into the formation of hybrid economies in which a capitalist nucleus came to peacefully coexist with an archaic structure" (Furtado 2013, 132). Contact with an archaic structure, as Celso Furtado argues, transforms subsistence economies, or rather, ways of maintaining the pre-existing functions of life – eating, dressing, cooking, dancing, etc. – by reducing these to production and consumption. Considering both Celso Furtado's reflection and *Mission/Missions*, it is possible to imagine how ways of life, homogenised by consumption, cannot be precisely reproduced in the same way in all parts of the world. Such economic mimicry would require the removal of the sacred from production and, above all, from consumption, disregarding the very animality of ways of life that are directly linked to land, dance, celebration, eating, and dressing, outside of narrow economic limits. Its close relation to consumption translates into a division between qualified life and bare life, or more precisely, precarious life. This is the cycle in which it is immersed: the maintenance of qualified life surrounded by the cruel theatre of bare and precarious life. However, bare, precarious life is not a straightforwardly representable event.

The numismatic fiction of Cildo Meireles: when zero is worth one

As regards the structure of the work's numismatic fiction, it is necessary to understand how, in the first instance, economies disorganise that which they precede, in order to create and establish points of contact with that which is archaic: Celso Furtado gives the example of colonial expansion, in which the lands of other continents were seen as "unoccupied", and agriculture and the production of

commodities were consequently regarded as ways to populate the United States, Canada, Australia, etc. In this mixture of the European economic mode of production and a natural, archaic element can be found a search for the riches of the earth, the eternal repetition of extraction. This mixture provides a strong basis for Cildo Meireles's numismatic fiction. The term “numismatic” – from the Latin *numisma* or *numismatis*, or coin – is linked to knowledge of coins and medals, that is, of the lost value of coins and the impossible genealogy of medals. Consequently, an act of invention accompanies the symbolic field in which ways of life are inscribed into social reality, rendering coins a form of mediation that is born of the search for equal exchange.

An unconventional way of doing art criticism, but also one of the most incisive readings of Cildo Meireles's work, can be found in the 1979 film, directed and scripted by Wilson Coutinho, in which the cowboy John Wayne, the hero of the Wild West, is dubbed so that he appears to be giving a lecture on Cildo Meireles's work. Wayne refers to money as it is used by Meireles: “I like financial utopias, the popular dream of finding the end of money on the streets.” Coutinho identifies how one of the key components of Meireles's plastic-critical operations resides in financial utopias, in the image of the value zero, another meaningful, circular element that recurs throughout his work. In this work, zero obtains the condition of signifier, of one, attaining a concrete value. Meireles's zero originally dates from the 1970s, in the form of his *Zero centavo* coin (1974/1978), *Zero cruzeiro* note, *Zero cent*, and *Zero dollar* (1978–1984), his *Zero real* being produced later, in 2013.



Figure 2 Cildo Meireles. *Zero cruzeiro*, 1974–1978. Media: lithograph on offset paper. Dimensions: 6.5 × 15.5 cm. Unlimited editions. Photo: Pat Kilgore. MoMA Collection. Courtesy of Cildo Meireles.

The absent element, the neutral point that demarcates the beginning of space and time in terms of hours and metres, occupies a place on the scales. Through this weighting, *Mission/Missions* encompasses this key aspect of Meireles's production. After all, to construct a territory, the juggler must mobilise the absent element, albeit through the miniscule value of the coins on the floor, extended through a series of zeros.

A definition of fiction that encompasses its relation to the field of the real, symbolic, and imaginary aspects of money is constantly being sought. Nonetheless, fiction remains an engine for the creation of desires for new uses of common sense, or, rather, the space of circulation. Notions like debt and economic growth serve as bases for works of art and literary texts in Latin America. In Brazil, the fiduciary work of Cildo Meireles is an acute example of this. Why fiduciary? Because money depends on a relationship of trust, on a legacy, and on transmission. Such characteristics justify the use of the term "numismatic", demonstrating that it is much more than an accessory to describe Cildo Meireles's fiction. It is a term which denotes the study and collection of coins and paper money minted by a nation and carrying its official designs. Collection, in the public and private realm, is a social phenomenon of which Cildo Meireles makes use in his monetary work. Through this work, he perceived the slight element or practice of monumentalism within the mechanisms of financial movements, which circulates in the form of coin. Alongside an anthropology of money and its structural and structuring traces in the Western and Westernised economy, in coin and paper money can be found the principles of sculpture and painting, as well as a relationship between the tridimensional and the bidimensional. These principles, in continuous contact, form part of the structuring force that moulds ways of life. The use of the signifier zero on coins and notes is a product of the artist's imagination that interferes with that which most regulates the real: economic speculation. Linked to fiction, money speculates and, within the artistic field, specifically in Cildo Meireles's work, performs hybrid forms of numismatic art. The artist himself asserts that he was interested in discussion about the "gap between symbolic value and real value, use value and exchange value, that in art is a continuous, permanent operation" (Fernandes 2013, 22). The first volume of Karl Marx's *Capital* gives a history of the circulation of money and its metamorphoses, a term constantly used by the German thinker:

Since money does not reveal what has been transformed into it, everything, commodity or not, is convertible into money. Everything becomes saleable and purchaseable. Circulation becomes the great social retort into which everything is thrown, to come out again as the money crystal. Nothing is immune from this alchemy, the bones of saints cannot withstand it, let alone more delicate *res sacrosantae*. (1990, 229)

Sacrosanct things (*res sacrosanctae*) circulate through the economy, moved by money's invisibility and alchemically transformed into merchandise. Cildo Meireles, employing Marx's terms "use value" and "exchange value", investigates what can be termed the zero degree of circulation. The space created by Cildo Meireles in *Mission/Missions* facilitates the intersection of anthropology and fiction, where there exists the speculative possibility for an anthropology of autochthonous peoples,

who are absent from the installation. This anthropology subsequently becomes attentive to minorities and how they are relegated to ghettos.

Beside *Mission/Missions*, the zeros on Meireles's *cruzeiro*, dollar, and *real* denaturalise money and make it opaque, exposing it to be not just a language, but also as lacking any value, thus emphasising its status as a medium. Zeroing money, in an underdeveloped economy, means displaying land and its use value alongside the zeros on the note, signifiers that are present in the equation "coin, communion wafer, and bone", or rather, the mark of these absences. In *Ausências* (Absences), Raúl Antelo elucidates how "fiction extracts the meaning of the *presens*, from the *absens* of the images that it coordinates, arranges and leaves for us to use" (Antelo 2009, 5). According to Antelo, fiction is critical. Following the logic of Cildo Meireles's previous works, it is anthropological. The former conception of fiction removes the signifier from social space to employ it in its work, whilst the latter inserts the signifier employed by the artist into social space. Drawing upon both conceptions, in *Mission/Missions*, Cildo Meireles turns absence into a signifier, where, for example, zero acquires value through its unit.

In this method of attributing value can be found the Indian-madman binomial that occupies the *Zero cruzeiro* and *Zero real* note created by the artist. On both notes, negative space persists. On one side, this is generated by an image, taken by Meireles in an asylum in Goiás, of an asylum patient, stood in a corner, whose back is turned to observers, that is accompanied by detailed design work. The patient occupies the space that the artist, at the end of the 1970s, had identified as a refuge. The presence of the Indian in these works consists of a photo taken from a dossier prepared by the artist's father, Cildo Meireles,⁵ as he fought against the massacre of the Krao Indians, who were decimated by a farmer who flew over the region where they lived, releasing infected clothes and exterminating more than four thousand indigenous people. This reduced the Krao to a small community of four hundred, of whom half went mad due to the scale of their loss (Fernandes 2013). These two narratives return us to the zero signifier, which could also be referred to using the common refrain "this is worthless". By creating a signifier of nothing, Cildo Meireles inverts the value of his art, whilst providing a genealogy of his monetary work:

The zeros (*Zero cruzeiro* and *Zero centavo*, 1974/1978) are a product of *Money Tree*, the ambiguity of being material and symbol (in the case of Brazil, during certain periods, money was the cheapest material). In *Insertions ... or Eppur si muove* (1991) resides the problem of the circulation of money. And, in *Mission/Missions* (1987), money appears as an ancient, ancestral material. (Fernandes 2013, 110)

Altogether, the 600,000 coins that compose *Mission/Missions* form part of a numismatic fiction, as the more coins collected by the artist, the closer they can simulate a genealogy of economic and migratory relations. The coins do not circulate, however, even as zeros. In this sense, spectators of this piece are faced with a tautology, learning its minimalist lesson that, not by accident, is also a political gesture: "what you see is what you see." How does this redundancy, taken from North American minimalist art, herald a political event when dislocated to a South American context? Cildo Meireles taps into a classic tautology anchored in the

geography of Brazil. The zero value that the artist gives the coins resides in their ancestrality, the material, generally copper or gold, of which they are made. Furthermore, the choice of coin included in the installation depends on the country in which the installation is held. In Brazil, for example, their copper coloration means that the light they reflect is reddened, despite the work's light being directed upwards, at the bones. That the selection of coins of low value and that the work's light varies according to their metal once again reveals the condensed allegory of the artist's baroque-minimalism. This subtle national representation is achieved by that which is worth least in monetary terms and abstracted by the light indirectly produced by that which has little value. The question of light also highlights the work's archaic condition, returning to the central problem of the Middle Ages, that forms part of the work's title: how to build a cathedral.

Given that the coins play an important role in the work's illumination, we can return to the fact that a cathedral's light was a key concern of the medieval builder. In gothic cathedrals, for example, clerestories, or elevated and inset openings, were constructed. The effect of light flowing from above follows the principles of apocalyptic texts, evoking a celestial Jerusalem (Hislop 2013). Erecting a cathedral required many forms of artisanal knowledge and workers, including carpenters, glaziers, painters, ironmongers, and roofers. Faced with such a monumental, vertical work, and given that height was such an important factor, artisans constantly moved, their itineracy depending on offers of work. Cathedral builders adapted to circumstance (Hislop 2013). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari later identified the figure of the artisan, and above all the blacksmith, as one who, unlike the hunter, agricultural worker or livestock farmer, maintains material fluxes in a state of pure productivity (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). Cildo Meireles's installation returns us to land and metals, taking these as its very ground. In this sense, the image with which Cildo Meireles provides us is of a juggler who elaborates negative space through design, creates a place, and, employing installation practices, generates an economy that mobilises the absent structure of land through metal. This movement is simultaneously anthropological and fictional, as are the stories of possible cathedrals contained in *Mission/Missions*.

Face and crown: *Mission/Missions* and *Oblivion*

Mission/Missions (how to build cathedrals) is an installation that presents land topographically, an absent cathedral making itself present in the work. A sacred and archaic economy perforates present time to counter the logic of the monument. The installation can, however, also be seen as a parody of the monument. Its parody uncovers how each monument also constructs a space of forgetting, guided by the allegorical desire to conceal the violence that would grant monuments a melancholic quality, a dissonant song of victory. This parallel song establishes a territory within a territory, as it is unceasingly in conflict with(in) a social structure, of which the monument is the most allegorical of borders. *Mission/Missions* shows that it is not just the history of art, but artistic practice itself that materialises what

Carl Einstein foresaw in his methodical aphorism: “the struggle of all optical experiments, of invented spaces and figures” (Einstein 1991, 65).

An example of this struggle of images is strategically configured in relation to the principle of the monument. The Brazilian critic Sônia Salzstein contextualises the problematic employing Rosalind Krauss’s notion of sculpture in the expanded field:

We can apply to a Brazilian context Rosalind Krauss’s reflection that the excavation of the negative field of the monument posed the very condition of modern sculpture’s emergence; this excavation encompassed the dissolution of the logic of the base and pedestal; the knocking down the historical focal point of historical reverence; the implacable corrosion of the classical space of representation, the erection of an autonomous and nomadic body in its place, and, above all, the arrival at an understanding of sculpture as an absolute interiority, open to the most abstract operations of thought, rather than as volume-content (thought of in terms of mass) deposited in container-space (thought of as “empty”, neutral, homogeneous and continuous). In Brazil, the modern would only be interrupted in the 1950s, principally through neoconcrete transgressions of the plane and the installation of lived space-time, breaking from Euclidean conceptions of neutral and immutable space. (Salzstein 1992, 36)

Cildo Meireles was aware of these neoconcrete conquests, above all in relation to lived space-time. Perhaps it was this awareness that, in 1970, led the artist to elaborate a sculpture that transgressed the plane, but foreclosed the establishment of a lived space-time: *Introduction to a new criticism*. As a critic, Meireles finds the very expansion of sculpture to be a parodic device that can neutralise even the possibility of monumentalising other artists. The social efficacy of Cildo Meireles’s parody resides in his monument’s removal of the allegoric layer that covers violence – present in both the economy and the sacred – and thus accesses the emptiness attributed to land, which is frequently occupied on the condition of this emptiness and of that work that was instituted as an element of human negativity. Like the zero signifier contained in Cildo Meireles’s numismatic fiction, land is an absent structure that resurfaces in the ancestrality of coins as a document of human exchanges; in the visibility of bones, material traces of completed exchanges, and in the presence of communion wafers, a spiritual exchange and abstraction of land itself.

Echoing Maria Filomena Molder’s work, the topography of land in *Mission/ Missions* intersects with the morphology of history, through “the absence of coin”: “A coin is as much an item that passes from hand to hand, as an institution in which millions of such coins are minted: this is the site of its individuation. (...) we see the mintmark but not the mould, we see coins but not coin itself” (Molder 1995, 183). Consequently, coins that circulate anonymously acquire a slight monumentality. Someone carrying a coin in their pocket or using it in commerce deepens their allegory. Indeed, the very minting of isolated coins grants them a slight sculptural element. As a monument, they facilitate the requisite forgetting of defeated civilisations. For this reason, land – its accidents, its topography, its worship, its way of offering subsistence, its archaic component – is a concern that can be read in and is frequently renewed in Cildo Meireles’s work, including in smaller pieces, such as a ring that holds a grain of sand (*Condensed I – Desert*,



Figure 3 Cildo Meireles. *Introdução a uma nova crítica/Introduction to a New Criticism*, 1970. Media: wooden chair, nails, black netting, and iron frame. Dimensions: 160 × 50 × 50 cm. 509 × 660 mm. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of Cildo Meireles.

1970) and *Southern Cross* (1969–1970). In *Mission/Missions*, coins, communion wafers, and bones are absented precisely because they are accumulated.

From the perspective of Christian economy, which underpins the representation of the image in the West (Mondzain 2000), *parousia* is defined as a second coming. Thus, the communion wafer does not embody an absent body, but presence itself. This is the distinction between communion wafer and coin from the point of view of the history of profane and sacred exchanges. Throughout its history, the notion of the presence of coin has transformed according to the dynamics of the economy. Almost the inverse of communion wafers, the spirit of value emanates from absent coin. In *Les monnayeurs du langage*, Jean-Joseph Goux presents a structural homology between coin and language. This link opens up a complex structure of values and exchange of “gold, language and the phallus” that become the general equivalents of the “triple register of measurement, exchange and reserve” (Goux 1984, 10).

Jean-Joseph Goux's observation reveals *Mission/Missions'* prison to be linguistic, economic, and literary. The historical foundations that legitimate a linguistic reading of *Mission/Missions* thus seek to re-establish a rupture noted by Goux: the notion of rational accumulation, and, above all, reserves. The artist exhibits a foundation that no longer exists. Ecstatic, coins evoke an economy linked to land – almost an agriculture – given that an economy of animal traction hangs in the ox bones that occupy the top plane of the installation. In this sense, the work follows a clear blueprint: a financial base, a theological and paternal nucleus, and a ceiling composed of the residue of animal bodies. This ceiling is not made of simply any part of the body, however, but tibias, the most animal part of the ox, which evoke traction and friction against the ground and embody the negativity of human work.

Through these bones, it is possible to read another of Antonio Vieira's sermons in Cildo Meireles's cathedral. It is one of the most eloquent sermons of his youth, "On burying the bones of the hanged", preached in the Church of Mercy in Bahia in 1637. Vieira establishes a distinction between peace and justice, affirming that peace does not come before justice. "You see those unburied bones? They are the seed from which peace grows" (Vieira 1908, 92). From these bones, arises another animal image: that of the Biblical deluge and Noah. The first image of peace after the deluge and the first animal to leave the ark, cautions Antonio Vieira, was not the dove, but the crow, as introduced in the following image: "the crow, having left the ark, started to eat and fatten itself on the bodies of those drowned in the deluge. When the meat of the executed is given to the crows, peace is certain in the world. If the crow had brought one of those cadavers to the ark, Noah would have been as certain of it as of the dove's olive branch, if not more" (Vieira 1908, 92). Through a reading of Vieira's sermon, the architecture of *Mission/Missions* acquires a post-flood and apocalyptic significance that was quite literal for the autochthonous peoples living in Brazilian territory before it was named after a wood used as a raw material on a vast scale: Brazilwood. Paradise for those who arrived there, hell for those who were already there. Much ambiguity has been generated about land in the name of the economies of heaven and hell. Between these lies land, the ancestor of territory. The post-apocalyptic sign appropriates the anthropological and fictional meaning of *Mission/Missions*.

Once an anthropological and fictional meaning of the work that understands land as an absent nucleus in an economy that does not dispense with the sacred is established, it is necessary to differentiate each of the artist's operations. The three planes of Cildo Meireles's installation connect to history through their plasticity. The artist knows that it is impossible to remove the symbolic value of each of these. Instead, it is through these "remains" of the common uses of money, communion, and animality that he travels between the anthropological and fictional dimensions of the work. Cildo Meireles's use of the subtitle, "how to build cathedrals", references the work's procedure – its appropriation of history as a coin to be exchanged with its time – and suggests how this procedure is employed to summon forth a place.

Mission/Missions awakens a figurative composition, the semantic force of its title recalling the imago. It thus creates an internal articulation through which it

represents missions in a Brazilian cultural context in terms of population and economic existence, as well as exhibiting a source of European enrichment through the religion-economy binomial.⁶ In Cildo Meireles's work, the social and subterranean dimension of work is present in the installation *Lampshade* (1997–2010). Taking a bulb, a photograph, a dynamo, and human labour as his materials, Cildo Meireles recreates a possible route of *Mission/Missions*: a caravel on the high sea. In the lower part of the work, one finds the engine that moves the work's images of navigation: four men dressed in white turning a dynamo that not only keeps the images in motion, but whose internal light illuminates the images on display. In terms of device, this figurative composition is a kind of anti-cinema. *Lampshade* once again returns to the notion of work, constantly rebuilding Cildo Meireles's cathedrals.

The figurative composition produces a rhetorical question about the return of land, as even with one's feet firmly on the ground, the image remains in motion. This journey culminates in *Mission/Missions*, as, unlike the monument and coins that circulate, land exposes a constant time of war. At the limits of anthropology and fiction, Cildo Meireles's sensory geography simultaneously exhibits both sides of the coin – its face and its crown – evoking the constant state of conflict within his work. This permanent conflict is both ironic and tragic. Of all the historical-geographic tensions that found Western civilisation and are propagated by the way it interacts with other territories, geographical figuration, its territorial extension, and, above all, land, make *Mission/Missions* an anthropological and fictional testimony of the artistic thresholds elaborated by the artist.

This tragic realisation, elaborated through the signifier “land”, introduces one of Meireles's physical artistic practices, that is, his dismantling of the map in order to understand cartography itself. The cartography present in Cildo Meireles's work serves not only to illustrate people's narratives of violence, of conflicts and territorial wars waged to redefine space by military and juridical means. *Mission/Missions* also deeply questions the formation of religious space, or, rather, sacred space, thus forming an economic-political-theological triad. Each of the installation's lines reinforces the cartographic design of territory. The very idea of the map is configured through design, defended by men of law and the military. This logic is at the very root of coins, as well as monuments. Ultimately, as Joseph Beuys affirms, money is a juridical document.⁷

However, for the relationship between the coins of *Mission/Missions* and the ancestry of land to be established, it is useful to outline a series of works that are literally mobilised by Brazil's “physical geography” (Fernandes 2013). Through the physicality of these works, Cildo Meireles has broken down cartographic conceptions of the map using line itself. He has broken down its very scale, understanding that the physical dimension of the line is 1:1. During the period in which he was working on *Corners*, the artist was also producing designs and collages on graph paper in *Physical Art* (1969).

Many such examples of design can also be enumerated: *Physical art: Celebrations: Bonfire (cremation)*; *Cords: Areas (solitudes)*; *Cords: Links*; *Cords: Confluence of the Araguaia and Tocantins rivers*; *Terrain: Sale*; *Cords: The sources of the rainbow*; *Geographical mutations: Vertical border*; *Cords: Areas (solitudes)*; *Natural traps (waterfalls)*;



Figure 4 Cildo Meireles. *Arte física/Physical Art*, 1969. Media and dimensions: Box of $30 \times 30 \times 30$ cm (each box) and two photographic panels of 100×70 cm each. $25,7 \times 19,0$ cm. Collection of the artist. Photo: Pat Kilgore. Courtesy of Cildo Meireles.

Marks: Tordesillas; Cords: Line of the horizon; Action: Cravan project; Action: Circle of fire. Each of these designs materialises a potential action. Leaving design aside and moving towards action, we find *Physical art: Brasilia/Clearing boxes, Ropes/30 km line*

extended and gathered, and *Geographical mutations: Rio – São Paulo border*, 1969. Incorporated into these designs and actions are borders, extreme points, cords, waterfalls, beaches, even the Line of *Tordesillas*. Line and land are juxtaposed to the tracing of maps and the rationality of graph paper. Above all in *Physical art: Geographical mutations: Rio – São Paulo border*, the mutant notion of geography in Brazil is solely attributed to land. The artist collected land from the cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, separated by border limits, and stored the two samples separately in a leather box of $41.4 \times 42 \times 42$ cm. This leather cube literally and ironically produces the temperature of the earth, an intimate space that does not exist in the cartographic neutrality of the map.

The topography of *Mission/Missions'* floor of coins produces this internal heat, in which proximity to the material erases the larger scale of the European cathedral. Sensing the temperature upon entering *Mission/Missions* also allows the visitor to feel that they are literally inside an economy, in the sense that its laws or norms (*nomos*) are exhibited. *Mission/Missions* embodies economic archaeology, leading us to pose a question that is unavoidable in the face of what we have discussed, taking *Mission/Missions* as starting point: what is the economy? Jacques Derrida, who takes into consideration ontological, political, linguistic, and sacred values, would respond that “Among its irreducible predicates or semantic values, the economy no doubt includes the values of law (*nomos*), of home (*oikos*), home, property, family, the hearth, the fire indoors” (Derrida 1992, 6). On the one hand, this internal fire renews the forgetting necessary to illuminate monuments. On the other, artists like Cildo Meireles destabilise this flame, literally transforming that which is totem into taboo and that which is taboo into totem.

Mission/Missions turns taboo into totem, giving form to forgetting. When Cildo Meireles conceived of the installation, he mentioned that “material power plus spiritual power equals tragedy” (Scovino 2009, 278), as he knows from experience. The artist had to abandon the first version of *Mission/Missions*, for which he wanted to build a 25 m tower. Like any good cathedral builder, he knew his stones, his absent structure. Nonetheless, Cildo Meireles's cathedral required another form. As Kounellis affirmed in *Bâtissons une cathédrale*, we can no longer build a cathedral in this sense. Ultimately, instead of reproducing the structure of a ruined cathedral tower of a Jesuit mission in Brazil, the installation erected a zone of silence around objects that, having previously been in circulation (the coin, the communion wafer) or hidden from view (the bones), are, in this work, able to be seen in such architecture for the first time in art history.

Forgetting is so latent in *Mission/Missions* that another variant of the work, *Oblivion* (1987–1989), emerges from it. *Oblivion* supplements *Mission/Missions*. *Mission/Missions'* materials are so expressive that they required another work to ensure that the forgetting within the first obtained a greater expressive value. Besides, to forget⁸ is an act of forgetting oneself. In Portuguese, the word oblivion (*olvido*) is a homophone of sound (*ouvido*); nonetheless, this phonic relation transcends a simple sonorous game, adding meaning to stories that are heard, and taking into consideration the cartographic dimension of orality in autochthonous cultures. Orality, linked to land, is a vigorous part of memory and one of its morphological components, given its dynamism and transformation, often to the point



Figure 5 Cildo Meireles. *Olvido/Oblivion*, 1987–1989. Media: indigenous land, six thousand currency bills, three tonnes of bones, 69,300 paraffin candles, charcoal, and sound. Dimensions: 460 × 8000 × 383 × 230 mm. Collection of the artist. Photo: Joaquín Cortés/archive MNCARS. Courtesy of Cildo Meireles.

of relegating the original form of a story to oblivion. The act of forgetting or an “unmemory”, as Houaiss’s entry for “oblivion” attests, means a state of repose, or, as in Cildo Meireles’s work, the creation of negative space.

Oblivion can be distinguished from *Mission/Missions* through its new architecture, made from a symbolic material similar to the economy (in the narrow sense of the term), to the sacred, and to animality. The economic value of money assumes the graphic and bidimensional form of the notes that compose an indigenous tent. Unlike *Mission/Missions*, the “internal fire” of the work is within this tent whose structure is covered by banknotes from various American countries, in which coal can be seen on the floor through a small aperture. Unlike *Mission/Missions*, *Oblivion* has a circular structure, 400 × 840 cm in dimension, composed of 6000 notes from diverse American countries, 69,300 candles, and charcoal, placed within the tent. From this tent, the sound of chainsaws can be heard. Why does Cildo Meireles shift from coin to note? Or, rather in terms of an artistic operation inherent to his numismatic fiction, why does the artist switch from sculpture (coin) to painting or pattern (note)? Here we argue that this is because the graphic form of paper money reinforces the idea of documents or juridical contracts balancing exchanges and thus develops the idea of representation and of the erasure of the traces of orality and of the monument.

Paper money functions as an index of the forgetting of its backing, or foundation, indeed, in the words of Jean-Joseph Goux, “paper money is a symbol of deception of the calculating intellect that has lost contact with a deeply buried treasure” (Goux 1984, 210). Any analogy Cildo Meireles makes between coins and

ancestrality in *Mission/Missions* is dilapidated in *Oblivion*. Jean-Joseph Goux analyses a passage from Goethe's *Faust* to show the gradation between note, gold, land, and home (Goux 1984). All Mephistophelian scenes related to value can be synthesised by the popular Brazilian phrase: "only the madman tears up money". On the one hand, the lack of recognition of the abstract value of money, in the form of paper or coin, locates the madman outside the economy itself. On the other, the presence of land in indigenous culture creates another place that is exterior to the economy. Both the madman and the Indian are graphically represented on the *Zero cruzeiro* and *Zero real* note designed by Cildo Meireles. The madman present on the note lived in an asylum in the city of Goiás, where the artist also resided. Nonetheless, the above-mentioned Brazilian expression shares its meaning with a foundational work of German literature. The passage that confirms this can be found in Jean-Joseph Goux's text:

The jester is not such a fool after all, as Mephistopheles remarks: this fool will not court the risk of inconvertibility, nor be party to any system of delegated value; he goes straight to the *thing* itself. In contrast with those who accept the mediated universe of paper money (of the pure sign), or even of gold (which has a value itself, but which remains unavailable to *jouissance*), the fool shows his wisdom by converting all exchange value into use value (land, a house). Use, for him, is the end of circulation. (Goux 1994, 150–151)

It is not just the madman that appears on Meireles's notes, rather the artist himself is part of the objects. A concrete meaning, removed from the symbolic, emanates from both the madman and the artist. A movement of circulation is created that moves from the detailed to the wider social structure. If Cildo Meireles had taken the opposite path, his work would have been an illustration or a pamphlet. Thus, when we say that Cildo Meireles creates a place through the objects he selects, accumulates, and arranges, it is the specificity of these objects and their agency in space that buttresses his installations. Thus, coins form the ground, and bones the ceiling of *Mission/Missions*, whilst in *Oblivion* paper money becomes a home. Even the candles in *Oblivion*, an installation that shares a sacred material with *Mission/Missions*, remain intact and unused, like *things*, objects.

Forgetting is slow, processual, and depends on the superimposition of events that erase, or attempt to erase, land. What is put in motion in Cildo Meireles's two installations are cyclical aspects of Brazil's history. Their enactment entails the eternal return of colonisation, previously external, but more recently internal and codified in behaviour. Colonisation becomes a component of the very social structure that it denies, by affording it an absent space that the madman and the Indian come to occupy. This anthropological and fictional operation is realised when the madman and the Indian occupy the zero signifier. Cildo Meireles has observed that many indigenous cultures are not "at first glance (...) tactile or visible. Maybe the key to understanding them resides in their oral tradition. But, strangely, this tradition was always forgotten" (Scovino 2009, 49–50). Orality buttresses both *Mission/Missions* and *Oblivion*, and it is the axis that links unused economic and sacred objects: from communion wafers, through to candles, even the matches used in *Sermon on the Mount: Fiat Lux* (1973–1979). In *Sermon on the Mount: Fiat Lux*, a work that precedes *Mission/Missions* and *Oblivion*, sacred space is diluted into

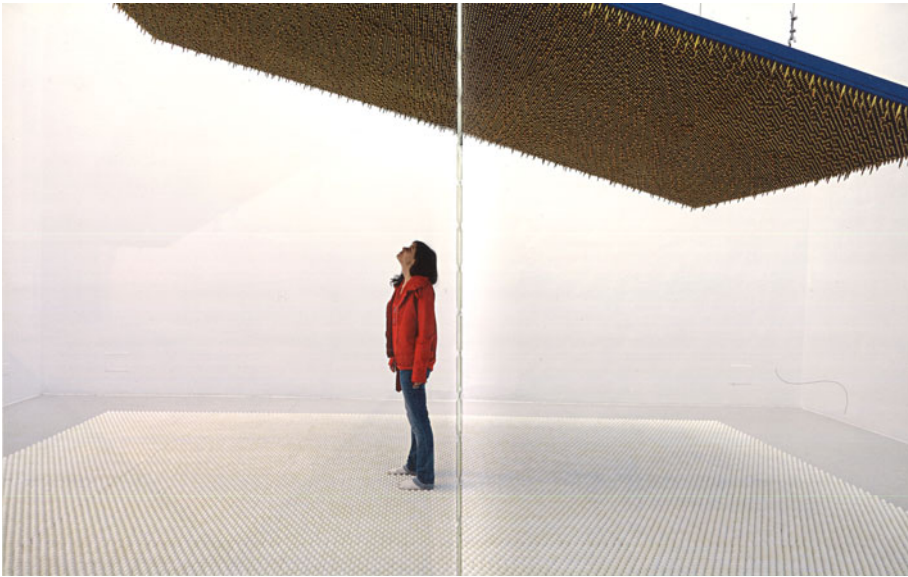


Figure 6 Cildo Meireles. *Amerikkka*, 1991–2013. Media: 20,050 eggs, 40,000 bullets, wood, and metal. Variable dimensions. Collection of the artist. Photo: Joaquín Cortés/archive MNCARS. Courtesy of Cildo Meireles.

a banal product: a box of matches. One hundred and twenty-six thousand boxes of matches were piled into the Cândido Mendes Cultural Centre in Rio de Janeiro in 1979 as part of an installation that lasted 24 hours. To give a brief account, the action of the installation consisted of the presence of a group of actors who appeared to be gangsters or plain-clothes police officers, dressed in suits and sunglasses. They made menacing gestures, insinuating that they were armed. The supposed plain-clothes police officers protected the piles of matchboxes, which bore the mark of the brand “olho”, or “eye”. This work dialogues with pop art, or more precisely with Andy Warhol’s advertising readymades. Once again, the situation in Brazil at the time led the work to be read as an account of Brazil’s police-militia and the fact that that order had become the imperative, not of a state of law, but of a state of exception. On distinct social scales, as Cildo Meireles demonstrates, violence that had previously depicted the sacred and the economic as being on the same side, later, in order to achieve order and progress, submitted to economic imperatives.

The installation *Amerikkka* (1991–2013) exemplifies this. It consists of a slightly inclined layer of 40,000 rifle bullets, under which the ground is covered in 20,050 eggs. The American problem can be found in the visual tautology of a new equation between extremes: the installation is almost an experiment, and the literality of its materials invite a physical reading of the work. It is not about raising the viewer’s awareness of the violence of wars or producing meaning through a message. The work’s very material is at play, in continuous movement. Consequently, the installation requires a reading that takes into consideration the body and space of its materials. Firstly, its virtuality is its message. The negative space at the heart

of Cildo Meireles's principle of design is the signifier of the materials arranged in the work: bullets and eggs. Secondly, there is a semantic accumulation of the letter K, that, repeated three times, evokes the Ku Klux Klan, the racist group from the United States. Rather than being propaganda, the installation, mobilised by the principle of experimentation, deals with plastic and semantic serialisation. Rewriting America, repeating the letter "k" three times, instead of the letter "c", allows the title to lift the direction of the gaze upwards, such that this work, *Mission/Missions* and *Oblivion*, forms a kind of negative trilogy of the whole American continent.

Building a cathedral in the era of *The Falling Sky*

The anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro writes in the preface to the Brazilian translation of *La chute du ciel* (2010), by Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, that the book's publication was an incontrovertible scientific event (Albert and Kopenawa 2010). To Viveiros de Castro's observation it can be added that the book's textuality also renders such an event artistic and literary. It is a literary event in the sense that in this collaboration between an ethnographer and a Yanomami leader there is a duality that reconstructs the symmetry of Kopenawa's narratives in *La chute du ciel* [*The Falling Sky*]. This falling is synthesised in the disastrous encounter of Western men with the autochthonous Yanomami population, which was the realisation of the Biblical prophecy for the former, but the very apocalypse for the latter. In this encounter of civilisations, or rather between "Indians and non-Indians", the image of "earth eating" as practised by the "People of Merchandise" recreates a colonial situation that, albeit under different guises, keeps recurring. Thus, it is necessary to ask, how is a cathedral built in the era of the falling sky? Or, rather, how was the sky held in place in the era of cathedral-building? When the question is inverted, the difficulty of the task of holding the sky in place necessitates a particular kind of forgetting, present in the possible happiness of the inhabitants of the forest themselves:

We are inhabitants of the forest. Our ancestors inhabited the sources of these rivers long before the birth of my fathers and even long before the white people's ancestors were born. In the past, we were really very numerous and our houses were vast. Then many of us died after the arrival of these outsiders with their epidemic fumes and shotguns. We have been sad and known the anger of mourning too often. Sometimes we are scared that the white people will finish us off. Yet despite all that, after having cried so much and put the ashes of our dead in oblivion, we live happily. (...) We know that they remain by our side in the forest and that they still hold the sky in place. (Kopenawa and Albert 2013, 25–26)

The conflicts evoked in this excerpt are articulated according to a cosmological, economic, and religious order, such that it is as if the design of *Mission/Missions* encompassed gold-prospecting, the Amazonian missions, and the inhabitants of the forest themselves. The fragility of the sky frequently depends on autochthonous bodies that do not possess antibodies and, consequently, were generally decimated by epidemics. Long after colonisation, the twentieth century was the scene of

many massacres, during which time Cildo Furtado Meirelles, father of Cildo Meireles, was president of the FUNAI, the National Foundation for the protection of the Indian. Beginning in the 1920s, FUNAI became involved in disputes with farmers, managing to indict those responsible for decimating the greater part of the Krao Indian Reserve in the 1940s. Cildo Meirelles is briefly cited in contemporary Brazilian literature, in Bernardo Carvalho's novel *Nove noites* (Nine Nights), a book which deals with the mysterious life and death of the American anthropologist Buell Quain in the north of Brazil in 1939. The book only mentions the artist's father in the narrator's initial investigation into the cause of the young anthropologist's suicide. Separate from but related to this context is an important biographical detail about Cildo Meireles: all his family's uprootings meant that the young Cildo Meireles grew up in various states of Brazil. Yet despite the fact that Indians, in particular the Krao Indians, occupy a territory in the artist's work, he refuses to link his art to the indigenous cause. He is interested in the observation of social structures through the recuperation of images and, in particular, the ghettoisation to which indigenous communities have been subjected, such that they no longer reproduce their own ways of life, but a ghettoised way of life.

The book *The Falling Sky* also inspired a homonymous exhibition, curated by Moacir dos Anjos, held from 10 April to 5 June 2015 in the Paço de Artes in São Paulo. The collective exhibition included works by Anna Bella Geiger, Claudia Andujar, Miguel Rio Branco, Paulo Nazareth, Regina Galindo, and, among other artists, Cildo Meireles. In the context of the falling sky, of ghettos, and of the precarity of a class expanded by qualified life whose lives are liveable outside of a framework of consumption, the exhibition aimed to reveal the fragility of images, installations, and narratives, as well as the violent and sacred dimensions of these. In this respect, Cildo Meireles and Claudia Andujar employ the notion of the ghetto to create two problematics that have points of intersection and divergence.

Almost incomparable, the Swiss photographer Claudia Andujar has previously lived in Hungary and the United States, abandoning Europe during the Second World War and emigrating to Brazil in 1954. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, Andujar was a photojournalist and, in 1971, during the military dictatorship, travelled to the Amazon for the magazine *Realidade* (Reality), photographing diverse indigenous Yanomami ethnic groups. Andujar's images on the pages of *Realidade* sharply contrasted with promotional and developmentalist messages linked to the State that, for example, declared that "the tractors roared louder than the jaguars" (Andujar and Machado 2007, 156). The question of land is formulated in relation to religion and economics, whereby, in a green hell, men tried their luck at prospecting, rubber extraction, and raising livestock, attempting to extract wealth from the land in ways that mix archaic and Western models.

The complex relation between gold, Christian life, and animality rendered the Yanomami peoples potentially killable life. From Andujar's photographs, Alvaro Machado employs a particular case to re-establish the conflicts between the economic and the religious:

According to rumours, one of the founding fathers of the mission had drowned in mysterious circumstances and his body was never found. Some affirm that mining companies had ordered gold prospectors to kill him. Others suggested that the father, interested in indigenous

cosmology, had fallen victim to his own curiosity, participating in ecstatic rituals and succumbing to the effects of a potent hallucinogenic. Faced with the sensationalism surrounding the case, the missionaries preferred to stay quiet. (Andujar and Machado 2007, 158)

On three occasions, before, during, and after the Brazilian military dictatorship, the Amazonian imaginary has been an empty signifier, a “global locality” of conflict. Indeed, this is the current state of many natural spaces that are sources of raw materials and natural wealth. Whilst on the one hand there has been conflict between prospectors and religious men, on the other, conflict between these two and the Yanomami peoples was inevitable. Ultimately, these two, or more, cultures have long been on a collision course. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, again in the preface to *The Falling Sky*, exposes the violence of the relations he defines as “local-global”:

Prospectors’ invasions of Yanomami lands – and the epidemics, rapes, murders, the poisoning of rivers, depletive hunting, the destruction of the material bases and fundaments of the indigenous economy that are their consequence – take place with monotonous frequency, following the oscillation of the price of gold and other precious minerals on the global market. (Albert and Kopenawa 2015, 22)

The Falling Sky was originally published in French, in 2010, as part of the Terre Humaine collection, as was Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes tropiques*. Both works possess a literary quality, this being a potential horizon for readings of such books. Nonetheless, in an attempt to portray the relationship between missionaries, autochthonous peoples, and prospectors, it is useful to cite a passage dedicated to gold and diamonds from Lévi-Strauss:

The *garimpeiros* can be divided into two categories: adventurers and fugitives. Since the latter outnumber the former, it is understandable that most of the men find it difficult to leave the *garimpo*, once they have joined it. The little river-courses, in the sand of which the diamonds are found, are under the control of the men who first arrived there. Their resources are inadequate to allow them to wait for a really big find, which does not occur very often. So they are organized in bands, each financed by a leader who is referred to as “captain” or “engineer”; he has to have capital to arm his men and provide them with the necessary equipment – galvanized iron pails to haul up the gravel, sieve, wash-troughs and sometimes also divers’ helmets and air-pumps so that they can explore potholes – and, most important of all, to ensure a regular food supply. In exchange, the member of the band undertakes to sell his finds only to recognized buyers (who are connected with the famous Dutch or English firms of diamond-cutters) and to share the profits with his chief. (Lévi-Strauss 1989, 271)

Faced with this problematic, in which ethnography simultaneously attempts to collect and organise non-Western narratives, or rather look for new, so-called “primitive” points of view, the true scale of the falling sky geographically takes place on Brazil’s northern border with Venezuela. The frequent presence of Bruce Albert or Claudia Andujar in Yanomami territories both offers a kind of testimony and establishes a hybrid language: Albert through the simplicity with which he collaborates in the establishment of a shamanic narrative that is hospitable to Yanomami myths and fables, and Andujar through her fracturing of distance and pose that until then had granted a figurative character to photographs of the

Yanomami peoples, something that is made evident through comparison with Marc Ferraz's photography, often reproduced on postcards.

Thus, from the insights granted through the reading of excerpts of Alvaro Machado, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Lévi-Strauss, it becomes clear that the condition of prospector is the extreme opposite of Western luxury. This reflection returns us to Cildo Meireles's affirmation that artist, like the prospector, spends their life looking for that which they have not lost, in an interview with Frederico Morais (Scovino 2009, 46). Cildo Meireles's reference to the fate of the prospector, an adventurer or a fugitive who spends their life looking for that which they have not lost, bearing in mind Lévi-Strauss's work, can be said to be an almost unsustainable ambiguity. As regards the art world, this fate demonstrates the risk artists run of becoming subject to the market, whereby the artist who mimics the prospector loses him or herself in the extremities of the commercial art circuit.

Works included in the exhibition *The Falling Sky*, for example, *Bruno has measles* (1976), strongly resonate with Cildo Meireles's *Salt without meat* (1975) and *Zero real* (2013). *Salt without meat* is a sound sculpture in which the concept of the ghetto remains at play. In Cildo Meireles's utopia, "there is a tendency for the ideology of the ghetto to spread and occupy the discriminatory – and descriptive – part of the equation" (Scovino 2009, 259). The possibility of the reversal of the "equation", or relation, between oppressed and oppressors was the impulse for the artist to create a disk recorded on an 8-track device and superposing two layers of sound: one related to indigenous culture and the other, to white culture. The work comprises a sonorous object recorded on a piece of low-value equipment, a clock-radio. Its sacred dimension, from a Christian perspective, consists of a recording of a popular pilgrimage, in which the faithful walk the streets, or even make part of the journey on their knees to repay a promise. The work questions the existence of intermediary chambers, zones of contact and extraction from which violence emerges. Diluted, the sacred serves as a form of mediation between the clock-radio and an interview with a Xerente Indian whose story, according to Cildo Meireles, is related to *Zero cruzeiro* and, as a result, to *Zero real* and the Kayapo Indians. In any case, the artist had control over the sounds and speeches recorded on the eight tracks.

It is not the "indigenous cause" that connects the works, but their engagement with the notion of the ghetto as elaborated by Cildo Meireles, and, in these works, presented on different scales in relation to missionaries, prospectors, and indigenous peoples. These lives, in distinct, precarious ways, generate a fiction and embody the most animal dimension of *Mission/Missions*. What is established, through the paradoxical act of building a cathedral in the era of the falling sky, is the imperative to identify, and, at the same time, occupy interstitial spaces, the vacuums instituted by power. This act possesses the tonality of the "art of counterconquest".

Modernity seems to be a project that has run its course; however, its ruins are permanently under construction, even if we are asked to excuse the inconvenience as we are diverted around them. From the diversions occasioned by such delays of modernity, such as those outlined by Raúl Antelo in *Ausências*, the Amazon retains what Antelo has termed "the radical alterity of the modern":

Modernity is traversed by a hiatus, an inherent emptiness. For this very reason, Reclus does not hesitate to call this scene, like Humboldt, or even Baudelaire, the “wonderful tableaux”, because it is in the most distant places, for example in the Amazon, where, in effect, completely antagonistic values are combined, such as force and charm, the grandeur of the whole and the grace of details. Such places seem to be the triumph of living nature, of a post-natural or even anti-modern nature, because its angles are at the same time grandiose and joyful, though completely alien to the sweet and apathetic melancholy of temperate forests. The Amazon is, in summary, the radical alterity of the modern, in which power and dehisence are inseparable. (Antelo 2009, 24)

A reading of the constitution of Amazonian space as empty signifier is, however, ultimately only a reading of exterior. In its depths and for those who live in what is either a green hell or an Edenic paradise, this space is not just constituted by mythology that is prolonged in everyday life, but violence itself that without an allegory to constrain its foundational moment, insofar as it acts as a sign, hangs between land and territory, as symptom, blood, and sentence. In *Mission/Missions*, Cildo Meireles captures these dimensions. Although the installation has a strong symbolic character, the work is not metaphorical, although metaphor remains an inevitable recourse in a first reading of the work. Instead, beyond metaphor, Cildo Meireles’s work arranges paradoxical, metonymic, and elliptical mechanisms. In its balancing of these three languages can be identified a rhythmic structure that holds together material and concept.

Translated by Victoria Adams.

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Notes

1. This way of observing Cildo Meireles’s minimalist-baroque practices offers another direction for a debate that took place in the United States, crystallised in Michael Fried’s text “Art and objecthood”, addressed to minimalist artists such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris, in which the literalist-minimalist aesthetic is an absolute investment in form as a property of objects. Criticism of anthropomorphism and spectatorial engagement were elements of minimalist theatricality that Fried considered pejorative. Criticising Judd, Fried highlights the relational character and ubiquity that surrenders his work to the virtual inescapability of pictorial illusion (2002, 132).
2. André Jolles studied legends, gesture, divination, cases, and traces of spirits as forms of the German term *Witz*, in which these simple forms guide analysis that allows us to distinguish between archaic use of the “pre-logical” or “primitive” (Lévy-Bruhl 2010, 35–37 and 120–122). Cildo Meireles aligns popular phonic knowledge and Amerindian thought, such that, conceptually, the artist employs simple forms as marks of Brazilian culture’s orality, as a minimalist and conceptual event, unlike analysis that only deals with the influence of American art.

3. “In 1968, following four years of methodical, obsessive work with designs (I began with masks and faces, later transforming this into a dialogue between two characters, which were then enacted) (...). The last design I made during that period (I didn’t design again until 1973) was a crossroads (...). And, at the same time, I started making *Corners*, which generated negative space. Crossroads are places of action *par excellence*. The *Corners* were places where action did not exist, places of total refuge. They were geometric works about the Euclidean model of space” (Fernandes 2013, 63).
4. In Portuguese, the English words “how” and “like” are expressed by the same word “como”. Consequently, in the Portuguese, this “like” evokes the “how” of *Mission/Missions: How to build cathedrals*.
5. Although they are homophones, the artist spells his surname differently to his father’s. Their surnames are, respectively, Meireles and Meirelles.
6. On this subject, artists such as Anna Bella Geiger and Adriana Varejão have produced counterconquest art using mediums such as postcards and tiles.
7. On 29 November 1984, Joseph Beuys took part in a debate, which took as its starting point the question of *What is money?* A former banker and an economics professor also participated in the debate. In the words of Joseph Beuys, money will be freed “from being a commodity”, and will become “a regulating factor in the rights domain. (...) I’m trying to say something tangible about money here – that it is an economic value and that we have to reach a stage where it must become a necessary potential, must act as a *rights document* for all the creative processes of human work ...” (Beuys et al. 2010, 17).
8. In Portuguese, the verb “olvidar”, to forget, bears a resemblance to the noun “olvido”, the title of Cildo Meireles’s work here translated as *Oblivion*.

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