Talk on Cildo Meireles’ artwork at the Rubin Center

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In an article written in 1963 for the Sunday Times Colour Magazine, David Sylvester quotes an American painter, who in 1948 tells him: “there’s as much culture in a bottle of Coca-Cola as there is in a bottle of wine.” Sylvester manifested outrage at his friend’s remark: It wasn’t that I personally didn’t like Coca-Cola as well as Cognac, Buicks as well as Bugattis –he says- It was that I couldn’t accept the juxtaposition of Coca-Cola and culture. But of course there’s a Coke culture, a set of tribal tastes and customs implying certain values and attitudes and a conception of what life could ideally be.
Coke Culture is, indeed, closely related to our own culture, closely linked to a larger system of values and beliefs, and subtly related to violence.

In ‘The Disappeared Exhibition’ Cildo Meireles, a contemporary Brazilian artist presents us his art in the form of three bottles of Coca-Cola, each holding a different amount of the effervescent dark liquid. All the artists in the exhibition, from seven different Latin American countries have something in common, something distinctive, although some installations show this in a more overt way than others. This distinctive mark is a discourse of denunciation and of opposition toward the military dictatorships in Latin America. Unlike these installations, in Meireles’ work the references are not obvious; there are no bones, no chipped mannequins, no images of disappeared people, and no anguished voices. This artist leaves us wondering: just three bottles of Coca-Cola. We clearly recognize the object. It is a well-known commercial referent around the world. We also recognize that its influences are intimately linked to Conceptual and Pop Art. What is not as evident is the connection between these objects and the Brazilian dictatorship. To understand this connection, and therefore the interpretation of these bottles of Coke in this context, we must turn to various sources outside the artwork.

It’s known that Conceptual Art is an art of ideas more than that of objects worked on with an aesthetic aim in mind; and we do know that in the early twentieth century, Marcel Duchamp became the precursor of an art that, through common objects, reshaped artistic language and thus opened up the boundaries of what is considered art. In other words, he modified the artistic status quo. Nevertheless, Cildo Meireles’ installation leads us to other artistic lines in Brazil, aside from Conceptual Art. He is also influenced by the work of Brazilian Neo-Concrete artists from the 60s, such as Lygia Pape, Ligia Clark, Amílcar de Castro, Franz Weissmann, Theon Spanudis, Ferreira Gullar, and Helio Oiticica, who broke with the rationalist abstractions of the 50s, as well as by the second Brazilian avant-gardes, whose highly political approach led the spectator to assume an active role in the construction of meaning.
Cildo Meireles was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1948. He began studying art in 1963 at the Federal District’s Cultural Foundation in Brasilia, under the Peruvian painter and ceramist Felix Barrenechea. In 1967 he moved back to Rio and studied at the National School of Fine Arts. It was during the 70s and 80s that his artistic production adopted a more intense political character of protest. Works of art such as *Tiradentes: tótem monumento ao preso político* and *Intrudução a uma nova crítica* heralded the emergence of his subsequent major project: *Insercoes em circuito ideológico: Projeto Coca-Cola*, which consisted of the artist’s writing on the glass bottles the sentence “Yankees go home!”— an evident gesture of opposition to American “imperialism” and its political and economic influence on countries in Latin America. Another subsequent project of his, was *Projeto Cedula*, where he printed the question “quem matou Herzog?” (Who killed Herzog?) on 1 cruzeiro-bills and 1 dollar-bills, in reference to a journalist who had been tortured to death in a military police prison cell.

Brazil lived under a military regime for 21 years. It has not been the only country to suffer this type of regime, nor has its dictatorship been the worst of all the dictatorial governments in Latin America. However, the Brazilian dictatorship has no doubt established a “before” and “after” in the social, political, cultural, and economic life in the country.

During the beginning of the 1960s the Brazilian government started to change certain national institutions through what was known as “Atos institucionais” (Institutional Acts). Their justification for these changes was that they sought to “free the country from communism and corruption” and to restore democracy. Among the many Institutional Acts there was the annulment of congress, the creation of military entities that guarded against those who committed “criminal acts against the State and its patrimony, as well as crimes of a political, social, or revolutionary nature.” Basing themselves on these special powers, the regime’s enemies started being persecuted, arrested, and tortured. In 1968 demonstrations in opposition of the military government grew: sectors of the Church, university students, artists, Rio de Janeiro’s middle class as well as
industrial workers in Sao Paulo and Belo Horizonte openly protested in public demonstrations against the government. As a consequence, the military government strengthened and increased its violent interventions. During the mid 70s repressions against the government’s main targets, namely students, intellectuals, artists, union members and people from the countryside, increased in number and became more violent. In reaction to this, the left-wing groups opted for armed struggle. They were heavily influenced by the Cuban Revolution and by the emergence of guerillas in various Latin American countries (like Guatemala, Colombia, Venezuela, and Peru). Terrorism on both sides became part of the Brazilian everyday life, especially in the big cities. This period came to be known as “anos de chumbo” (lead years).

The other side of the coin showed quite a different image: that is, the so-called “Brazilian economic miracle”, which lasted from 1969 to 1973, and which combined an extraordinary economic growth with relatively low percentages of inflation. Foreign investments, especially in the automotive industry, led to great industrial growth.

Nonetheless, the balance for the years of the dictatorship, after Gral. Figueiredo left office in 1984, was extremely negative. Inflation had gone up from 40.8 percent in 1978 to 223.8 percent in 1984. The foreign debt had risen from US$ 43.5 billion to US$ 91 billion. In Brasilia, president Figueiredo declared a state of emergency. Yes: emergency. But it was too late for the economy, too late for constitutional amendments, too late for the country and its citizens. Brazil had suffered a historical fall that had dramatically changed its society and its future generations.

How does a society recover after 20 years of terror, repression, killings, torture, insecurity and, with a kafkaian reference in mind, how does a person stop seeing himself as free and non-guilty? How does he stop thinking that he was, is, or could be guilty of something, and that for that “something” he will be tortured or killed? The marks of those years, those footprints, are still imprinted in the generations that followed, in the urbanism, in the street corners, and also, in the objects in their houses. The
marks are imprinted in the signs that surround us even in the most irrelevant quotidian routine. Footprints are signs. Or rather, signs are traces of that period. This is what Meireles wants to tell us: violence is there, as hidden or subtle as what the Coca-cola bottles represent, reminding us of the economic power and domination of the foreign country that produces them.

For the artists and intellectuals of those times, who were silenced during the dictatorship regime, art was urgency during the first years of democracy. Their texts and images were understood as constructions of consciousness. There was a strong will to re-signify the (mis)representations of that art. These were artists that belonged to the context of State violence; but they were, also, products of mass media, pop, and rock ‘n’ roll. They were the witnesses of the general collapse of established values in the sixties and of revolutionary idealism thereafter, and they dissipated the antediluvian authority of their elders. Despite everything, they suffered too, from a loss of credible traditions that had made life seem real and reality seem livable. Many of the works of these artists exude restrained violence hidden underneath; a melancholy of clever artifice masking inexpressible emotion.

Cildo Meireles’ art has as its hallmark, the appropriation of ordinary and everyday images and objects, and the sabotage of their meaning. Red Shift/Desvío para Vermelho is an example of this. His imagery is disconcertingly familiar: chairs, tables, TVs, knives, mundane objects of our everyday life that we might even take for granted. Meireles gives them visibility, defamiliarizing the objects, which in his installations become disturbing. The way he achieves this is by separating the objects from their domestic context, isolating them like noxious carcinogenic cells, so as to differentiate them from the totality, the whole. The bloody red color that dyes them is far from being a strategy to homogenize a discourse. Rather, it becomes excess, and the objects become hyperboles of themselves. This fixes them into a still-life aesthetic, or as photographs. Seeing these objects
the spectator awakes: they can no longer ignore the fact that these objects are a product of an abusive and violent system.

Roland Barthes said in *Camera Lucida* that photographs are “the return to death”; they interrupt progression and turn the real into fetish.

The layout of the objects Meireles uses contains a horrific reality, which is, at the same time, ungraspable. In this horrific reality, violence becomes evident in codes that have to be decoded, thus pressuring the spectator’s gaze. This art of the synecdoche is able to apprehend the untranslatable past, turning it into a motionless eternity. As spectators we witness a process of domestication of the historic experience, which is made possible through reiteration, that is, the repetition of the same motifs and themes from different angles.

The conceptual grammar of his art creates a narrative. Each element that Meireles uses presents a constant—the dramatization principle of cruelty. It is not cruelty in the sense of sadistic or aggressive violence, but rather, it is a selection of elements from reality as seen through the imagery of political and social violence that penetrates the quotidian and trivial, altering it.

In *Projeto Coca-Cola* (1970) as well as in *Projeto Cedula* the idea of circulation and recirculation of commodities and currency is associated with other circuits: those of ideas, ideologies, values, and beliefs. As Meireles himself has put it, “the important thing in the project was the introduction of the concept of circuit, isolating it and fixing it.” Through his parasitical appropriation of the Coke bottle or the bill as the medium for an oppositional form of political speech, Meireles brings into focus the fundamental paradox of money and commodities: that despite their mobility, both are founded in a kind of centralization and repetition, produced by the concentration of economic and artistic power in dominant systems. The circuits are then global and local. The bottle of Coke is there in its dialectical relation between circuits of symbolical capital. It refers to capitalism as well as to a political system imposed by the dictatorship, a
system that controls violence and the symbols and signs that shape this violence within the society.

Art is loaded with symbols – functional components shaped in a way that gives them a particular meaning. As David Sylvester explained: “Pop Art is more often a form of still-life painting than of figure painting. It doesn’t depict fairground barkers and buskers, but fairground equipment, like targets and slot-machines; it doesn’t depict men drinking, but the can of beer; it doesn’t depict families out for a Sunday drive, but the car they drive in. When Pop Art brings figures in, it doesn’t depict stars as they appear in the flesh, but the posters announcing their appearance. So that even a painting of figures becomes a kind of still life.”

Let’s then ask ourselves what is behind Meireles’ cokes. The bottles he uses are just mediations between art and its relation to reality. In an avant-garde gesture that is clearly political, although maybe not as violently obvious as the eye slashed by a penknife in “El Perro Andaluz”, Meireles reveals the hidden mechanics of everyday life. As I mentioned before, the bottles are just cells within a system, a system into which he breaks with his art, and in this way exposing its entrails. Meireles infiltrates into the gaps in the official discourse, like so many other artists have done (and have died in the process) during the 20 years of the Brazilian dictatorship.

Every social class consumes Coke; it circulates freely and naturally just like the 1 cruzeiro bills did. The empty bottle, like a symbol that is emptied out of its content, is refilled and reinserted in its circuit. You can neither destroy the signs nor the system, but you can alter it, you can use it to change a certain status quo. Cildo Meireles was able to create a strong, intelligent, and complex artistic narrative, using these three bottles of Coca-Cola.