

Cildo Meireles: On the nature of things

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Dark Light 1982 (p.103) is a box mounted on the wall with a panel forming a screen at one end. On this screen an apparition: the dark shape of a light bulb in the middle of a blaze of light. The image denotes light and darkness simultaneously, but in a kind of reverse relationship: what we expect to be light is dark and vice versa. Different circuits of the mind, different understandings of ‘energy’ and ‘image’ are pleasurably confused. We can leave the workings of this box a mystery, or read the artist’s own description: ‘There are two light bulbs, one of which . . . is the source of light. The other bulb forms a screen through which the light will be projected [casting a shadow] onto a further screen upon which the spectator will see the image.’¹

Dark Light is an object completely sufficient for what it demonstrates. It bears no superficial resemblance to the other objects that Cildo Meireles has produced, of whatever physical size, underlining the artist’s belief that ‘every idea demands as singular a solution as possible’.² Where *Dark Light* does resemble Meireles’s other works – and it is a very strong resemblance, which runs through his entire oeuvre – is in its fascination with paradox. ‘I am interested in this kind of inversion’, he has stated, ‘the paradoxical relationship between objects. I believe that even when I try to avoid it, things sometimes make themselves quite explicit to me through paradox, through the relationship between thesis and antithesis. I am forever trying to look for this hypothetical synthesis.’³ Therefore, ‘dark light’ may be taken as a synthesising metaphor for the spirit in which Meireles investigates things in general.

He is seen as one of the key instigators of Conceptual art, now that Conceptualism has been acknowledged to have had points of origin all over the globe. But the label is inadequate to describe the combination of abstract thought and direct physical experience in his extraordinarily diverse body of works. A deep interest in the relationship between the sensorial and the cerebral, the body and the mind, is now seen as one of the defining characteristics of the post-war Brazilian avant-garde, out of which Meireles emerged with his early works at the end of the 1960s. ‘In Brazilian conceptual art, so linked to sensuality, the limits of the body and pleasure’, he puts it, ‘it is impossible not to think of seduction; there are also, however, political aspects which are rare in art from other parts of the world’.⁴ He has remained loyal to these origins, and to a political/ethical viewpoint formed outside the ‘cultures of plenty’. At the same time, he has become a global artist, responding in his work to different contexts and dealing with issues that affect us all.

Visitors to the exhibition will immediately realise that the works on show range immensely in size and diversity of materials – at its greatest extreme, from an object in the form of a finger-ring to an installation covering 225 square metres. And it may happen that a tiny object provokes the sensation of a vast space, while a big environment feels obsessively delimited. Such contradictory sensations often incorporate or lead on to one another. We also realise that some exhibits, for example *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* 1970 (p.62–7), do not constitute the work itself but are relics or samples of an

event that took place outside the art milieu, in society in general, works whose limits are unknown.

This exhibition brings together more of Meireles’s large installations than any previous one. If architecture permits, the museum space can be opened out to accommodate these works without divisions, following the artist’s belief that each installation ‘defines its own space’. Some are completely open to the neutral circulation space, some partially veiled, and others concealed and secret. The way of entering and leaving each work is different. All make a startling first impression, a complete and unique scenario, which gradually reveals the workings of a perceptual/philosophical/ethical proposition, a modern allegory rooted in the material world.

Certain themes run through this varied body of works, appearing in very different physical guises, and criss-crossing with other themes. A striking feature of Meireles’s works is the way in which they are dated, often with a span of several years. This may represent the birth of an idea followed by the date of its realisation, a gap sometimes denoting a wait for sufficient resources to construct the piece, or sometimes it may refer to the maturing of an idea. A project like *Red Shift* 1967–84 (pp.120–31), might mature for as long as seventeen years. There are some preoccupations that remain constant and universal. His entire oeuvre could be described, for example, as a ‘poetic of physics’. The cosmos, how it may be known or imagined, is a persistent reference, though not necessarily an explicit one. And then there are contingent demands, such as the necessity

that Brazilian artists felt in the 1970s to resist or counter the abuse of democratic and human rights, and individual freedom, perpetrated by the military dictatorship (1964–85). In Meireles’s case, this was part of a wider concern with Brazilian history and predicament: ‘Political and social events steam-rolled us.’⁵ These two responses to the world are completely intertwined in Meireles’s art. For this reason, it was decided to structure the exhibition catalogue differently from the norm. Instead of one or two long interpretive essays, there are short texts by nine writers, each taking an individual approach to the work. These are accompanied by Meireles’s own commentaries on the origins of each project in the exhibition, usually grounded in some life-experience or memory, often a childhood memory, whose story he tells.

Frederico Morais has described Meireles background:

He was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1948. His father was an Indianist who worked for the Indian Protection Service, having served on Marechal Rondon’s original team. His uncle was a backwoodsman. The uncle’s son, Apoena (named in honour of a Xevante chieftain) followed the same path. As a boy Cildo accompanied his family on their constant moves throughout the vast Brazilian territory, vicariously participating in the pioneering expeditions aimed at making contact with unknown tribes. He resided or spent seasons at Curitiba, Belém do Pará, Goiânia, Brasília (1958–67) and Maranhão. In this unsettled, rough and active life, he learned things more by

¹ Cildo Meireles, interviewed by Felipe Scovino (2007). The interview, specially commissioned for this catalogue, forms the basis for Meireles’s recollections of the origins of his individual works, quoted in each catalogue section.

² Cildo Meireles, interview with Gerardo Mosquera, in Paulo Herkenhoff, Gerardo Mosquera, Dan Cameron, *Cildo Meireles*, London, Phaidon Press, 1999, p.27.

³ Quoted in Scovino (see note 1).

⁴ Herkenhoff 1999, p.28.

⁵ Cildo Meireles, ‘Places for Digressions’ interview with Nuria Enguita, in Nuria Enguita and Bartomeu Marí, *Cildo Meireles*, exh. cat., IVAM Centre del Carme, Valencia 1995, p.163.

actually seeing and hearing them than by studying them in a schoolroom. He speaks of his father, whose name he inherited, with boundless affection and admiration. Many of his art works have been born as memories of his experiences at the side of his father, who loved books like a bibliomaniac. From him he received his first book on art – on Goya.⁶

Space physical and mental

Meireles has often cited ‘spatial questions’ as a fundamental concern of his work.⁷ He not only sees space as a complex, having connotations that are ‘physical, geometric, historical, psychological, topological and anthropological’, but also treats and works with space as a reality inseparable from scale, an endlessly elastic phenomenon and source for the characteristic wit, intelligence and poetry of his art. Scale is space relative to ourselves as humans, suspended somewhere between the unimaginably vast and the unimaginably tiny.

Meireles began with two fields of operation: geometricised, Euclidean space, taking the form of full-size mock-ups of the corners of domestic rooms, as in *Virtual Spaces: Corners* 1967–8 (pp.20–3), and the outdoors – Brazil’s immense territory. Actions undertaken in the outside world were brought to the exhibition space in the form of a box, or case, something portable. In *Geographical Mutations: Border Rio-São Paulo* 1969 (pp.46–7), an exchange of earth was made between two spots that were physically very close but separated by a mental construct.

Collages such as the *Physical Art* series of 1969 (pp.40–5) proposed fantastic, imagination-stretching interventions in Brazil’s geography: for example, instructions for taking 1 cm of material from Brazil’s highest mountain, Pico da Neblina in the north, and exchanging it with materials from the subterranean depths of Brazil: rubies, emeralds or diamonds. A further example of a paradoxical inversion. And in turn, a piquant borderline emerges between imagining and actually doing: ‘Once I thought’, the artist relates, ‘about a project of a country so reduced that it could only be operated from abroad. It would be a minimum of terrain, a border only, where only one person, or not even that, could fit’.⁸

The fluctuating relationship between mental construct and sensory experience was put to the test, with the public’s participation, in the environment *Eureka/Blindhotland* 1970–5 (pp.111–15). Many balls, visually identical, were discovered by the viewer, in the process of playing with them, picking them up, rolling them, etc., to vary greatly in weight (between 500 and 1,500 grams). A large variety of bodily responses and exertions were created within a visual constant. Meireles saw the work partly as an investigation of density (‘what it is and what it seems to be’),⁹ which he was concurrently exploring in a direct relationship to scale. If a political landscape had been condensed into a carrying case in *Geographical Mutations*, it was further condensed into a finger-ring, *Condensation II – Geographical Mutations: Border Rio/São Paulo* 1970 (pp.50–1), where tiny traces of soil are encased in white gold,

onyx, amethyst and sapphire. Or in *Condensation I – Desert* 1970 (p.50), one could wear the desert on one’s finger in a pyramidal ring containing a viewing window and a single grain of sand. A further ring (*Condensation III – Ringbomb* 1970 [p.53]) introduced the notion of space as potentially explosive, an extraordinary concept that was to flourish in works like *Southern Cross* 1969–70 (pp.58–9), *The Sermon on the Mount: Fiat Lux* 1973–9 (pp.82–5) and *Volatile* 1980–94 (p.181). *Ringbomb* contained a capsule of gunpowder and a lens through which the sun’s rays could potentially ignite it.

Meireles often mentions Marcel Duchamp as a primary inspiration, and with this talk of boxes and condensations it is natural to think of Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-Valise* 1938. But whereas Duchamp understood miniaturisation as replica, a portable version of works already made, Meireles saw it as the possibility of creating new versions, invoking the poetics of the small but highly charged or precious artefact: a facet of energy, or density.

The tiny cube of oak and pinewood that constitutes *Southern Cross* is ideally exhibited without a plinth in a space of 200 square metres. ‘I wanted it to be much smaller ... but when I sanded it down to my nails, I lost patience and stopped at 9mm.’¹⁰ If the cube was photographed with its surrounding space, it would be nearly invisible, so it has usually been pictured for catalogues resting on a finger tip (an image bearing an interesting resemblance to a simile recently used by a scientist to describe the huge pressures achieved by the experimental laser fusion generator, HiPER: ‘equivalent to ten aircraft-

carriers resting on your thumb’.¹¹ At the same time, *Southern Cross* is wittily conceived within the Minimalist scenario of abstract ‘objecthood’, and it is only when you learn that the rubbing together of oak and pine has been traditionally used by Brazilian indigenous tribes to kindle fire, that your whole experience of the installation changes. The material turns to the mental, a historical, mythological and cultural dimension opens up, and the metaphor of fire takes on implications, vis-à-vis the predicament of indigenous Brazil, of both destruction and of creative potential. This ambiguous state of something being ‘simultaneously raw material and symbol’ is fascinating for Meireles.¹²

Space as circulation

Around the turn of the 1970s, Meireles’s thinking branched away from the specialised art space, and the cosmic space of nature, towards an idea of space as a circulatory network, and the object as travelling. It was a time of authoritarian oppression, with an atmosphere of censorship and fear increasingly pervading the public space and the media. A form of clandestinity was necessary, both to preserve individuality and the freedom to speak out on social matters, and to continue experimentation with the nature of the art object. Hence the *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*, which, although a response to the immediate situation and materially ephemeral, have since become possibly the best known and most discussed of Meireles’s works. The Coca-Cola bottles imprinted with political messages (Coke

⁶ Frederico Morais, interview with Cildo Meireles, in *Cildo Meireles: Algum Desenho / Cildo Meireles: Some Drawings (1963–2005)*, exh. cat., Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Rio de Janeiro 2005, p.57.

⁷ Enguita and Marí 1995, p.164.

⁸ Cildo Meireles, in Paulo Herkenhoff (ed.), *Geografia do Brasil*, exh. cat., MAMAM (Recife), MAM-BA (Salvador) and ECCO (Brasília), Rio de Janeiro 2001, p.86.

⁹ Enguita and Marí 1995, p.165.

¹⁰ Scovino.

¹¹ *Guardian*, London, 6 December 2007.

¹² Scovino.

bottles in Brazil circulated on a deposit system in those days), or the banknotes stamped with an awkward question concerning the murder of a prominent opponent of the regime, made use of existing, self-propelling spatial systems in the economic sphere that were effectively uncensorable.

Value

‘I like dealing with paradigmatic things’, Meireles has said, ‘material things that are recognised by the public in their everyday lives, things that are at the same time matter and symbol. Money, for example.’¹³ From the blatant exhibition, on a pedestal, of a wad of banknotes secured with rubber bands, *Money Tree* 1969 (p.77), to the gold thread and gold nails inserted, respectively, into a great mass of straw in *Fio (Thread)* 1990–5 and plain wooden crates in *Ouro e Paus (Gold and Wood)* 1982–95, the conundrums of value have continued to fascinate Meireles. *Money Tree* ‘points towards the problem of the value of the art object and the discrepancy between use-value and exchange-value’.¹⁴ It consists of 100 one-Cruzeiro notes and was offered for sale for twenty times that amount. One wonders what it would fetch today; in inflationary Brazil at the time it was made, Meireles joked, money was the cheapest material.¹⁵ Much later, for *Occasion* 2004 (p.176–9), the artist contrived a scenario in which the public would be faced by money in the most direct way. This ensured that our attention would be drawn away from speculative thoughts about the

art object, and back to ourselves. We encountered a small, elegant, open receptacle containing new banknotes in the centre of a brightly lit room lined with three big mirrors on three of the walls, producing endless recession images. One of the mirrors was two-way. Viewers reacted in various different ways to the presence of the naked cash, and then, leaving the room and looking back through the two-way mirror, saw other people where they themselves had been a moment before, becoming voyeurs.

As a last clandestine fling, Meireles became an ironic counterfeiter, printing a large number of bills – *Zero Cruzeiro* 1974–8¹⁶ and *Zero Dollar* 1978–84 (pp.79–81) – the latter with the help of the designer/engraver João Bosco Renaud. Reducing official value to zero, the subversive Cruzeiro notes are embellished with the portraits, not of some illustrious figure of the Brazilian pantheon, but of two individuals effectively excluded from Brazilian society, whose civil rights are minimal: a Kraô Indian on one face and the inmate of a mental asylum on the other (Meireles knew both these men).

En masse

One unmistakable characteristic of Meireles’s art is the very large number of a particular element that he loves to deploy. In fact, it is a feature of almost all his major installations: 2,000 bones, 600,000 coins and 800 communion wafers in *Mission/ Missions (How to Build Cathedrals)* 1987 (pp.99–101);

126,000 matchboxes in *Fiat Lux*; 6,000 carpenters’ rulers, 1,000 electric clocks and 500,000 numerals in *Fontes* 1992/2008 (pp.165–7); an indeterminate number of red objects in *Red Shift*; the anthology of different kinds of barrier that make up *Through* 1983–9 (pp.138–46); the many radios in *Babel* 2001; the open pages of innumerable blue books that recreate the sea in *Marulho (Murmur of the Sea)* 1992–7; the more than 200 balls pushing up the heavy mesh in *Glovetrotter* 1991 (pp.161–3). In general terms, such accumulations denote a teeming universe (the massed rulers of *Fontes*, for example, are structured as a double spiral, or, looked at from the side, as a projection of the Milky Way). They denote, too, the human masses and the density of history. But for Meireles, the phenomenon of number is riddled with paradox. You can go into a shop and buy a box of matches with no problem, but pack thousands of boxes together, as in *Fiat Lux*, and you have a potential bomb. You have broken the law. Yet this relationship between the one and the many is reversible. The poster announcing *Fiat Lux* depicted 400 razor blades compressed in a clamp: a single blade is dangerous but the conglomerate will not cut and is harmless. In a similar spirit of inversion, Meireles has pointed out how a big installation can be made for a single person (for example *Murmur of the Sea*), while a small object can be made for a huge audience (*Insertions*).

Such statements reveal the complex relationships that Meireles establishes with the public, involving bodies and minds in intricate, and occasionally disturbing, combinations. Sometimes an experience

is overwhelmingly sensorial, and difficult to verbalise, as in the room full of red objects in *Red Shift*. We note that it is a collection of already red objects, not a coat of red paint over everything. The subtleties and wit in this work are compelling, yet the overall feeling is of monomania, which makes us realise how essential variety and diversity are to our lives. But things open up: in *Red Shift* we are taken from a domestic to a cosmic space.

Sometimes the warring sensations of illusion and reality are so acute – as when we see the candle-flame and smell the gas in the powder-strewn room of *Volatile* – that we are left to contemplate stark fear and its aftermath. In *3 Estudos (3 Studies)* 1969, the abstractions of space and time are given an intense corporality in our minds through a piece of paper stuck to the wall typed with a few simple words. One of these ‘instructions’, for example, reads: ‘Go without drinking water for 12 hours and then drink half a litre from a small silver tumbler, very slowly.’¹⁷

Sound is an important element in many of Meireles’s works. In *Eureka/Blindhotland* the tactile sensation of different densities is translated into sound, through a track that records the impact of the balls of different weights falling from different heights at different distances from the microphone, in a complex set of permutations. The magisterial tower of radios, *Babel*, is heard before it is seen. Or the public may produce the work’s sound inadvertently – by walking over broken glass in the labyrinth of *Through*, or by the rasping of their shoes on the sandpaper floor around the stacks of

¹³ *Cildo Meireles: Algum Desenho/Cildo Meireles: Some Drawings* 2005, p.61.

¹⁴ Enguita and Mari 1995, p.165.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The cruzeiro was the then currency in Brazil.

¹⁷ Enguita and Mari 1995, p.161.

matches of *Fiat Lux*, greatly augmenting the sense of potential catastrophe.

Eye and body

As Moacir dos Anjos writes, invoking one of Brazil's leading aesthetic thinkers, Ferreira Gullar, Meireles exercises a method of investigating the world that, 'instead of focussing only on the retinal field of perception, concentrates on a "synthesis between sensorial and mental relations"', so that the senses and the reason stimulate each other to produce, together, the cognition of inhabited or merely conceived spaces'.¹⁸ Nowhere in the exhibition is this summed up more elegantly, economically and paradoxically than in *Through*, one of Meireles' greatest works, rarely seen because of its huge size.

Through is a penetrable maze of short, discrete sections of barriers, obstructions, fences, blinds, demarcations, limits. It is a work concerned with visibility, although it is neither a painting nor a sculpture. Can we see through? Can we go through? Can we reconcile the pleasure of visual interference – semi-transparency, veiling, variations of density – with prohibitions on our bodily movement? Is the eye's experience divisible from the body's? How do we move from the experience of the different screens and barriers as abstract, visual and plastic, to their social meaning? (They range from the neutral – netting – to the aggressive – barbed wire – and include barriers that indicate the complexity of social experience.) We see the sort of ropes used to fence off artworks in museums, or the lattice

screens that in certain contexts can evoke gardens, in others the decor of cheap cafés (token barriers whose constraints we accept although we could very easily demolish them). The work is a tangle of such questions; questions that in a way are set by the overall form of the installation. *Through* poses the right-angled and perspectival 'order' of the arrangement of screens against the nucleic energy and chaotic form of a great ball of crumpled cellophane that lies at its centre.

The cellophane may be taken as one of Meireles's cosmic metaphors. The great ball is an indication of infinity, which is found at the heart of all these devices of limitation. Are we relieved of the social minutiae of each different barrier by the transparent abstraction we discover at the centre? Or are we reminded of the human need constantly to frame and contain experience in order to be able to live in the ferocious universe?

If earlier artists pursued energy, contemplated space-time, in a spirit of clearing away, starting from zero, from a *tabula rasa*, Meireles presents such a search as enmeshed in culture, as inescapably mediated. Hence the components of his labyrinth, made from mass-produced utilitarian items designed to satisfy a multitude of consumer needs, foibles, fears and preferences. Yet *Through* goes beyond these givens (a process already implicit in its title) towards those unlimited spaces and yearnings latent in the abstract.

These two forces or conditions – the contingent and the infinite – are continuously in contention in the work of Meireles, always re-appearing in new

guises quite different from what we have seen before. He continues to be 'forever looking' for the 'hypothetical synthesis' mentioned at the start of this introduction. It is not a doom-laden scenario, but a fascinating process of investigation leavened by modesty and humour. While not wanting to be chauvinistic, in the wider context Cildo Meireles has spoken of a 'model of social harmony [that] runs

throughout Brazilian culture, despite its historical social and political upheaval'. He refers back to the highly influential metaphor of *antropofagia* (cannibalism) proposed in the 1920s by the poet Oswald de Andrade – the idea that Brazil critically digests the universal cultural heritage – calling it 'a positive contribution that Brazilian culture can make to the possibility of co-existing with difference'.

¹⁸ See Moacir dos Anjos's essay in this catalogue, 'Where all places are' (p.170). His reference is to Ferreira Gullar's influential essay 'Teoria do Não-Objeto' (Theory of the Non-Object), *Jornal do Brasil*, 21 November/20 December 1960.