ATLAS: MATRIX*

A COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

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*from Latin mātrix (dam, womb), from māter (mother)

This short piece tells about a mindful collaboration, one where the act of collaborating - intentional but not overly planned - resulted in an open-ended installation/dispositive that called for ulterior collaboration, enabling the spectators to play with the elements while generating, at same time, a reflection around the collaborative endeavour itself.

An introductory story in the form of a diary is followed by DIY guidelines, indicating a replicable formula for co-laborating - ['from Latin cum (together) + laborare (to practice)'] - in transdisciplinary settings.

Atlas: MATRIX* emerged, at first, as a space of dialogue and confrontation where our individual research paths - a reflective practice generated by the creation of ceramic pieces (Elias 2016), and a genealogy of childbirth pain in Lisbon's biomedical settings (De Luca 2018) - conjoined in an inquiry on the colonial legacy of the Tropical

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Garden and its surroundings.

The site-specific installation was elaborated during the first #Colleex international workshop (July 2017) in the Tropical Garden of Belém (the western area of Lisbon) on an invitation of EBANO Collective, host of the event.

The event constituted, for Heléna, an opportunity to merge a previous research carried under her PhD, regarding the public art and urban design of the Portuguese World Exhibition (1940) as the urban matrix of Belém riverside. It also propelled Francesca's enquire into the colonial imprint on the epistemological and political configurations of childbirth pain and practices on the pregnant body in Portuguese obstetrics.

From such we developed a set of correspondences to stage our work at #Colleex. The matrix, referring to an object or concept from where something originates, was our common ground: matrix was the name given to the uterus until the 19th century in midwifery, but also the fragments from which ceramic objects may take shape; matrix referred to a geological structure that frames the rocks, but also an architectonic model that served as a paradigm for replications (as the ecclesia matrix, the "mother church"); matrix could be the portion of soil that encases, through a dominant colour, the main characteristics of the area, but also indicate a group of symbols organized in a rectangle used to solve particular mathematical problems.

All these connotations implied an idea of (re)production, indicating the condition of generative possibilities withheld in specific configurations. The matrix we were looking at and working on was a very material endeavour.

**AN ATLAS DIARY**

*Francesca. Day zero -* We meet at the Tropical Garden a few weeks before the #Colleex event to explore the space together and decide where to set up our installation.

In 1940, the Tropical Garden hosted the Colonial Section of the *Exposition of the Portuguese World.* "Persistance in time [...] may be coupled with debris" (Hunt 2016:10). Debris of the Exposition are scattered all over the place - standing pavilions, abandoned structures, busts of anonymous colonial subjects, ceramic tiles with exotic flowers, exotic animals, exotics bodies and scenes. Little is said in the garden's leaflets about its colonial past.

Helena's gaze is directed downwards while we walk: she explains that, as for the rest of Lisbon, also this place's soil is rich in old ceramic pieces, remains of previous architectures or potteries used to create new compounds to cover the ground. She squats down a few times when spotting what appear to be minuscule shining stones, she digs a bit and - to my amazement - she always picks up pieces of glazed pottery of different sizes and colours. We consider the possibility of setting up the installation in the entrance hall of the Lion's House. It is a chancy prospect - the space is so much imbued in upfront colonial narratives that we struggle at first to envision an intervention that may retain any form of independence and not be swallowed by its immediate surroundings. We decide to take up the challenge and see where the dialogue goes.
Helena. Day one - We set up the installation structure with colonial wood tables with a western modern design that we found abandoned in one of the buildings of the garden. In such structure, we display a set of ceramic sculptures and pregnant bellies plaster casts, artefacts that comprise our previous research explorations, adding various objects and elements that are part of the Tropical Garden environment. They include ceramic fragments found in the soil as well as Portuguese colonial research books about the geography and geology of Africa, borrowed from the Garden’s library collection.

The ceramic sculptures constitute part of my ongoing artistic research, which embodies the concept of matrix as the sculpture-making procedures testify. A previous plaster mould has been the nest of a ceramic fragment found in the soil and from where a new ceramic form grows. A metaphor for the origin and growing of form starts with an unknown ceramic fragment from where I start to mould the sculpture. Ceramic objects are one of the testimonies of the west/east cross-culture references over the centuries, as they embodied many histories of the European colonization.

F. Day one - The installation is set as a dialogue, and we agree to play with it along the three days of the workshop and to encourage participants and casual passersby to intervene freely with the pieces. I am reticent to move some of Helena’s ceramic artefacts, as they seem fragile and the tables appear unstable. So, at first, when I find time to go back to the installation between the various events of the workshop, my dialogue with it consists of minor shifts and shy tentatives of objects reorganization.

I’m less restrained with the pregnant belly casts. They are fieldwork devices (X. Andrade et Al. 2017), testimonies of the intimate touch of an anthropological encounter, bearing layers of dried plaster on gauze stripes and hours spent with pregnant women in the private settings of their homes. I have resolved to do belly casts in my research on childbirth pain to overcome the tight temporality that hospital fieldwork imposed on my engagement with pregnant women. It takes time to probe people to open up about experience or expected pain, and "the time of the clinic" - an obstetrician has once told me when asked for an interview - "is very different from the time of anthropology". Displaced from their original setting, the casts become versatile objects and bodies' archives.
H. Day Two - Below and above the drawers we overlap and place other personal research materials. We continue to add elements directly collected from the garden such as diverse types of soils, leaves and seeds. As each of us move to different buildings to participate to the #Colleex events, we keep collecting materials that resound and resemble the matrix concept we have agreed to explore further, strengthening the site-specific aspect of the installation. Later, I return to the installation room and add such elements, placing them in strategic areas of the installation. Soil portions are shown inside the colonial wood table's drawers, as they have been collected as specific features that stand for land possession, as samples to investigate and nominate the unknown. Francesca has collected botanical samples such as seeds and leaves from tropical tree and plant species. We move and open the Midwifery book and the Geological African soil stratus's book in specific pages to match the collected elements.

F. Day Two- The longer we engage in our matrix manipulation, the more intricate and intertwined appear the various archives we're mobilizing. Heléna tells me that on the inaugural ceremony of the construction work of Belém riverside, which was commemorated twice during the dictatorship (1940 and 1960), the Ministry of Ultramarine Lands (Ministério do Ultramar) ordered small quantity of soil from the Portuguese colonies to be dispersed in Belém (Elias 2008). The mobilization of soil was followed by the displacement of colonial subjects and materials -the Tropical Garden was in fact transformed during the 1940’s Exposition by what a local newspaper defined "an ethnographic documentary from three continents: Africa, Asia and Oceania" (Matos 2006:211). Temporary artificial colonial scenographies were populated by a "human zoo" of 138 natives plus an elephant that walked in a secluded area of the garden according to scheduled hours and a caged lion. Two indigenous women gave birth during the six months of the exposition, and the three infants died before its ending (Vargaftig 2016). Colonial
soil, objects and bodies (animals or human alike) also filled medical imaginaries and obstetric books of the time, that circulated an old trope asserting how indigenous women - like animals - had easy, painless childbirth (Rich 2016).

**H. Day Three** – As we dialogue through the objects' placement, crafts and collected elements, we continue to display and coordinate verbal and visual elements. Paper notes from midwifery books with seeds and ceramics, cartographies of the continents as background of sculptures are among the operations developed. I re-arranged the set and disposed ceramic fragments over the colonial maps. A ceramic fragment has the word "pain" printed although, originally, the full word might have been "painted". I displayed the printed ceramic fragment over the map showing world countries' frontiers on the XIX century. Frontiers and pain. At the time, the Western orders to divide and share Africa land and their resources have come to my mind as I was part of such colonial matrix too. Also, the propaganda motto of the Portuguese regime, during the dictatorship, saying that Portugal goes from Minho to Timor, namely the former country and the colonies (Elias 2008), has been a consequence of such European agreement upon Africa. At some point of the day III, I come back and placed sculpture ceramics over the maps. Francesca has also orientated the plaster bellies towards the map.

**F. Day Three** - One of Helena's round sculpture, shaped in the plaster mould and generated from a ceramic matrix is resting bottom up on a world map of an old atlas. I put a belly cast beside it, and think of how it has also been moulded around a shape. I have punctured this cast with little holes, that being close permit to see through it - and one can see the definition of matrix from a geology's dictionary. The MATRIX: Atlas* is an installation that, like the research carried out in fragmented or forgotten archives, calls for active engagement. The pieces that we have put together may at first seem random and unrelated, but they share the logic of the matrix, of something that has a generative character. Moreover, they are debris of a past that has no narrative in the stroll around the Tropical Garden. Our matrix exercise becomes a practice of visibility and a work of deliberate connections.

**H. Postscriptum** – According to Bishop, the collaboration and interaction within creative practices in the art domain not always led to participatory art, due to the imposition of a false social consensus among the relations settled on such art projects (Bishop 2006). Nevertheless, she acknowledges that some participatory projects have challenged social established perspectives and assumptions as some interventions have cast some light towards alternative forms of participatory practice and convergence of diverse Knowledges (Bishop 2012). While experiencing the artistic turn in academic research, artists have settled a debate on forms of research and knowledge (Cossens, Douglas and Crispin 2009) that artistic practice can offer. There are procedures that do not fit entirely into the conventions of scientific knowledge.

Artistic research encompasses heuristic methods, primal non-verbalised research work, experimental collaboration strategies and embodied forms of knowledge. Nevertheless, they may not be exclusive of the artistic practice. By initially exploring communication through non-primal verbalized research work, namely the ceramic sculpture works and the pregnant bellies plaster casts, me and Francesca have started
an experimental format that cuts with the unidirectional procedure of reflecting and presenting work in progress. Previously, both have individually approached their research subject through craft making and bringing visible the tactile human experience (Ingold 2010). As part of the embodied knowledge, such craft investigation has trigger the mutual exchange and reciprocity enquire regarding the matrix subject and the colonial legacy of the garden. Such motivation has led to the co-creation of an interactive installation as a communicational device to open and include the dialogue with peers.

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COLLABORATIVE INSTALLATION - A FORMULA

In this installation we have composed, at different moments along the #Colleex workshop, sets of matrix proposals as described above. Although the installation was bound to our experience of the place and previous research paths, we were able to design a set of procedures that might be used by other researchers. Here is the formula:

1 – Set a common ground:
Previously to the installation, combine a concept that match both of your research. Start to think of visual and material elements, crafts our other elements you both have produced in your research (whether data, material evidences, crafts, visual documents, field notes, other) and that could generate dialogues between your research issues.
(NOTE: Concentrate on the side-works of field-work: those activities, materials, thoughts or occurrences that happen around but outside of fieldwork; then undress fieldwork of the possibility of having, or discerning, an inside from an outside).

2- Create a site-specific approach:
After having a common-ground mind-set to start, please visit the place where the installation will be developed. Observe the typology and uses of the space – a corridor, atrium, room, open space, etcetera, and correlate such specificities with your mind-set.

3- Tune the collaborative mind-set:
Bear in mind that you will have at least three dimensions to be intertwined at the place of the installation: a) physical characteristics of the space where the installation is displayed; b) symbolic, institutional, agonistic discourses the space resonates, and the mind-set you have previously agreed upon. You may find attached to the space diverse elements that might bridge, reset, highlight or enlarge your initial collaboration approach to the concept you want to explore and communicate to peers within the event. Furniture, books, materials, objects, etc., may be among the preferences.

(NOTE: adopt the vision of a collaborator in displacing your object from the usual niche you have created for them. Do not dwell on feelings of embarrassment).

4- Planning and displaying the installation:
Plan the days that you will be dialoguing with your installation during the event and a reasonable amount sources of both previous research work that you will you be connecting to the concept and place the installation. Also suggest the moments you will be together available to talk to participants in the event and plan as well the sorts of devices suited for your documenting the performance schedule.

5- Continually feed the installation:
Bring elements form previous research each day and collect elements from the surroundings that could match the mind-set concept, highlight aspects of research you both find pertinent or
even topics the participants have suggested for you to think about. Keep changing and re-arranging and composing different sets.

Documentation of the process is desirable as in the form of notes or visual or audio-visual recording build a reflexive practice of the installation. As you document the procedures you may find specific frames that constitute the next arrangement.

Particularly, the compositions staged, the intuitions underlined in the matching groups of data collected, the ideas generated during the installation feeding, and shared knowledge with peers during the event, are features that will surely nurture individual and collaborative future research of the participants of the Collaborative Installation.

(NOTE: Feel free to create the connections, spur dialogues and unite the dots deliberately).