

Preface

Motion: Migrations’ How Does It Inform Art History Today?

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The term *Migration* made its first significant appearance in the realm of CIHA in the title of 2008 CIHA World Congress in Melbourne, Australia: “Crossing Cultures: conflict, migration, and convergence”, increasingly entering the vocabulary of academics in the field since then. It emerged together with a set of terms such as circulation, transit, displacement, that were evoked in an effort to reinvent art historical narratives, adjusting them to an increasingly “globalized world”. In spite of the presence of the term “conflict” in the Melbourne title, at the time, there was a freshness and optimism to this project, since it offered convincing alternatives to the traditional nationalistic approach to art, and a vision of a dynamic art history, where everything was on the move. More recently, however, in light of the contemporary political debates on migration, and particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic, the term has acquired a more complex meaning. As Tom Mitchell points out in his article on *Migrating images*, migration is associated not only with mobility and convergence, as suggested by CIHA’s Melbourne title, but also with “contradiction, difficulty, friction and opposition.”¹ The radical experience of being ‘held in place’ brought by the Covid-19 pandemic made the entanglements of migration with all kinds of barriers and violence explicit, demanding a critical reevaluation of the utopian promises suggested by the concept in the early 2000s. In this new context, art historians such as Mieke Bal, Miguel Hernández-Navarro, Inge Boer, and Jill Bennett, among others, have helped to reposition the concept of Migration within art history, by focusing not only on themes associated to migration, such as narratives

about the circulation of peoples and objects in the colonial world, for example, but reflecting upon the *condition of the migrant*.

Migration has always been one of the conditions of artists. In the contemporary world, however, it became endemic. As Ann Ring Peterson observes, today “a considerable number of artists are on the move, due to the triple processes of globalization, decolonization and migration”². Migration became central to artistic practice, and it seems very hard today to be an artist – especially for those born outside Europe or the US – without experiencing the conditions of a migrant. To acknowledge this is to understand art as emerging “between cultures”, in a place defined by Inge Boer as “uncertain territories”, which is also by definition a political place.³ Mieke Bal pins down the description of art produced under these conditions with the term “migrant aesthetics”. As Ann Peterson observes in her article, “For the last two decades, an increasing number of non-Western artists have been ‘included’ in the art market and the international exhibition circuit. Many of these artists follow the same typical career path: born and raised in a non-Western country; educated at a Western art academy or university; presently living and working in one of the metropolitan art centers of the West; and travelling and exhibiting worldwide.”⁴ The biography of the Brazilian artist Clarissa Tossin perfectly fits the type described by Ann Peterson. Her work can help us understand the kinds of challenges that our contemporary migrant culture sets upon art history and why Migration could serve as an urgent and important platform, suited for a CIHA international congress.

Born in 1973 in Porto Alegre, Clarissa Tossin grew up in Brasilia, completed her Bachelor in visual arts in São Paulo, and left to the US to study at the California Institute of the Arts. She is based in LA since then but maintains deep ties to Brazil. Dislocations and migrations are central themes in her work. In “Encontro das Águas” (Meeting of Waters), for example, she proposes a reflection on the impact of advanced capitalist society on local populations of the Amazon. The work, first exhibited in 2018 at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, is composed of different objects that,

together, in their material presence, reflect on the complex environmental and human problematic in the region.⁵

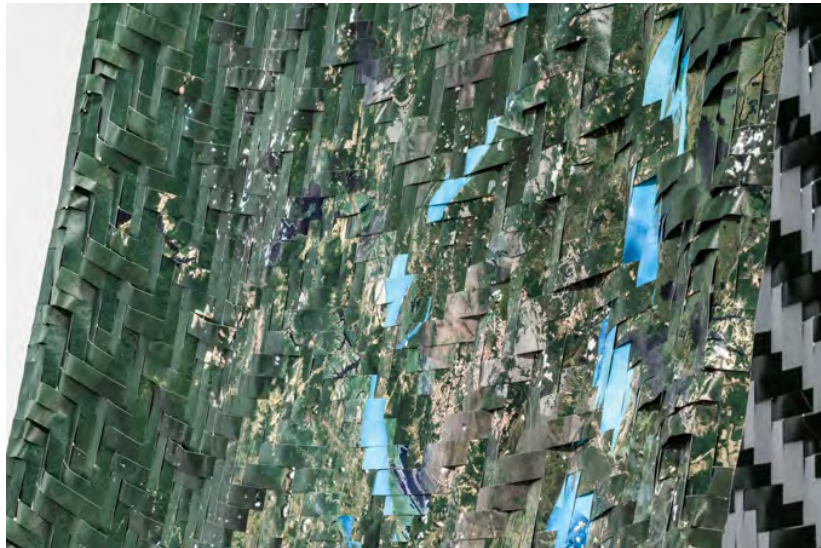


Fig. 1 and 2. *Encontro das Águas (Meeting of Waters)*, 2016–18. Woven archival inkjet print on vinyl, terracotta objects, fishnet, thread, woven baskets and backpack made out of Amazon.com delivery boxes. Instituto Inhotim Collection, Minas Gerais, Brazil.

The first work produced for the group was a large tapestry, 15 meters in length and 1.3 meters wide. It is built out of two satellite pictures depicting the 900 miles stretch of the Amazon River, from the city of Manaus to its entrance in the Atlantic Ocean. The satellite pictures were cut into long ribbons and woven together, in reverse, using the traditional basketry technique of the Baniwa peoples. The stretch of the Amazon presented in the work corresponds to the route travelled daily by hundreds of cargo ships, transporting products from the so called “Zona Franca de Manaus” (Manaus Free Trade Zone) to the Atlantic Ocean, and from there into the world. The “Zona Franca”, an area of more than 6 thousand square miles in the heart of the Amazon forest, was created in 1957 as a tax-free, deregulated zone to attract international capital to the region. Today, some of the largest companies in the world have their base in the surroundings of Manaus, such as Apple, Samsung, Coca-Cola, Panasonic, Honda, and many others.

The establishment of the “Free Trade Zone” is one of the most recent, among many interventions in the ecosystem of the Amazon throughout history, resulting in the deforestation of thousands of ackers of native forests, as well as violence and dislocation of native peoples in the region. The indigenous populations living along the Amazon and its affluent rivers have been interacting with European for centuries, struggling to survive. The Baniwa people that traditionally occupied the margins of the rio Içana and the high part of the rio Negro are one among many of these affected communities. The first registers of contact with the Baniwas date to the 18th century, when they were captured and enslaved by the Portuguese settlers. From the 19th century on, religious missions were created in the region by the Salesians, and later also by protestants from The United States, transferring the Baniwas into villages and converting a large part of their population. In the turn of the century, they were deeply affected by the rubber exploitation economy that brought constant confrontation with the “seringueiros”, or rubber workers, and many deaths. Again, in the 1970’s, the government confiscated significant part of their land to build the North Perimetral road, and in the 1980’s they were affected by big mining companies that settled in

the region. In spite of this violent history, the Baniwas managed to maintain their culture and traditions, including the art of basketry.



Fig. 3. Baniwa Basketry at the Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro. Photo Juliana Chalita/ archive Selvagem Ciclo de Estudos, 2023.

In the 90's they finally organized politically and obtained the demarcation of their lands. They also developed co-ops to insert their products – basically peppers, terracotta pots, and basketry – into the market, becoming an inspiration for other native people seeking their rights. The relevance of the group within the local indigenous organizations in the Amazon was probably the reason why Clarissa Tossin chose to use the Baniwa basketry as reference in her work. Although their territories lay outside the Zona Franca, 600 miles up the Rio Negro, they are still affected by the global market created by the Free Trade Zone. Forced to navigate the Amazon waters to bring their art work to sell in Manaus as means of survival, they cannot avoid being an active part of the net of economic, politic and social relations in the region.

By using Baniwa traditional weaving techniques to reconfigure an image of the Amazon river, Clarissa Tossin points to this complex history of assimilation and resistance present in the area. The weaving of the satellite photographs materializes this entanglement of cultures, with their own sense of place and space on the Amazon. In front of the city of Manaus, the two rivers that form the Amazon – Rio Negro and Rio Solimões – meet, but do not mix their waters for another six kilometers, this is one more metaphor for the dialectics of resistance and assimilation included in the title of the work.



Fig. 4. Meeting of the waters of the Negro and Solimões rivers

The artist's discussion of the encounters and (des)encounters produced in the area of the "Zona Franca de Manaus" is expanded by further objects that compose the "Encontro das Águas" installation.



Fig. 4. Installation view, Clarissa Tossin: Encontro das Águas (Meeting of Waters), Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin, January 13–July 1, 2018. Courtesy of the Blanton Museum of Art. Photo: Colin Doyle

Using terra cotta, a traditional media in the region since pre-Columbian times, she produces cast models of locally manufactured high-tech objects by multinational companies, such as motorcycle tiers, routers, computer keyboards, and Coca-Cola bottles, handing them in fishing nets, or setting them in baskets woven with cardboard strips from *Amazon* company boxes. All these products put on the market for local or global consuming are also known and desired by the indigenous population of the Amazon, however remaining largely inaccessible. When translated by Clarissa Tossin into the traditional media of terra cotta, they become dysfunctional and awkward, albite maintaining an aesthetic appeal. Hanging on fishing nets, they also call to mind images of environmental degeneration and pollution that directly affect the lives of locals.

The use of *Amazon* boxes as material for the production of Baniwa-like banquets and carriers, is again another way of reflecting on the complexities of the “Zona Franca” cultural texture. Jeff Bezos, creator of *Amazon.com*, chose the name for his company because of the Amazon river. Amazon is today one of the largest transport service companies in the planet, guaranteeing the circulation of millions of items every day. For the Baniwas, however, outsiders to the consumer world of globalized capitalism, Amazon boxes have other connotations. When translated into the local technologies of transport, they result in useless “simulacra”.

We can see all the movement taking place in the Amazon “Free Trade Zone” as a movement of incorporation of the region into a globalized capitalist system. This process provoked dislocations, exclusions, and violence, which remain part of the local memory. Although Clarissa is not one of the immediate actors involved in the Amazon conflict – after all she comes from a middle-class family of European descent and never lived in the region – as a Brazilian immigrant in the US, she feels compelled to engage and act. By exhibiting the installation “Encontro das Águas” at the Blanton Museum of art in Austin she found a way, through her own imagination, to connect the space of the gallery to the Amazon reality. With this gesture, to use Mieke Bal’s words, she “enacts a small-scale resistance against the status quo”, and

thus exert political agency. To center the CIHA World Congress around the concept of Migration is, therefore, to interrogate the ways in which art history can become as space of resilience and resistance against the globalized corporate reality we live in.

Motion is implied in Migration, but today both concepts exist in tension. In its traditional meaning of dislocation of populations, Migration has always been part of the human experience. People were on the move since prehistoric times, crossing continents to seek better living conditions. However, since the beginning of the circumnavigation that led to colonial expansion, human dislocation was incorporated as an essential part of the nascent capitalist system, which depends on mobility for exchange. To be functional and serve its purpose, as capitalism advanced, mobility became highly regulated. With time, sophisticated strategies of controlling movement within the system were put into place. Boundaries were set, and immigration laws were established. At the same time, various technological apparatus for mapping and location – from navigation maps to satellites – were created to operate radars, televisions, telephones, and most recently, the internet and cellphones. As Jonathan Crary describes it in his book *24/7*⁶, humanity partakes today in an advanced capitalist system of permanent regulated movement, captured by the image of a society that works around the clock, in which the last unconquered, but already threatened frontier is sleep. In *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture*, Mieke Bal and Hernández-Navarro also deliver a rich insight on the utopia of Motion permeating contemporary society. As they describe it, “the current status quo is dominated by the paradigm of travel, the key figure of modernity.” However, “the idea of travel implies a direction and also a hidden ideology of control (that) becomes apparent when we consider that even mobile phones are linked to satellite technology of location.”⁷

In this contemporary scenario, Migration gains new meaning and can be seen as the disruptive element, as a movement that escapes control and disturbs the system. It causes unpredictable movement and resistance, disorganizing temporal and spatial coordinates. It creates the “uncertain territories” in which established boundary lines are transformed into loosely

defined zones of encounters, where multiple spaces and temporalities are obliged to coexist.⁸ Mieke Bal sees such spaces as offering “the conditions for resistance to technological control”. In her view, this can create the space to experience the tension and the conflictual nature of social life. In art, these experiences become visible and tangible. In other words, the concept of Migration as the disruptive element within contemporary society can become operative within art and art history.

The 33rd CIHA World Congress proposed “Migrations” as a platform for art historical discussion in these terms. The objective was not so much to examine how art represents the past and present phenomenon of migration, but rather to explore beyond that, and see Migration as a political condition of art. In other words, we wanted scholars to come together to reflect on the potential of art as one of many spaces of the political, created by the dislocation of people, objects and ideas across cultural borders. A space which is at the same time framed by “aesthetics”, by the materiality and sensual quality of things that incorporate and make ideas visual and tangible.

Endnotes

1. Mitchel, “Migrating Images”, in: *Image Science*, 2015, p.65.
2. Ann Ring Peterson, “The location of memory: migration and transnational cultural memory as challenges for art history”, In: *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, v.4, n.2, 2013, p. 121-137, here: p. 122.
3. Inge Boer, *Uncertain Territories: boundaries in cultural analysis*, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006.
4. Ann Ring Peterson, op.cit., p. 122.
5. The series of works presented in this installation were produced by the artist during an artistic residency at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute in 2017. See: <https://blantonmuseum.org/rotation/clarissa-tossin-meeting-of-waters/>
6. Jonathan Crary, *24/7 terminal capitalism and the end of sleep*, London, Brooklyn, and New York: Verso, 2013.
7. Mieke Bal and Miguel Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction”, in: *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: conflict resistance and agency*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011, p.10.
8. “I will argue that boundaries cannot be wished away but will serve their ordering purposes better – that is, without the lack of understanding and the ensuing hostilities that usually

accompany them – if we accept their existence but take them as uncertain; not lines, but spaces, not rigid but open to negotiation. The resulting uncertain terrains are the ground we stand on, together.” Inge Boer, “Introduction”, *Uncertain Territories: Boundaries in Cultural Analysis*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006, p. 13.

This article is an updated version of a paper presented in 2018 at CAA as part of the panel “Mobilities: Brazil and Beyond”, chaired by Jeanette Favrot Peterson.