

The Past Today Por Tiago Mesquita

The civil-military dictatorship installed in Brazil on March 31st, 1964, began to loosen its grip on August 28th, 1979, with the promulgation of the Amnesty Law. This law represented a social pact to accelerate the end of the dictatorship and find a democratic way out. It was important for ending the suffering of exile and political incarceration, allowing for the onset of a democratic vision for the country, with multi-party politics, an organized civil society and general elections.

The price of amnesty was high, however. It was followed by silence, in which everyone washed their hands: civilian support for the dictatorship was no longer under scrutiny, and the complicit or indifferent looks at torture and its executors led to a lack of accountability. Torture is a living practice in the country to this day, frequent even in the higher posts of the republic. The Amnesty Law was never reviewed, regardless of a few different attempts. These and other burdens have remained, renewed and remain among us in the present. The exhibition *O fardo, a Farda, a Fresta* [the burden, the uniform, the crack] explores the permanence of the past in Brazilian social life, highlighting the impacts felt today in major political events or everyday living.

Rivane Neuenschwander does not bring the past into the present through a historical thesis but rather through allegory. She produces friction between different memories from 1964 through 1985, so that parallels and discrepancies between many pasts and presents are established. These are works that recreate loose fragments collected from documents and statements from friends and family. The artist spatially reconstructs their memories, translating them in various ways. The representations of reminiscences reverberate through each other in a mosaic of contrasting narratives. Different and combined.

The visual translation of memories is one of the procedures that Neuenschwander frequently employs. In *O Fardo, a Farda, a Fresta*, works assume a dissonant relationship. Neuenschwander is not focused solely on the significant events of the dictatorship's history. There are memories of both government and resistance slogans, major happenings, catastrophes, torture, extermination, salary cuts, oppression, and opposition. They are drawn together with more subjective memories, such as domestic objects, days off, television shows, games, symbols of the time, school and labor. When transformed into artistic language, these works evade the original sense of memory, suggesting new meanings.

If *M.F. (Road Trip)* (2015) takes off from memories of car trips during vacations, once it becomes an olfactory installation, it suggests new relationships. A hole in the wall quietly expels the smell of gasoline. The odor, though it does not really spread, contaminates nearby objects and, more importantly, impregnates our perception as a whole. We begin to see other objects, *O.S. (Pai Voltando Para Casa / P.E.R.N.A.M.B.U.C.O.)* (2023) and *M.C. (Piracema, Uma Transa Pós-Amazônica)* (2023), as if they were doused in gas.

In both, we find symbols of the rapid expansion of highway capitalism in Brazil. If one groups together different ornamental patterns, which were common decorations on truck fenders, to form the Pernambuco state flag – with the name of the state written in a typeface formed by the ornaments; the other deals with the advancement of the automobile as part of predatory exploration projects in the Amazon. On a winding wooden table tracing the outline of a highway, the work makes us see the forest as the “green hell” of the military's communications. It would be a stretch to think that the landscape is filled with smoke. The black tulle fabric that permeates the objects and dictatorship slogans is an indication of this. The smell of gasoline becomes one of the odors of an era. It wafts through activities, pleasant walks, children's games, the expansion of “conservative modernization,” state flags, prosperity and scarcity in the past and in the present, in the construction of the *Transamazônica* and in the desertification of the forest.

The relationship of the past to the present assumes many guises in the exhibition. In some works, it is the denouncement of a tragic occurrence that never found public recognition, as in *M.C. (Agulhas Conspiratórias)* (2023), that provides a form for the paranoia of the military regime. Neuenschwander takes off from the story of nine Chinese government officials who were arrested and tortured under the charge of communist infiltration. At the time, the press spread the word that they had planned to assassinate Governor Carlos Lacerda with their acupuncture needles. This kind of persecution fantasy is still echoing in the far-right's social networks, with even more histrionic rhetoric.

In *Nunca Mais, Brasil* (2023), Neuenschwander weaves a patchwork quilt where childhood monsters and stylized creatures are interspersed with a series of letters that name clandestine sites for torture and murder under the dictatorship. The figures recall the imagery explored by the artist in *O Nome do Medo* (2015 - *ongoing*), a series in which she researched children's fears. They hover around names with jumbled letters,

making it difficult for us to understand what is spelled out. This difficulty in naming places seems to be the same as recognizing the past. It appears as a code yet to be deciphered. The tapestry deals with this dispute and the trauma resulting from the civic-military regime. *V.G.T. (Ame-o ou Deixe-o)* (2023) approaches the ciphered shuffling of the dictatorship's official statements. An anagram is constantly undone on an obsolete device, used during the years of lead.

This difficulty of finding oneself, assigning a name, and giving a face to things appears in a new work made with spoken portraits: *L.G. and J.N. Retrato Calado (Agente Guarany)* (2023). Here, Neuenschwander has a sketch artist reconstruct the face of the agent who allegedly participated in the bombing of the Brazilian Bar Association (OAB) in Rio de Janeiro, during the dictatorship. It would provide a face and render visible those who we cannot but wish to name, as if we could dispute the meaning of those times. As Octavio Paz remarks on the 1968 crises in Mexico, "A past that we thought buried is alive and erupts among us. Whenever it appears in public, it is masked and armed; we don't know who it is, we only know that it is destruction and revenge. It is a past that we did not know or could not recognize, name, unmask"¹

These meanings are not fixed. They must be disputed. After all, art is here to increase the complexity of problems. The artist represents more than one temporality. Along with the time of events, calamities, tragedies or epics, prosaic artifacts appear, as in the embroidery *M.M. (Caixa de Costura)* (2023), made with all the material found in a sewing box. There is also a pastoral image in *E.N. (Flamboyant)* (2015), a scene from neighborhoods of the time, the ground covered with the leaves of *Flamboyant* trees.

Rivane Neuenschwander's memory museum is made up of this complex cluster of events, where horror appears amidst the most absolute normality, coming close to being confused with it. Everything happens in the same place, in different ways. Everything is in dispute. In fact, though these are memories of a dark political period, the exhibition is optimistic. There is no nostalgia for the representation of other times, but this is not a melancholic exhibition. It is full of color and life, as the pistachio shell fingernails in *J.R. (Aurora Postiça)* (2023).

The film *Eu Sou Uma Arara* (2022), made in partnership with Mariana Lacerda, is an expression of this optimism. Faced with the risk of democratic rupture, between 2021 and 2022, a group of protesters appeared on the streets as an imaginary forest. Beings populate the marches and political acts of resistance to far-right policies. That 'forest' claims, at a critical moment, the rights of nature and other overturns. The past here is not a peaceful point but rather something to be transformed.

Critical essay written for the exhibition *O fardo, a farda, a fresta*, at Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, 2023.

1 Octavio Paz, in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950)