

Pélagie Gbaguidi in conversation with Karamujinho

KARAMUJINHO: I remember the first time we met at the Pivô Residency in Salvador, my dear Pélagie, you invited me for a glass of water at first sight. Not just an invitation, but a request. And as usual, as it is to offer water to someone, the feeling I had, coming from you, was like a kind of body ritual in reverence to encounters. I thought that it was very symbolic to use water as an introducing agent to refresh our bodies in the heat of Salvador, but, first of all, to refresh our minds to start a great journey that was to come. At the same time, I was thinking: it is curious that we, people of Afro-indigenous traditions here in Bahia, use water for what we call *apaziguamento*. It's a peace spell to bring harmony and alignment. Consciously or unconsciously, Pélagie, all our encounters took place in incantations of *apaziguamentos* through water. And it was a very beautiful journey for which I would like to thank not only you but first of all the ancestors who made this and other encounters possible. How do you feel about that?

PÉLAGIE GBAGUIDI: Thank you for your insightful analysis and observations. How could you have known in advance that the water element is so present in my way of being? Looking at water as a metaphor for human life, water is a matrix to understand the course of history, the memories and recollections (*souvenirs*), the infinite, the vastness, and the uncertain. There is something that we cannot identify because it questions our smallness on the cosmic scale.

Water is fundamental as an architecture of language, and water is a bond in relationships. Water generates relationships.

The image I have in my mind is that words are made by clay and water, and this forms a language, the beginning of creation. In a spiritual dimension, it is a path that leads us to the traditions of libations, offerings to remember the ancestors, the ones who built Brazil.

Water, a vital energy and a precious resource, is now being compromised by capitalist lobbies. We are at a turning point that questions life on Earth and, as I said before, our smallness on the cosmic scale. Yes, giving water is a human gesture, the elementary language for welcoming someone.

I had an experience of welcoming when I arrived in Salvador. The first contact I had was with the taxi driver, then Murilo Silva and Vittor Adél, and then the whole team of Pivô. During my residency, I recorded all the traces of welcoming deeply. It was helpful to face some part of the reality in the street, in terms of precarity, and some scenes of non-verbal violence (when I saw a policeman play the rhythm of samba with his arms while carrying his weapon during an event celebrating Iemanjá). This is not a situation that needs to be banalized. In Brazil, we hug each other as a salutation. I see that as a sign of survival in the face of enormous societal complexity and as a sign of hospitality. My experience has been very hospitable.

K: And continuing about the waters: I would like to talk about these waters that connect Bahia to the African continent. They say that from Benin and also from Senegal, if you look straight at the Atlantic Ocean, you can see Bahia. It's a beautiful way of seeing this connection, which involves cuisine, such as *Pirão*, *farofa* and *quiabada* that you identify as being the same in Benin, but also through various symbolic aspects that constitute what is called the African diaspora in Brazil, certainly with colonial problems across the globe, problems that derive from the slavery that affected our people. What could you say about the African diaspora in Bahia?

PG: This link is also a telluric link between continents through the dance of the tectonic plates between America and Africa. In other words, the notion of distance (looking at Africa from afar) has been reinforced by the appalling history of slavery and colonization. I would say that the filiation with Africa is more than present. You can sense it everywhere in your daily life.

Let's talk about the lexicon, where certain words pose a problem, such as religious 'syncretism,' which is commonly used to refer to spiritual traditions such as Candomblé. From my point of view, it is important to underline the violence of the historical context in which the Catholic religion was imposed in the face of the worshipping practices of 'ethnic groups.' This is why it would be interesting to look at the forms of contextualizing a communication that has been remodeled and assumed. This is why the term diaspora seems to me dissonant and questioning. Afro-descendants living in Bahia or Brazil are at home just as they would be on the African continent, with the difference that coloniality in Brazil is part of a history that is too long now. Asymmetries of power are legion.

Yes, food seems to be an indelible link with African culinary practices, and with Benin in particular at the time of Dahomey.¹ The dishes prepared by Hungria Freitas at Pivô in Salvador have reactivated the taste of distant links, and we have all experienced this memory of taste (by talking, feeling, laughing, conversing...).

K: Could you talk about your visit to the Public Archive of Salvador? What was interesting for your artistic research?

PG: The research is rather experimental. The method consists of an approach that considers the way of looking by inviting another person to look at the same time as you. This allows us to have this shared experience and to get out of our own ruts (a desired decentering and distancing): 'looking together, changing together', an approach that I explore in my practice of deconstructing thought patterns. The idea is to transform toxic matter into a poetic language that involves an effort of confrontation with a search for forms that can enable us to create spaces of understanding, openness, and fraternity.

I invited Ramon Martins from Pivô to share our views on the archive. First, we needed to sweep up a very wide range of images, from the dictatorship to the period of slavery, to images from the 1970s. What struck me was the rudimentary way in which 'Negros na Bahia' is a description of images linked to slavery, and the romanticization aspect that appears in photos lined with coconut palms and with black people in the foreground in scenes of enslaved daily life. I felt it was imperative to explore the role of this historical figure, Catharina Alvares Paraguassú, by reversing the way the image is read with a painting entitled *Out of the frame* (2025). This upside-down central figure is now questioning the burning issues of this century. There is an urgent need to reflect on ethnicity issues. I also received a very warm welcome at the Public Archive, which is currently in the process of re-archiving the system, hopefully with a decolonial approach.

K: A memorable aspect of your work is the signs and symbologies linked to the global issues affected by coloniality. It is a very necessary discussion about racism, hierarchy, exotification, and the romanticization of traditions, in addition to post-colonization. Aesthetically, your work crosses me with the mystery factor, which is part of the secret of being who you are, a self-referential contemporary *griot*. Another important aspect of your research is the pigments of vibrant colors, as we can see in the great work of the mango tree. Could you tell me a little about this work and others in the exhibition?

PG: Yes, in the 2000s there was an urgent question that came to me like a revelation: that of the contemporary griot, which I have redefined as follows. In

¹ The Kingdom of Dahomey was a West African kingdom located within present-day Benin that existed from approximately 1600 until 1904.

the poetic sense, 'The griot challenges the individual in his own trajectory because he absorbs the word of the elders, remodeling it like a lump of fat that he comes to deposit in the belly of the passer-by, with the ingredients of his time'. In practice: 'breaking the rhythm of the everyday and integrating its share of eternity.

The digital revolution, the oral revolution and the transformation into a capitalist world have given rise to existential questions;

How would my body go through these changes?

How does one preserve the body in the face of capitalism?

(or rather why does capitalism need human capital/bodies to build the economy)?

I've begun my own process of shedding (*mue*) and deconstructing stereotypes.

My practice is pluriform. The colors express the depth of this space, which I call non-visible. I use pigments because they are mixed with water. This is close to a 'liquid' language that can spread.

The mango tree near Pivô appeared to me as a vision and as a need to summon the element of nature as a documental archive. I was struck by the strength and immensity of this beautiful tree, and I began to add traces and small holes to the canvas², like in excavations. Later, when I visited the *Ecos Malês* exhibition curated by João Victor Guimaraês and co-curated by Mirella Ferreira at Casa das Histórias de Salvador, I learned that under the mango tree was the cemetery of the Malê revolt of 1835 in Salvador da Bahia. I continued to think about other trees that also bear witness to violence, the "witness" tree in Charlottesville [Virginia, United States] I saw last December, but also how to get out of this destructive relationship towards the earth and human beings.

K: Another fascinating aspect of your work is your research about the body, a theme that also deeply interests me, you know because I investigate the body as memory and as an artistic surface for creation. During our adventures in Salvador, we attended Afro-Indigenous dance classes, which embodied the symbolism of the *caboclos* — mixed-race descendants of Black and Indigenous peoples — who played a crucial role in Bahia's independence. And today, these traditions remain alive, reaffirming themselves as a powerful form of resistance. In the face of the countless traps and issues of coloniality, do you believe our bodies are still moving forward?

² The artist alludes to her painting *Mango Tree* (2025)

PG: The experience of the polyphony of voices (Vittor Adél, João Guimarães, Angel Costta and Mateus Asipá, Karamujinho) in the *Manifestação* performance on February 15th at Pivô Salvador³ shows that bodies together express a desire to be animated by poetry, dance, writing, singing and all forms of language while integrating a shared ritual dimension (breathing, bodies in movement, light, pulsations, sensory awakening, community). Everyone contributes to this 'interruption' of reality. These spaces of resilience, expression and comfort must be understood not as escapes, but as structuring forms of renewed orality.

This salutary breach that penetrates our bodies and consciousness helps us to escape our human condition; at least for the time it takes.

It is through this colossal task that the 21st century can finally enlighten us about human achievements that call on us to reflect on the meaning of life on Earth and the creation of consciousness: *Quel est le sens de la vie sur Terre et la Fabrique de la conscience* (2023).

K: I started this conversation by discussing incantations and rituals. I would like to end it by discussing manifestations. What is Manifestation for you?

PT: A gaze that incorporates everything and tries not to fit into a Cartesian logic of thought.

Embracing/trying/confronting the stupor of horrible things or the brutality of certain scenes or aspects of reality, at the same time as friendly relationships, creativity, or the sunset, with the feeling that we are linked to the whole by a chain of vital human energy. Hope to be reborn from the whole world (as in Edouard Glissant). It's a clear commitment to social justice. The event is an array of voices, movements, feelings, constellations seen, heard, touched, a feeling of having been absorbed in a serious choreography, with all the nuances of its exuberance, and an invitation to look at the cosmos through dance and the urgent taste of life.

This state of being was achieved thanks to a human reciprocity that was lived. Thanks to all the people who helped me enjoy this residency; Iron Andrade, taxi driver, Vera, Bruno Sousa and Rosangela Silvestre for the dance; Karamujinho, for the curatorial approach and sense of sharing the insight of the city, Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel and the whole team; Pivô Salvador - Maria, Fernanda Brenner, Jaqueline Santiago, Carolina de Sá, Ramon Martins, Murilo Silva, Mateus Asipá; and Hungria Freitas; Galatea Gallery, José Adário Dos Santos, Gokula Stoffel, Erika Verzutti, Paulo Monteiro, artists for the performance: Vittor Adél, João Guimarães, Angel

³ Presented as the closing event in Gbaguidi's residency at Pivô, *Manifestação* was a performance of dance, poetry, and drawing.

Costta and Mateus Asipá; Alana and Alice for Cachoeira; Alberto Pitta, Acervo da Laje, Ekedy Sinhá; “seu” Agnaldo; Joceval Santos; Arquivo Público de Salvador; and the passers-by I met.

Pélagie Gbaguidi
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