(A telematic correspondence between Tamar Guimarães and João Maria Gusmão regarding *MARÉ-BAIXA!*, an exhibition of art stuff at Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel)

Tamar Guimarães:
Dear João Maria,
Could we start with the occasion of the many moons?

Moon light on stage.
Blue Room and Moon Lamp.
Moon phase through binoculars.
One window two moons.

Among the *Poemas mudados para o português*[1] is a poem in which Herberto Helder brings a Caxinauá moon from the Amazon, metamorphosing the language.

"The moon lay down: the moon is lying down,
do not do it! make the head of lobonauá lie down!
It taught them, finished, put its threads in its mouth, up above
it hung itself, went away. It entered
the sky, pulled out its eyes, made them into stars,
its head became the moon, from its blood
it made
a rainbow. [...]"[2]

There's also Manuel Bandeira's *Satellite* from *Evening Star*. Here's an excerpt:

"Ah, Moon of this late afternoon
having walked out on your romantic duties
without any show for sentimental dispositions.

Weary of hyperbole,
I like you just this way:
yourself, yourself alone
– satellite."[3]

Tell me about your moons.

João Maria Gusmão:
Tamar!!!
The exhibition is positively teeming with moons.

One Moon, two Moons, three Moons. I have a certain fascination with lunar anomalies, with the proliferation of celestial bodies, with the spellbinding sight of multiple Moons, multiple Suns. To me, George Lucas's most original image is the sky over Tatooine.[4] The multiplication of celestial bodies always implies a multiverse, a downpour of space and time.

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[1] A collection of translations by the Portuguese poet Herberto Helder, including "poems" drawn from Indigenous peoples' oral traditions and native songs. Published in Brazil by Selo Demônio Negro in 2020.
[2] Translation intended as a literal rendering of the original Portuguese text, for explanatory purposes.
[3] *This Earth, That Sky: Poems by Manuel Bandeira*, translated, with notes and introduction by Candace Slater (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 213.
[4] The desert planet in *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (1977).

Your Moons, the Amazonian moon of the Caxinauá, transposed by Herberto Helder, and Manuel Bandeira's *Satellite* project two lunar aspirations: one mythical and metamorphic, the other materialist yet affective. Both show just how impossible it is to be indifferent to the Moon.

Twenty years ago, I read Karl Popper's essay *How the Moon Might Throw Some of Her Light on the Two Ways of Parmenides* (1992), and I've gone back to it many times since. It's almost a metaphysical novella, bringing to mind Menippean satire,[5] a literary genre that resonates with both my writing and my artistic practice. There's something of that same metaliterary, metaphilosophical quality in Pessoa's writing: the idea that a single metaphysics is not enough, that a proliferation of them is needed, a "drama in people," to stage such a modernist tragedy.

Reading Popper's essay, we encounter a kind of archaeology of ontological experience: a comparative study of Parmenides' pre-Socratic fragments and the primordial imagination of lunar observation. He imagines the Greek world beneath a starry sky, night after night, trying to make sense of what it sees. Popper constructs a conceptual theater in which to speculate on the origins of idealist thought, that great founding split in Western thought.

It all begins with an apparently elementary question: how can the Moon always be the same when it appears to us in a different shape every night? New moon, waxing quarter, full moon, waning quarter. These are different forms, yet we know we are looking at the same object. How can we recognize its identity across all these appearances? What are the conditions for attaining true knowledge when what we see is constantly changing?

Popper's speculative reconstruction of Parmenides' argument for the immobility of being rests on the idea of a perfect lunar circle that accounts for the illusion of appearances. The images we see during the Moon's phases would be merely deceptive manifestations of an unchanging reality. This marks a decisive step in the history of metaphysics: instead of trusting what our senses show us, we begin to imagine a reality that exists beyond appearances, a reality that thought can grasp even when the senses seem to contradict it.

What particularly interests me about this theoretical hypothesis is the possibility of conjuring the Moon as an anti-Platonic archetype. There is an intriguing paradox here, because the Moon seems to stand in opposition to the ideal Platonic object. In the allegory of the cave, the Sun is associated with the idea of the Good, with that which illuminates and makes knowledge possible. It is a figure of permanence, intelligibility, unchanging truth. The Moon, by contrast, is a celestial object that presents itself to material experience, both visible and invisible, subject to transformations, reflections, shadows, and eclipses. It never appears in quite the same way.

In a sense, the Moon belongs to a materialist poetics, a profane mythologem, in opposition to the Apollonian, solar imaginary. It is not so much an image of absolute truth as an object that produces images out of shadows and illusions. An object that places us in a state of impermanence.

TG: Baudrillard tells us that the iconoclast destroys images because he takes their power very seriously. The fear is not simply that people might worship an object in place of what it represents, but also a more troubling suspicion: that the image conceals nothing, that there was never anything behind it. Destroying images would then be a way of preserving the possibility that something might exist beyond the image, without having to confront the void it might reveal. Remove the image, and no one can see the hole that was there anymore.

The iconolater seems to trust in this distance: they know that the image is not the divinity itself, but that they can address the divinity through it. But Baudrillard takes the argument a step further. Perhaps image worshippers, too, sense this absence and know how to live with it, surrendering themselves to representations without needing the assurance of an original. The

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[5] Menippean satire originated in ancient Greece in the third century BCE and takes its name from the Cynic philosopher Menippus of Gadara. Although his satirical writings have been lost, they influenced the genre, which is characterized by a mixture of humor, fantasy, and criticism of intellectual and social conventions.

distinction between the two becomes less straightforward: those who destroy images fear their power, while those who preserve them accept two possibilities: that an image points beyond itself, or that there is nothing beyond it.

So, in one account, the image is destroyed to preserve what might lie beyond it; in the other, a form is found that can accommodate the mutability and proliferation of appearances.

I wasn't thinking in terms of form and content, and I imagine that wasn't Baudrillard's intention either. What prompted me to think of this account was the promise of clarification that often accompanies the gesture of revealing how an image is constructed: as though, once we recognize its means, we already know what we are dealing with. In your Moons, I see the card, the lamp, the filter, the paper, the chemicals, the iron. Recognizing these materials doesn't seem to resolve the image or make the Moon disappear. I can follow how it is made and still find myself looking at a Moon. Here, the construction is part of what continues to surprise me.

Are we close to what you call a profane mythologem?

At another point in our conversation, amid lunar anomalies, card and lamp, you said you wanted *diagram-images*, *poem-images* in the photographic chamber, the laboratory chamber, and the chamber of thought. What are diagram-poem images?

JMG: It's interesting that you bring up Baudrillard's discussion of these two positions in relation to the image, and then go on to mention the oxymoron "poetic diagram." If Baudrillard is concerned with the ontological status of the image, I'm also interested in bringing in the semiological problem: how the image produces meaning between the legibility of the diagram and the irreducibility of the poem. This brings us back to the age-old question of form and content, of syntax and semantics. From the perspective of artistic practice, the difficulty lies not in making one correspond to the other, but in incorporating the discursive component into artistic practice itself, so that the two dimensions inform one another rather than being considered separately. When an artist is described as formalist, this usually suggests an aesthetic whose concerns are limited to the work's sensuous aspect, its syntax. But artistic positions whose focus is strictly conceptual can also be called formalist, precisely those that respond to the problem of semantics with an envelope.

To answer the question, the images are diagrammatic insofar as they constitute a device, both material and conceptual, much like a theater of pictograms. We might even call them photographic sets and objects. I add "photographic" because our perception of them as objects is diffuse, partial, or evocative, transformed by the work of the camera and the printing process. It is no coincidence that the sets contain so many interruptions of plane and depth, windows and reframings, images within images. I want them to operate ambivalently, between the illusion of the fourth wall in a theatrical scene and the material construction that supports it, between the image of a construction made of colored paper and its pictorial projection in the window of the camera.

The ideas behind the images follow a dialogical logic, one that always calls for interpretation. This mechanism is sometimes activated by the title of the work, at other times by the recognition of its orientation or by the presence of a mask within the frame, such as a binocular-shaped cutout, a blurred silhouette, and so on. Above all, I seek a paradoxical tension that establishes a codependence with the observer's apparatus of representation. An implicit riddle, at once visual and linguistic: a lighthouse at dawn; one window, two Moons; a Moon-shaped lamp in a sky-colored room.

At the beginning of this photographic series, I was thinking a lot about the cinematic technique known as day for night, in terms of what it brought to cinema from a diegetic standpoint, but especially what it achieved in spectral terms.

The day-for-night technique makes it possible to conceive of an image of a reality that is not strictly photographic, as though it were possible to take a photograph without light.

TG: I wanted to stay with this photograph without light and go back to the Moon: something exists even when we cannot see it. Elsewhere in our correspondence, you spoke of the "reason for the Moon's invisibility" and of "making the apparent visible." What changes between seeing something and seeing it as an apparition?

JMG: Here I was referring to a tautology of perception. There is a very amusing passage in Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid* in which a medical student is asked why opium induces sleep. He replies that opium has a soporific property. It is a classic example of circular reasoning.

In the case of the pre-Socratic Moon, this redundancy amounts to a kind of inversion of the idealist explanation. It is not because appearances are deceptive that we fail to see the model of the perfect, circular Moon, but because the absence of light makes it invisible. This explanation, which seems to resolve the problem, merely restates it, while nevertheless bringing about a kind of sabotage of the transcendental.

This idea also addresses the question you raised about appearance as apparition. I think we can find, in this material logic of invisibility, a spectral *locus* for the origin of the image, as Derrida indeed demonstrates in his analysis of the episode of the daughter of Butades the potter, as recounted by Pliny the Elder.[6]

Recalling the myth of the origin of the image, on the night of their farewell, Butades' daughter traces the outline of her lover's shadow as he prepares to leave for war. There is a double negation here, something profoundly spectral. On the one hand, the shadow appears as the apparition of an absence: it makes a form visible precisely by obstructing the light. On the other, it anticipates the disappearance of the one it represents, the possibility that her lover may leave and never return. It thus becomes a trace of someone who may no longer be present. I am interested in this condition in which the image makes the world disappear so that we can consider what remains of that disappearance.

TG: And what is it about Yoshitoshi's Moons that makes you return to them?

JMG: Japanese prints, and Yoshitoshi's series in particular, produce a kind of vertigo that has much in common with what I was saying earlier about Parmenides' Moon and day for night: the relationship between appearance and the conditions under which something becomes visible. *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon* is a visual chronicle of the "floating world." The Moon is not the main subject of each print; rather, it is the transient observer and the feeble light within the image. The Moon serves as a conceptual counterpart to the mythological episode: the Moon as witness. Yoshitoshi's virtuosity is remarkable: he manages to camouflage the lunar motif and find new variations on its appearance throughout the series.

During my art studies, I devoted myself almost exclusively to etching and lithography. I now recognize the importance of what I developed then in the darkroom, in my work as a printer. Printmaking taught me to see two things in an image. First, its microstructure: the direction of the grain in a plate, for example, or the texture of an aquatint mark. Second, that an image is an assemblage of composite parts which, like a machine, requires its own engineering. Curiously, it was as a photographer, more than as a filmmaker, that I came to rediscover these ways of thinking about images. We are talking about a dimension that is both technical and conceptual. I am interested in looking at certain technical possibilities and exploring them in depth as content, as a way of thinking about the very essence of the medium. In this photographic series, for example, there is an image of an unlit ceiling lamp photographed in shades of green [*Ceiling lamp off*, 2025], as though it had been captured by a night-vision camera. And yet the image is overexposed, blinded by the excess of light.

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[6] A reflection developed in *Memórias de cego: o autorretrato e outras ruínas* [Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins] (Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2010). The original French edition was published in 1990, on the occasion of an exhibition at the Louvre curated by the philosopher.

Japanese printmaking, particularly the *ukiyo-e* tradition, achieves this same degree of sophistication in the relationship between technique and aesthetics: the medium's limitations shape not only the images' vocabulary but also their subject matter.

TG: If limitations give rise to a vocabulary—and here I'll confess to our defunct attempt to write this conversation according to rules that would first eliminate conjunctions, then adjectives, and finally verbs, an attempt we abandoned when we realized how difficult it would be—what is it about photographic procedures that leads you toward painting?

JMG: One of the decisive moments in photography's entry into the realm of art came between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, through the work of Alfred Stieglitz. The Pictorialist movement emphasized certain qualities of the image that distanced it from a strictly photographic or documentary conception. Its aesthetic was highly atmospheric and diffuse, with a strong emphasis on printing processes. Pictorialism thus reversed the direction of influence between photography and painting: photography sought to establish itself as an artistic practice by drawing on techniques that brought the photographic image closer to the pictorial. I think that, in the current historical context, marked by the mass production and consumption of images, the emergence of AI-generated images, and their relationship to the idea of post-truth, there is a renewed urgency to return to the materiality of the image.

The approaches to photography that interest me most are those that bring the printer into the image-making process, with the same person taking control of the means of production all the way through to the finished image. In black-and-white photography, this principle has always been present, but color printing poses far greater technological challenges. It is worth remembering that an enormous industry, with its supplies and laboratories, once supported the reproduction of color images; there was a whole market for these services. Now that this technology has become obsolete, the possibilities for making analog chromogenic prints have opened up in new directions, creating room for other forms of experimentation. The manipulation of color makes it impossible not to draw a connection with painting, especially in alternative processes such as the chemigram, in which the application and behavior of photographic chemicals play a part in constructing the image. In chromogenic photography, color inevitably ceases to be merely a property of the photographed object and also becomes a consequence of the printing process.

The RA-4 reversal process offers enormous scope for experimentation. The shaping of studio light, exposure and development times, temperature, the exhaustion of the chemicals, and so on: all of these affect the final image. What interests me in particular is the point at which photography ceases to be merely a means of reproduction and takes on a specific material, plastic dimension that can readily be associated with the pictorial.

TG: In photography, what stood before the camera is usually proof that something existed. Here, what stood before the camera is a scene you constructed. What remains of that connection to the world?

JMG: In fact, the core of these images is not indexicality, the physical and causal relationship between what stands before the camera and the photographic image. I am thinking instead of a continuous spectral movement: the world, the model of the world, the image of the model of the world.

The process is so technical, both in the camera and in the printing, that the constructions from which the images emerge are developed solely in relation to the desired result. Each photograph is conceived as a project: I begin by drawing the image, then make an elevation drawing of the various planes in front of the lens, lay out and cut the shapes, and finally arrange them on the cyclorama before moving on to the lighting and the camera. I rarely make more than is needed to compose the shot. Perhaps that is why I find it interesting to carry part of this process over into sculpture.

TG: And what happens to these constructions when they leave the photograph and begin to share space with us, with volume and weight?

JMG: There are a number of assumptions within the discipline of sculpture that I find rather prescriptive: the idea that a sculpture should be viewed from all sides, that it should have no pedestal, and so on. These are achievements of the discipline itself, tied to the evolution of perception and to our bodily relationship with sculptural objects. They do not interest me in the least, at least not in these works. What interests me instead is revisiting the visual ideas behind these works by expanding the photographic apparatus.

Edison first ventured into cinema in 1893 with the construction of the Black Maria studio: a rotating shed whose roof could be opened to let in natural light from any direction. I find this shift very interesting: the camera requires a second camera, the studio. It creates a reversibility in the way we think about image production.

For instance, the large-format photographs in this exhibition were not made with a conventional camera, but directly in a darkroom. The set, with all its elements, is assembled next door, in a lit room. Between the two spaces, I have a 400 mm lens that projects the image onto a movable support, where I place the photographic paper for the duration of the exposure. In this case, the photographer is inside the camera, not outside it. The studio is turned inside out: the operator is on the image's side, not the world's.

I think of the sculptures as matrices for the images. As you know, these images have no negatives. Reproducing them means rebuilding the model, quite literally the idea behind the image. In the sculptures, one can make out the observer's position, the photographer's point of view, but also the succession of layers that produces the illusion, the spatial dynamics that the image flattens. Sculpture allows me to work on the construction of the image outside the image itself, for a third observer.

TG: If the sculptures are diagrammatic matrices for the images, and the images have no negatives, then sculpture is both what precedes the image and what remains of it.

By association, I think of your work *Pelvis* (2013), which appropriates the shape of that human bone and reconstructs it using a template. There, too, the mold and the finished form seem to constitute a continuum.

Back to the photographs: how much of the construction do you allow to show? Is there anything you need to conceal?

JMG: In fact, there is a point in the making of these images when the constructions almost disappear in favor of a certain pictorialism. I would say that the key moment is focusing. A slight shift can cause structural details, though irrelevant to the subject, to disrupt the natural sequence of depth of field, the logic of the photographic image. The subject remains in focus, but there is a blur in front of it and another behind it.

It is worth noting that in large-format photography, especially when images are magnified (that is, larger than the objects they depict), depth of field can be as little as a few millimeters, even with relatively small apertures such as f/16.

It is less a matter of hiding things than of putting these optical artifacts to formal use. For example, two juxtaposed forms in complementary colors on the additive color wheel can produce chromatic aberration: a contour line in which the two colors combine to form a third. Red and green, when mixed additively, produce yellow.

TG: Take us through the making of one of these photographs, from the initial construction to the print, including the decisions you reversed along the way.

JMG: An image like this, much like an etching, requires a great many test prints. Typically, I make around ten prints before getting one I'm happy with. The process leaves very little margin for error. Some images involve two or three exposures, masks, and movements, with cumulative

exposure times of a minute; others use relatively short exposure times to work only with underexposure.

Some turn out inexplicably well on the first try. In others, a technical error, whether in the darkroom or in the photographic process, produces a more interesting result than an ideal print.

The 8-by-10-inch printed edition *Melting Islands* (2026), on view in the exhibition, depicts a group of icebergs suspended from a rope and is relatively simple to produce. It combines two camera tricks. The first is to blur the object: small sculptures made of Styrofoam suspended in front of a pale blue background. The second is to place a turquoise gel inside the camera bellows, between the lens and the photographic paper, covering two-thirds of the frame. Here, the gel acts as a chromatic shadow between the projection and the image. It remains in focus because it is very close to the paper. The combination of these two planes of focus creates the illusion of a submerged mass of ice, seen in profile: the iceberg at the surface and the much larger hidden part beneath the ocean.

The images that take the least work are usually my favorites, partly because the more difficult ones could go on being technically refined indefinitely, which I find extremely frustrating. At some point, you have to stop and move on to the rest of your work as an artist.

TG: As for metaphysical narratives—one is never enough—you speak of them with a pleasure that goes beyond agreeing or disagreeing with an explanation. What draws you into a way of conceiving the world, without requiring you to settle there?

JMG: I think, for instance, of Sun Ra[7] and the way a delirious worldview can generate an extraordinarily powerful metaphorical engine. At the heart of his artistic persona was the idea that he was an extraterrestrial born on Saturn. His mission on Earth was to transform consciousness, particularly by imagining a future for the Black community beyond the historical condition of racial oppression.

When he says, “This is the worst planet I’ve ever been on!”, the phrase takes on extraordinary resonance. It is by no means a joke; within and beyond that worldview, it acquires a political and metaphysical dimension. I am interested in the possibility of looking at the world through a poetic theory that need not be validated by reality to reveal its power. A kind of metaphysical narrative that, precisely because it is delirious, can think about and interpret reality by analogy, perhaps in ways that a more reasonable explanation could not.

TG: Between Menippean satire and Sun Ra, a phrase emerges that makes us laugh, even though it is not a joke. I’m thinking of works such as *Colosso*, *Half a Horse* and the entire *Experiments and Observations in Different Kinds of Air* cycle, where humor and wonder go hand in hand. How do these two things coexist in your work?

JMG: In fact, I’m not particularly fond of the word humor. I think it has acquired a very specific place in the entertainment industry.

I’m more interested in a satirical literary tradition that runs from Lucian and Apuleius to the moderns, with particularly surrealistic echoes in Roussel, Jarry, and Daumal. These are writers who construct parallel worlds with their own internal logic, yet remain in dialogue with their historical moment, expanding its meaning through analogy.

In these writers, what we might call humor amounts to a profound questioning of the reverence and veneration accorded to the so-called serious arts, to the canon, and to bourgeois taste. Laughter has the power to make the established order implode. The point is not necessarily to

[7] Sun Ra (1914–93) was an American composer, pianist, and poet, a central figure in free jazz. His work combined musical experimentation, cosmology, Egyptian mythology, and science fiction, challenging conventions of music and African American identity.

make people laugh, but to create a short circuit, to disrupt the ideological structures that have been put in place.

TG: Yes, I was thinking of satirical dramaturgy, a subtle form of iconoclasm that works by turning up the volume. In the text accompanying *Melting Islands*, there is a voice and an addressee: someone is trying to sell us a property that is melting. The voice acknowledges the catastrophe and carries on with the sales pitch. “We are not ignoring it” is almost a stage direction for the salesperson: admit everything, proceed without changing your behavior in the slightest. Global warming enters the sales pitch as just another manageable circumstance; the “mirage” of intergenerational wealth becomes a recommendation to think of oneself first. And the “limited and exclusive edition” is both the actual object for sale and the occasion for this performance. The buyer is invited to recognize the landowning fantasy and take part in it. It is a dramaturgical situation that implicates the audience.

You said that there comes a point when one has to stop.

JMG: I don’t know if you’ve ever had to reshoot something or start a work from scratch because of some mishap. It’s an extremely distressing experience, one that drains away all the excitement of discovering what a new work might become.

I think a series comes to an end when it is no longer pleasurable to develop it, when you have nothing more to add, when you could be doing something more stimulating instead. That said, I love the idea of endless series, of processes, and subjects that can be taken up again at any time. I keep three or four ideas in reserve that I can always return to.