

## **De-Colonizing Art Institutions**

**Maria Thereza Alves**

*A Question of Aesthetics and Colonization*

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**ONCURATING  
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## A Question of Aesthetics and Colonization

*Maria Thereza Alves, May 10, 2017, Berlin*



Domingos Fernandes and Maria Thereza Alves (along with Jose Gaspar Ferraz dos Campos), founders of the Green Party of São Paulo . Photograph by John Ashley of the Missoulain.

In 1987, I along with Domingos Fernandes and José Gaspar Ferraz de Campos were discussing how to make politics in the new possibility of the end of the military dictatorship and the beginnings of democracy in Brazil. At the time, there was a celebration of political freedom and there were over fifty parties registered for the upcoming elections and we tried to figure out where we would best be able to contribute politically to Brazil. I had worked as the representative for the Workers' Party of Brazil (the Partido dos Trabalhadores - PT) but was no longer active within the PT due to an influx of upper class people who had taken over many positions within the party. Both Domingos and Jose Gaspar had belonged to a wide range of political parties and movements. We thought that none of the parties reflected new potentials of working in politics and founded the Green Party (Partido Verde) in São Paulo. In between this and my paying job, working as an English teacher I would also work on my art. The Museu da Imagem e do Som in São Paulo was in my neighborhood, Pinheiros. I took my heavy and large portfolio which was not allowed on buses and walked the 2.6 kilometers to the museum. I had previously called and made an appointment with the director, whose name I can no longer remember. I arrived just as Domingos of our nascent Green Party was coming out of the director's office. He asked me what I was

doing there and I in turn asked him, who did not like art, why he was in a museum. He said that he had just done a political favor for the director, a large one and suggested that we both go and speak to the director and I could ask for a solo exhibit and we could look at the calendar and see when was the best time for me. I was shocked and said that that was not how things are done in the art world. I had graduated from art school three years previously. Alone I went into the director's office. He asked my name. He asked which Alves family was I related to. I said, "None that you would know". He would not, my family at the time were peasants or small scale farmers in the countryside of the state of Parana. The director then refused to look at my portfolio. This was the first time, as an artist that I was presenting my work to a museum director having followed all the steps I had been taught in art school. So I placed the portfolio on the table but he would not flip through it. I then opened the portfolio. He still would not flip through it. I then flipped it for him. As we were reaching the end, and he had been silent throughout, I explained to him that it was his obligation to discuss with the artist about the work – what he thought was interesting or not. At this point, my frustration with his rude and arrogant silence was obvious. The director was then forced to explain that he was actually a medical doctor and that his family had been helpful in getting the mayor elected and in return the directorship of the museum had been given to them. He confessed he knew nothing about art.

A few months later, I dropped off my portfolio at a renowned local cultural center, SESC also in São Paulo. They also did not bother to look at my portfolio. Then I asked Domingos to call in a political favor. Some months later, I received a call from the cultural institution who were now enthusiastic about giving me an exhibit whenever I wanted one. I declined to participate in corruption and explained I was only verifying if that was how things were done in Brazil.

A few years later, I was working on an issue of Documents magazine published in New York

and met with some people from the culture department of the state of São Paulo. I was treated well – I mean I was taken seriously as a person. I was not interrogated as to which family I am connected to and if I am not connected to any important family who was my political ‘godfather’. (As a young woman with a family of no political or social import at the time, all this could possibly mean would be that I was the mistress of politically or socially powerful people. I was given this opportunity several times –that is to be the sexual mistress of someone - as I looked for employment in fields for which I was qualified but had no social connections to assure employment and finally settled for teaching English for a small company run by a woman who agreed I did not have to accept any sexual offers to hold my job.) I returned a week later to continue my discussions with the cultural department and was treated as I am normally treated – that is as an intrusion where I am not welcomed because I do not belong – and wondered what I had done wrong to merit this. I was to be enlightened - they explained that originally they thought I was connected to the secretary of culture of Rio de Janeiro who was an Alves and were disappointed to have discovered during that week that I was not.

Lina Bo Bardi’s Museo de Arte de São Paulo is thought to be appealing due to what is considered by some to be its “democratic openness” in design. To us it is a fortress which begins with its moat like entrance as the building floats above the ground and becomes more intimidating because the entrance is not visible and is reached only after a flight or two of stairs and therefore you cannot figure out if someone like you would be allowed in. I must confess that I myself never thought I would be allowed in and only finally went in when I was invited to participate in the São Paulo Biennale in 2010. And neither my mother nor my father, who lived in the city would ever have thought they would be allowed to visit such a place. My mother had such fear of visiting museums that

years later, when working as a maid in the upper east side of Manhattan, and living quite close to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, she never visited it until after I took her there. That day, she held back climbing up the stairs and even after we purchased discounted tickets and walked to the entrance door – which are quite tall and fascistic, she was dragging back and nervously whispered that the guard would not allow us to go inside. She thought he would shout at us to get out of the museum and as a naturally shy person feared being publically embarrassed. We made it in and after that she would often visit the museum but never one in Brazil. It would take me another year to have enough nerve to walk into the Guggenheim and Whitney in Manhattan.



Detail of the installation: The Return of a Lake. Courtesy CAAC.

In 2014, I exhibited at the MUAC in Mexico City, a large installation, The Return of a Lake, originally made for dOCUMENTA (13) of 2012. The aesthetics of the work is in homage to the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico in the state of Mexico, whom I have worked with since 2009. Some of the staff of MUAC did not and still do not consider this work to be art, due to its popular aesthetics.

How to decolonize the museum? Staff that have a colonial idea of art can retire to Europe and the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico, can take over.

[www.mariatherezaalves.org](http://www.mariatherezaalves.org)





Genaro Amaro Altamirano of the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico and Maria Thereza Alves during the installation of The Return of a Lake in MUAC in Mexico City. Photograph by Pedro del Llano.



Meeting of members of the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico. Photograph: Courtesy of the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico