Project Earth and Art's Exposability

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Project Earth and Art’s Exposability

ABSTRACT  Seeking salvage from the wreckages of colonialism and capitalism, this essay offers a transcultural historiography for art that also seeks to be useful for art practices in the present. While drawing on the writing of Walter Benjamin, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and Anna Tsing, among others, it centers on Projeto Terra, an initiative by Juraci Dórea in the rural northeast of Brazil, started in the 1980s and exhibited in the art biennials of São Paulo (1987), Venice (1988), and Havana (1989). The point is not to narrate Projeto Terra into any canon but to demonstrate how studying it might anchor a heuristic articulated as art’s exposability. This heuristic attends to art’s shaping—and being shaped by—a particular durational field; foregrounding art’s capacity to expose, while being exposed. Prompted by the public outings of Projeto Terra and using writing experiments to connect different times and places, the essay reflects on the cultural use and worldwide trade of wood, leather, and beef—highlighting some of the intricacies by which the lives and deaths of humans, trees, and cows are imbricated.

KEYWORDS  global art, art historiography, ecology, Juraci Dórea, Walter Benjamin

I don’t know when John Oswald Booth left the Northwest of England and headed to the Southeast of Brazil, nor whether he worked for the Booth Steamship Company or another in transatlantic, transhemispheric shipping. It must have been around the turn into the twentieth century, just as the technology enabling sea carriage of frozen produce meant that cattle butchery around the world started to feed far-flung human populations. At this same time, bovine populations faced another demand—on their skins, not their flesh: industrialization in parts of Europe meant that while employment in shoemaking there was falling, the consumption of leather doubled.

The family bible that my mother inherited from her father records her great uncle’s birth in Armley (Leeds) in 1874 and his death in São Paulo fifty years later. Apparently, my grandmother—who was later added to this bible herself—was sniffy about the siblings of her mother-in-law escaping post-Victorian England to live abroad in places where they could afford to employ servants. I guess my grandmother’s disdain was directed against her peers for allowing others to perform domestic duties that she herself had no choice but to perform, and did proudly. I doubt there was criticism of the colonial violence, industrial dominance, and military might of the British nation, which allowed those siblings to travel far from their birthplaces through jobs in the navy, plantation management, mining implementation, and, for John Oswald Booth, the shipping industry.

From my home in the United Kingdom, I have travelled to art exhibitions and academic institutions across Europe and in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. I am typically...
invited abroad to speak, in English, about historical exhibitions of “global contemporary art.” Perhaps like my grandfather’s uncles and aunts, I have rarely questioned the qualifications and privileges that allow me to play my particular role around the world. Indeed, I have always used my travel opportunities to learn about art exhibitions wherever I land, being introduced to eminent locals and following their leads, which only further qualifies me for future opportunities. I am well placed in a virtuous cycle, unless you look at it from the abyss carved by power protecting power, or in terms of my carbon footprint.

ANOTHER INTRODUCTION

In her 1989 examination of participation in world fairs in the second half of the nineteenth century, Carol Breckenridge identifies not only the reifying of nation-states on the basis of cultural difference but also, paradoxically, the simultaneous emergence of a cosmopolitan and transcontinental elite, distinguished largely on the basis of taste. It seems significant when she offered this picture, given the ensuing global boom in art biennials, as the scattered and mutating descendants of world fairs. If the late 1980s may now be seen as a transitional moment in which historic colonization across the world by an industrializing Europe was overtaken by financialized global capture via neoliberal capitalism emanating from the United States, then perhaps—from what feels like a distinct era, today—art biennials of this past moment might offer a petri dish for modes of engagement better fit for present purposes.

This essay is anchored and inspired by a work of art that roved biennials of the late 1980s. Projeto Terra (Earth Project, or Project Earth) was staged by Juraci Dórea in rural northeastern Brazil early in the decade and then represented in the Bienal de São Paulo (1987), Biennale di Venezia (1988), and Bienal de La Habana (1989). At the core of this work, Dórea mounted leather-on-wood assemblages at sites selected for their cultural resonances and dissonances, while documenting the construction and socialization of the ephemeral structures produced. Photographs, maps, and text have represented this work on the printed page—in dedicated publications—and in exhibitions around the world. I first became intrigued by Projeto Terra as portrayed in a hasty installation shot taken at the Museum of Fine Arts in Havana during the Bienal’s now famous third edition of 1989. Through a decade of ensuing research, I have studied how this particular work was installed and operated differently in each of its biennial appearances. I have mobilized a Latin American understanding of no-objetualismo at the expense of Anglo-American insistences on “postconceptual” art. I have assessed the harsh costs of the modern, as

inadvertently reflected in Venice in 1988, the failures of the postmodern (including the denial of postcolonial or decolonial possibilities) as inadvertently pictured in São Paulo in 1987, and the inadequacies of the global contemporary, given its ultimate neoliberalization, as inadvertently flagged in Havana. However, grounding the present essay is greater attention to the production of Projeto Terra in rural Bahia, Brazil, between 1981 and 1989, on the one hand, and deeper reflection on what conceptual and methodological tools might serve a critical examination of planetary circulation, on the other.

Denise Ferreira da Silva has drawn on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of the “native informant” (1999) to describe acutely how artists from around the world are still expected to address a “global class,” which can be extrapolated from Breckenridge to the collecting and professional audience of art biennials today. Nevertheless, I would like to think that even from within this class—and informed by Ferreira da Silva’s writing—it is possible to approach biennials of the 1980s in a way that acknowledges a marginality (as visitors from the present rather than contemporaneous moment) while flexing possibilities for undercutting cultural difference with inseparability, eroding the borders erected around “foreign” art while refusing any claims to aesthetic universalism. In this, I draw on

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the raw materialist perspective developed and articulated by Ferreira da Silva, and, more explicitly in what is to come, on exposability after Walter Benjamin’s exhibitability (1935–39) and temporal polyphony as proposed and practiced by Anna Tsing. Entwining these strands together, my purpose is to allow art of the past—in particular, Projeto Terra—to clarify the present and interrelate places, indeed by interrelating places and times. Exposability insists that my role in this is not neutral: Projeto Terra has snagged me for a decade and not let go because its exhibition history—or situated exposure—exposes something to me about my own situation in relation. Nevertheless, I do not wish to impose myself, or any self (for instance, any artistic or curatorial subjectivity) on the reader. My intention is to demonstrate a generative approach to so-called “global contemporary art” that is attentive to the vulnerabilities and interconnectedness of life on Earth, while highlighting how cultural activity is both implicated and might operate with more care. To be clear, I cannot speak about “global contemporary art” any more than I can assume that you and I form a “we” in looking at the art that I want to share. Nevertheless, I remain committed to the global, not as a totality or unifying field, but as an Earthly material context that entangles any particularity; to the being-together, even across distance, promised by contemporaneity; and to any art that convenes a public, conjuring a durational field.

FROM AURA TO EXHIBITABILITY

The concept of “aura” is perhaps the most famous in Benjamin’s well-known 1935 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” Discussion of the compelling, if elusive, character of aura has tended to occlude the opposing concept, quietly introduced at the same time: Ausstellbarkeit in the German, or “exhibitability” in its English translation (although it is so awkward as such that it is only rarely given just this single word).

Art’s exhibitability is considered in the section of Benjamin’s essay initially subtitled “Cult Value and Exhibition Value.” Here it follows an assertion that the social function of art as based in ritual (by which aura commands cult value) should be contrasted with its social function (in producing exhibition value) as based in politics. I will attend to aura, ritual, and cultic evaluation but, going against the grain, I want to anchor consideration instead on exhibitability. However obliquely the term is used, it insists on a political role for art and, specifically inflected through 1930s Europe, on an antifascist, antimilitarist role in particular.

As announced in his essay title, Benjamin’s particular spur to writing about art’s functionality is the advent of modern technologies of reproduction. Art’s newfound reproducibility since the turn of the twentieth century, through photography and film, seems to promise a galvanization of its exhibitability. Benjamin charts the industrial
production and mass circulation of film—its technological reproducibility as art—as a development of, for example, the portability of modern paintings and sculptures and the dissemination of enlightenment music. Seen from this teleological perspective, once such art was freed from fixture to an immovable setting—for instance, from its tethering to ancient temples and medieval or Renaissance churches—its capacity for political engagement could start to develop. The crucial term he introduces for this is *Austellbarkeit*:

The exhibitability of a portrait bust that can be sent here and there is greater than that of a statue of a divinity that has a fixed place in the interior of a temple. The exhibitability of a [panel] painting is greater than that of the mosaic or fresco which preceded it. And if the exhibitability of a [liturgical] mass may perhaps in and of itself have been no less than that of a symphony, the symphony came into being at a time when its exhibitability promised to be greater than that of the mass.7

Here Benjamin sets declining religious control over art against increasing public and political possibility. In this context, the promise of filmic reproducibility can, in particular, be seen through its reach beyond the contented European bourgeoisie to the laboring poor, if not to those otherwise subjugated.

As described by Benjamin in the “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” “film turned the viewing of images into a collective activity.”8 In the section dedicated to the reception of art, he elaborates:

nowhere more than in the cinema are the reactions of individuals, which together make up the massive reaction of the audience, determined by the imminent concentration of reactions into a mass. No sooner are these reactions manifest than they regulate one another.9

Outward responses to films in a cinematic setting are negotiated live between those assembled. Benjamin draws a comparison with the way in which people may together experience the architecture of a building. A more immediate precursor is identified in Dada performances, where collective laughter or shock—as openly demonstrated and contagiously spreading or mutually amplified in the event of simultaneous experience—augur revolutionary potential.

The successful reception of art, according to Benjamin, involves “an immediate, intimate fusion of pleasure in seeing and experiencing with an attitude of expert appraisal.”10 In other words, perhaps, exhibitability is experienced both affectively and critically, with these aspects proving inextricable. To elaborate on the terms of

engagement, on the proximity and yet challenge of encountering art in this way, Benjamin dedicates a section of his essay to “Dadaism,” seeing this as a seedbed for audience reactions where film would later flourish. Accordingly, Dada “manifestations” [Kunstgebungen]—from paintings and poems to objects and word salads—turned “the artwork into a missile”; they “jolted the viewer, taking on a tactile quality.” The taktisch character of “exhibitability” emphasizes art’s insistent, physical claim upon critical attention. That which lands as a projectile, through Dada, has a percussive or jerking effect on the spectator of film. Speaking of his moment, in exile in Paris of the 1930s, Benjamin adds:

*Film is the art form corresponding to the pronounced threat to life in which people live today. It corresponds to profound changes in the apparatus of apperception—changes that are experienced on the scale of private existence by each passerby in big-city traffic, and on the scale of world history by each fighter against the present social order.*

Here Benjamin sees film as capable of rendering tangible or making perceptible the brutalities of urban, industrial modernity—or, as promising to break the capitalist spell upon the masses that pedals the ruthlessness of this modernity as a newly natural reality. Through its technological newness in the early twentieth century, film seemed to wield a unique potential to achieve this tactical aim—to shatter the collective illusions of capitalist urbanism. The still broader and grander purpose was no less than facilitating the interplay between nature and humanity. Benjamin writes, “The primary social function of art today is to rehearse that interplay.”

According to the dialectic that Benjamin sets up between aura and exhibitability, that social function of art may be operative through either ritualized cultic command, or through political openness. He writes: “as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics.” Let me follow Benjamin in his dissociation of politics from the exercise of ritual—and focus on a social functionality for art that is anchored in bottom-up discursivity and negotiated possibility, at the expense of top-down stricture and hegemonic or elitist governance. Here politics, after Esther Leslie, is “dialogue space.” Of course, rhetoric—as a ritualized form of delivery—empowers command of that space; however, the emphasis on two-way communication rather than one-way assertion is insistent.

In the foreword or opening section of the “The Work of Art,” Benjamin desynchronizes changes in the cultural superstructure of modern society—which he sets out to explore—from those of the economic base, the analysis of which he cedes to Karl Marx. Accordingly, art need not conform to commodity status and Marx’s distinction between use-value and exchange-value is not invoked. Significantly moving to one side a labor

theory of value, as founded in the social relations of production, Benjamin proposes a receptive theory of artistic value, as socially determined either by aura commanded by an elite (cult value) or through open politics (exhibition value).

Nevertheless, Theodor Adorno, among many, has related Benjamin’s concept of exhibition value to the exchange process for commodities. Clearly the display of a work of art by prestigious organizations, in celebrated exhibitions, or by renowned curators, can significantly increase its exchange value, or its price at the point of sale/purchase. And it is notable that the sale/purchase of films as art (for example, as acquired by museums in limited editions) has become normalized since Benjamin’s time. However, as I have tried to underline, Benjamin’s concern lies not in the indubitable commerce around art but in its bottom-up political usefulness as enabled through its exhibitability. Moreover, he denigrates the top-down form of use—and associated economic value—that he sees exhibitability as refusing. Celebrating the early, collectivized practices of Hans Arp, Hugo Ball, Max Ernst, Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield, Hannah Höch, and others, he writes approvingly that: “The Dadaists attached much less importance to the commercial usefulness of their artworks than to the uselessness of those works as objects of contemplative immersion.”

By opposing exhibitability to aura, Benjamin condemns the latter for implying that art acts at a distance, through contemplative immersion, to provide individual enlightenment, as stretched to include governable members of the bourgeoisie but hardly addressing the masses beyond. Modern aura is maintained through cultic imposition by those most powerful and is served uncritically through ritual practice by those suitably cowed. It pedals in notions of art’s unique existence, originality, authenticity, and quasi-eternal endurance and fixity. Whereas a political mobilization of imaginaries is waged by art’s exhibition value, the modern auratic engagement of its cult value involves “the theological archetype” of “awareness of being alone with one’s God,” of “fostering a breeding ground for asocial behaviour.” However, this is not the place to add to the numerous elaborations of aura.

For the translation of Ausstellbarkeit as “exhibitability”—rather than as “the opportunities for exhibiting,” or “can be exhibited,” for example—I borrow from Michael W. Jennings. He acknowledges the influence here of Samuel Weber’s work identifying and exploring Benjamin’s tendency to nominalize verbs not in the usual manner but by adding the suffix “-barkeit,” that is, “-abilities.” Weber does not analyze Ausstellbarkeit
in particular but rather, for example, readability and criticizability. He sets out how, in the place of more attention-grabbing neologisms, the mere addition of “-ability” to a noun allows Benjamin to maintain and highlight the structural possibility of future recurrence (for example, connecting up to readings, critiques, or other experiences to come)—over and above any particular instantiation (for example, rather than essentializing this reading, or that critique, this or that event).

The power or potentiality to repeat is crucial to exhibitability, which, in its very grammatical form, emphasizes that art in a given situation—its specific exhibition value or political functionality—does not endure but passes away with the change of that situation, even while this very transitoriness holds out the possibility of further future configurations in different subsequent contexts. There is not simply iterability and the open possibility of repetition here, but incompleteness and unfulfillability and the predicament of ever-different engagements, with affectivity and critical effectiveness to be negotiated by every new audience in every new exhibition event, or across every new durational field. Following Benjamin, it is not the exhibition that needs emphasis but—in the name of Ausstellbarkeit—art’s potentially ongoing capacity to pluralize and interrelate individuals, realizing, without exhausting, political possibilities. As well as flagging potential future instantiations for art, exhibitability points back and away to the past and elsewhere; there are insistent connections made throughout history and across geography.

**TEMPORAL POLYPHONY AND ART’S EXPOSABILITY**

Following the work of Tsing, I am lured away from the Anglophone clumsiness of “exhibitability” and toward the more felicitous, while more risk-inviting, “exposability.” In *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015), Tsing both articulates and performs a method that I shall adapt and sample here—as study of art in the name of its exposability. This involves a looking around rather than a looking ahead (or behind), which—more seismically—demands an opening to “temporal polyphony,” a casting aside of the handrails provided faith in progress, for which I still find myself reaching. It entails a turning of “attention to the nonscalable, not only as objects for description but also as incitements to theory,” while insisting I grapple with “the challenge of thinking with precarity.” In some ways, Benjaminian emphasis on “-abilities” even encourages this, to the extent that it allows, in Tsing’s words, “multiple futures” to “pop” into “possibility.” Yet Tsing emphasizes the equal likelihood of popping out of possibility, the prospect of endings, which is where the fragility entailed by exposure—over the polished resolution of exhibition—comes into play.


Perhaps “a cacophony of troubled stories” is, after Tsing, the best way to address “transformation through encounter” and to call to account the “survivors in histories of greed, violence, and environmental destruction.”26 Certainly, it is a way I am keen to try, art historically. Certainly, I seek to “give substance to noticing” through careful use of terms, across languages, while remembering words are only “heuristics,” or “names-in-motion.”27 Tsing instructs: “To learn anything we must revitalize arts of noticing and include ethnography and natural history.”28 “To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a method,”29 she encourages.

If “exhibition” suggests that something already fully formed is being presented, then “exposure” implies that what is revealed only transpires in the process of emerging, or becoming public. I favor art’s exposability and exposure value, over its exhibitability and exhibition value, in part because when art galvanizes a public situation, it is also shaped by these circumstances. For me, “exposability” names art’s capacity to shape—while being shaped by—a particular durational field; its capacity to be exposed and simultaneously to expose. At the same time, exposure works terminologically for the role of the public: individuals are exposed to each other and to broader possibilities via art; they reshape their worlds, while being reshaped themselves. The thinking and imagining here is situated—taking place in the company of art, in the throes of a shared context, among interlocutors and other lives that have influence without speech—and an openness to being implicated and potentially transformed is demanded. There is no simple presenting to view, or disclosure of truth, only a palpability of unpredetermined change.

“Exposability” foregrounds the vulnerability of both art and life, flags threats as well as more positive or neutral change. To be exposed is to be laid open, if not to be left without shelter or defense. Privileges and prejudices may be exposed productively. There is also exposure to the elements, to matter at its most basic, to the implacability of—or embrace by—forces beyond us. Here is what I wish to reclaim from aura. “Exposability” draws on the magical and ritualistic possibilities for art in so far as it sheds any domineering impositions or manipulative cultic promises. Contemplation may be involved, as much as tactile or tactical reception, but any immersion involves entry into worlds beyond that which might be called one’s own, or which come dictated by another. There is no unique, aural here-and-now commanded but a here-and-now co-convened: a durational field collectively formed. Art promises the anywhere of exhibitability while remembering that everywhere is not the same, even while everywhere in the world is connected. If modern technology enabled the exhibitability of art from the early twentieth century, then might it be global ecology that sparks its exposability across interconnected locations around the world today?

To the extent that “exposability” recoups selected qualities of artistic aura and exhibitability, it could suggest a synthesis of the dialectic Benjamin proposed nearly a century

ago. However, I am not proposing this; I do not wish to pretend to the philosophical completeness that this would imply. It is true that I started conceiving of collective exposure value (as lived, pluralistically) in opposition to individual market value (as capital, conferred by data). Here Ivan Illich’s defense of what he calls “vernacular values,” over those that are commodity driven, seems salient, especially with a worldwide dispersal of what he describes as “homebred, homespun, homegrown, homemade”—a dispersal on the basis of “damage control” in relation to globalization, after Spivak. Yet, with Tsing in mind, the attractions of ontological command only ebb as the attendant whiffs of progress grow.

When involving “here” in enmeshed “elsewheres,” and the “not now” in an enmeshed “now,” art’s exposability encourages a tending both to embeddedness and distribution. It may resonate with—without suggesting mastery of—the dynamic and imbricated complexities of planetary life on Earth. The role for art here lies in its sharing of material wealth: without implying use or exchange value, nor societal health (as wholeness); instead, catalyzing wealth as welfare across bodies—recognizing that lived materiality is interdependent in its fragility. Art on this basis can implicate people in lives beyond their own, without necessarily centering humanity.

Projeto Terra

Like “earth,” the word terra in Portuguese can mean “world,” “planet,” and “globe,” and also “ground,” “land,” and “soil.” It can have spiritual as well as material connotations, and—for instance, linked to “territory”—there is political suggestiveness that interlocks the colonial and national. In the context of Brazil in the 1980s, landlessness also comes to mind, especially under the banner of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), the political union of heterogeneous rural workers who jointly identified as lacking land and therefore possibilities, mobilizing to become the biggest social movement in the country. Underlying this situation, and drawing on hundreds of years of history, is “the colonial resident question,” as Ferreira da Silva puts it—posed here in recognition of the ancestral custodians of so-called terras devolutas, or lands deemed vacant by aggressive settlers from afar.

The sculptural manifestations of Projeto Terra were widely distributed across a small region of the state of Bahia in Brazil throughout the 1980s. None survive now: while some apparently stood for years, others did not last beyond the day of construction. All were made from cattle hides tethered to conical armatures of stripped wooden poles, typically sisal stems. Each was bigger than a person: they were the size of a large animal, or a small tree. By 1983 there had been eight. The sixth was staged in Campo do Gado—

cattle market in Feira de Santana—and the rest were more remote from urban life, visited by rural passersby. Juarci Dórea assembled the works and he discussed them with anyone who was interested. He photographed the construction process, the finished works and their audiences, also noting comments made. Documentation was gathered more organically than systematically: living the social occasion was prioritized and remnants kept as a secondary measure. This documentary material was then edited into books published by the artist and formed a significant part of the work’s representation in biennials at the end of the decade. Moreover, aside from the records gathered by the artist at the time, some who witnessed the events in situ still recall them independently. The lived memory, as shared by communities in different places in Bahia, is as important to the artist as the work’s subsequent representational export to biennials.

_Projeto Terra_ is both rooted and at large in the _sertão_, the vast inland zone of northeastern Brazil with a semi-arid climate. Matilde Matos has described the _sertão_ as “an enchantment and a challenge.” The _sertão_ has inspired numerous artists (from musicians to poets, storytellers, and filmmakers)—many of whom are more internationally famous than Dórea, and many with only localized renown. _Sertão_ translates into English only poorly—as “outback,” “backlands,” “hinterland,” or “wilderness.” Losing both the mythical allure and the entwined sense of radical political resistance, these English words point only to a colonial imposition, naming a peripherality relative to the points of entry maintained by the conquerors arriving by sea. Cattle and sisal are also colonial introductions to this land.

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It is tricky to render into English the testimony of Maria Dendém who, at the age of eighty, had her response to the third sculptural iteration of _Projeto Terra_ transcribed. This iteration was staged next to the ruins of an old farmhouse at Acaru, near Monte Santo (Holy Mountain) in 1982. There is historical dialect in play, as well as more widely spoken Portuguese, and the usual productive ambiguity when discussing the significance of art.

This is a trap, a tall tale told to the world. It is. No? . . . It can only be that, nothing I ever saw before. I am of such an age, I have never seen these things, but I am seeing today . . . Art . . . I am seeing now. And all those little ones . . . they never saw . . .


I have used the word “trap” for _armada_. The latter word can be found in a Portuguese dictionary as a northeastern regionalism, meaning “haunt” and “ghost” as well as “feat”


34. Maria Dendém, quoted in _Sertão Sertão_, ed. Juraci Dórea (Salvador, Bahia: Edições Cordel, 1987), 21. This publication was produced by the artist to accompany his participation in the 1987 Bienal de São Paulo. English translation by the author.
and “prowess.” Luiza Proença, who has pored over the Projeto Terra testimony with me, researching nuance that I cannot access, relates it to another word used by others about the structures, armação. This can be translated as “trap” too, but the sense of construction can be emphasized. The last time I sought out a computer-generated translation I found “frame,” “framework,” “scaffold,” “skeleton,” “cage,” and “carcass.”

One photograph showing the Acaru iteration of Projeto Terra implies a community portrait. The dog in the foreground waits out a human conversation calmly. A man, seated alongside, bows toward the small boy nestled against him, listening so fully that we see only the leather of his hat, no face. The three female figures at the center of the picture—perhaps different generations of the same family?—claim the shadow of the sculpture.

There are tales about the leather used for the Projeto Terra structures being recycled: cut and repurposed by locals in the repair or manufacture of everyday items such as sandals or the seat of a stool. This reuse of the raw materials goes undocumented but it is remembered. Today there are no material remains of the farmhouse of Acaru, let alone of the sculpture.

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The seventh sculptural iteration of Projeto Terra was staged on the banks of a river in 1984, close to the former village of Canudos, now covered by the waters of Cocorobó Dam. Photographs amassed by the artist show him at work here, with an attentive
audience of local children. With the sculpture finished, I have the impression these children are left with the work; that the artist is withdrawing. The eye contact made with the photographer reminds me that they know they continue to be observed, until the artist has left.

The Portuguese name for the river, Vaza-Barris, indicates the dual state of usual dried-up wispiness and occasional full-bodied flow. The indigenous name, Irapiranga, has been translated as “vermillion-colored honey,” suggesting reluctant but also powerful fluidity through hotly hued viscosity. Although now strategically flooded, leaving no trace, the village of Canudos remains famous for the peasant rebellion led there by a mystic in the late nineteenth century, which ended brutally, with the Brazilian army slaughtering the community.

Here is the testimony of Evaldo Pereira, at the age of fourteen, almost a century later, responding to the sculptural assemblage of Projeto Terra near the site of Canudos:

Acho qui parece cum vaquêro incorado. Num faiz medo. A gente vê uma coisa dessa aí, num faiz medo. No serrão a gente tá custumado a vê muitas coisa...

I think it looks like a cowboy in his leathers. It’s not scary. We see something like that, and it’s not scary. In the serrão we are used to seeing many things... 36

The Portuguese term *vaqueiro* or *vaqueiro* gains an awkward US intonation when translated as “cowboy,” just as *sertão* acquires distracting, while telling, overtones of Australia through the use of the English word “outback.”

In his now classic account of the military attack and reconquest of the rebellious village of Canudos, Euclides da Cunha describes the “russet-gray of tanned hide” worn by the vaqueiro of the sertão as “fine leathern armor.” 37 This is the Samuel Putnam translation of 1944. Elizabeth Lowe, in 2010, gives us “handsome leather armor.” 38 Both English renderings of the book describe local religion around 1900 as missionary Christianity elaborated through “an extravagant mysticism,” 39 which combined indigenous beliefs with those brought from Africa through nearly four hundred years of slavery, together with a multitude of imported Portuguese superstitions atavistically anchored in the late sixteenth century.

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With sugar, tobacco, and coffee plantations worked by enslaved people abducted from Africa inhabiting the more fertile land in Brazil during the colonial era, the semi-arid interior of the country became the place for draft oxen, and meat and hide production,

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with ranching holding a vital position in the national economy. At the turn of the twentieth century, zebu cattle were introduced into Brazil from the British colony of India, for their capacity to withstand high temperatures. Crossbreeding with the taurine cattle imported from Europe, centuries earlier, was typically managed as a calculation between the animals’ resistance to the semi-arid climate, on the one hand, and changes to European people’s taste for meat, on the other. Brazilian debates over the value of “national” breeds relative to “Hindu Idols” were fierce.  

The beef cattle population across Brazil doubled in the twenty-five years centered on the early 1980s. The country currently has the world’s second largest bovine population after India and exports to China and Hong Kong, in particular, have surged in recent years. JBS, the leading Brazilian corporation specializing in cheap meat for global distribution, slaughtered 13 million animals a day in 2019, with an annual revenue of USD$50 billion. The company has been associated with political corruption and practices described as “modern-day slave labor,” illegal deforestation, and animal welfare violations.

Raising livestock has been described as the main factor responsible for increases in greenhouse gas emissions in Brazil. In some areas of the sertão, the average temperature increased by more than 2°C (3.6°F) over the past forty years, while the average precipitation has decreased by thirty percent. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the United Nations body assessing the science related to climate change, has increasingly drawn attention to the possibility of desertification in Brazil. The BBC News Brasil online reports that the area already transformed in this way is roughly equivalent in size to that of England.

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Wood for the Projeto Terra sculptures was gathered locally and therefore varies between iterations. Near both Monte Santo and Canudos, sisal stems generated the structural elements. Each stem is the remnant of a single plant. Sisal plants have a typical lifespan of seven to ten years, thriving in temperatures between 20 and 28°C (68 and 82°F) and surviving up to 45°C (113°F). As a plant nears its end, its stem extends way above its leaves into an upward arrow bearing flowers. It dies after generating seeds.

Sisal cultivation, for the production of fiber from its leaves, is one of the longest surviving agricultural industries. The name “sisal” comes from the Yucatán settlement turned Spanish colonial port from where the plants were widely exported—to countries around the equator—in the nineteenth century. The first commercial plantings away from Mexico were made in Brazil in the late 1930s and the Brazilian sisal industry remains the busiest internationally today, with the greatest share of exports bound for China.

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The fifth sculptural iteration of Projeto Terra was constructed in 1984 at a site within the Raso Da Catarina Ecological Reserve, between the municipalities of Jeremoabo and Paulo Afonso. Caatinga, or “white forest”—referred to as xeric shrubland by the World Wide Fund for Nature—is earmarked for protection in this region. Likewise protected are rare macaws, among other local creatures. 45

Dense expanses of caatinga were a haven in the early twentieth century for regional bandits, famously Lampião, Maria Bonita, and their fellow cangaceiros. Brutal and bloody, such outlawed activity has nevertheless become the basis for folk heroism, respected to the extent that it protested the uneven distribution of wealth and land ownership in the region. For thirty years, the severed and preserved heads of Lampião, Bonita, and their band were publicly displayed in local museums.

There are various stories about the Catarina whose name has been given to the ecological reserve, although they all seem to reference her death. Sometimes she is associated with the Pankararé people, who are indigenous to the region. Sometimes she has been driven mad through ongoing drought, with her crops finished off by a swarm of locusts. Her spirit is supposed to help vaqueiros find their animals when lost in the thorn forest.

The widespread replacement of caatinga with grass pasture for cattle has reduced resilience to climate change, for instance through reducing the soil’s water retention and decreasing microbial biomass. At the same time, in response to rising temperatures, farmers have increasingly turned to cattle for beef and dairy production, although health—measured as “productivity”—then suffers through droughts. 46

Just one person, beyond the artist at work, has been caught on camera alongside the Raso da Catarina iteration of Projeto Terra—and the commentary recorded notes the infrequency with which people visit this spot. Both individuals photographed are half occluded by surrounding vegetation, which itself was the source of the structural components that then supported the draped leather. Dória used branches from bushes along the banks of a road. In some of the pictures, the sculpture barely clears the encompassing foliage; and in almost all images its legs of sacrificed branches disappear into plant life.

45. In particular is the so-called Lear’s Macaw, named after drawings of blue parrots in captivity published by the English poet in 1832.
The sixth sculptural iteration of Projeto Terra, in Feira de Santana, involved rustic woods of various unidentified species as sold in the town for use in construction work and then discarded. On the market now, in their place, is eucalyptus—to which I shall return.

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A single artwork is now rarely exhibited in three successive biennials in different parts of the world, especially when each biennial situation has the status associated today with Venice, São Paulo, and Havana. The international mobility of art professionals in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, and the attendant desire for newness, has made re-exhibition of the same work of art highly unusual. Yet the circulation of Projeto Terra between three prestigious biennial settings is even more remarkable because it changes its form significantly in each place relative to the others. Whether the different display strategies stem primarily from the artist, or curators, or practical constraints and opportunities does not interest me, whereas the dramatic variation does, because it is suggestive. Indeed, a distinct stage is set in each distinct exhibition situation and the results—here again, as in the sertão—are documented photographically by the artist.

In studying the artist’s photographs—also those held in official archives—while pursuing associated research in conversation with a widening web of sources and interlocutors, I have endeavored to visit the biennial outings of Projeto Terra, albeit belatedly. Doing so in tandem with research into the raw materials that make up the work in the
sertão—leather and branches, also the local landscape and populations—has changed my sense of what is at stake, for Projeto Terra and for me, in São Paulo, Venice, and Havana. In what follows, this will be characterized in terms of exposability.

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As exhibited in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Cuba for the third Havana Bienal in 1989, Projeto Terra took compact form. A montage of panels showing photographs, maps, and commentary was presented as a rectangular display, propped up on wooden legs. As such, it would be easy to relate to the work on the basis of European and North American “land art” and “social sculpture,” to assimilate it to “global conceptualism” or “postconceptual” qua contemporary art. With more effort and interest, and as already flagged, I have elsewhere insisted on a regional dissociation and argued for a somewhat more suitably Latin American banner for understanding. However, this is still looking at the artwork in isolation, ripe for extraction, ready for museum acquisition—and away from the other works on display, the third-world curatorial frame, the particular institutional context in Old Havana, Cuba, and the Caribbean more broadly. It also ignores those seven wooden legs—the load-bearing square-planed timber that could have come from any city in the world but in this case came from Feira de Santana. After studying Projeto Terra in the sertão, it is the remnant of life in these legs that strikes me viscerally. Yet I am conscious I have to repeat the words “Feira de Santana” to myself to get this effect: this market town, known as the gateway to the sertão, is less palpably invoked in
this wooden form displayed in the Bienal than is the globalized production and circulation of equivalent timber. I ultimately find these legs to be a metonymic fragment, indicating precisely the commodified wieldiness of “global contemporary art.” This powerfully overrides any triggering of specific exposure value.

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For the 43rd edition of the Venice Biennale the year before, in 1988, Projeto Terra exceeded the information panels introducing the work, which were presented in linear and gridded arrangements on the walls of the Brazilian pavilion in the Giardini. More prominent in claiming attention was the installation: two wood-and-leather sculptural assemblages, like those in Bahia, set upon a gravelly floor one had to cross to view the information panels, with scrub material and semi-dried bovine excrement scattered so that it was easy to avoid walking on, although the smell is reported as lingering.47

Let me set aside some possible interpretations at this point: auto-anthropological diorama, kitsch expanded sculpture, political resonance with Arte Povera, or third-world occupation of first-world territory. Let me also set aside possible interpretations based on a slightly wider purview: the pairing of Dórea’s work, within the Brazilian pavilion, with abstract sculptures by São Paulo artist José Rosende, as curated by poet, critic, anthropologist, museologist, musicologist, and translator Lélia Coelho Frota; the

47. Luis Camnitzer, “The Third Biennial of Havana,” in Third Text 4, no. 10 (Spring 1990), as reproduced in Weiss et al., Making Art Global, 211.
Brazilian pavilion itself, as constructed in 1964, the year the state entered a military dictatorship it would only emerge from in 1985; or the international sculptural frame set curatorially by Giovanni Carandente, the artistic director of the Biennale at the time.

Instead, I want to note that, on the other side of the glass windows that offered a transparent backdrop to the Projeta Terra installation, two further wood-and-leather structures were erected—taking one step away from the timber-clad modernist architecture of the Brazilian pavilion and toward the flora and fauna of the public gardens that host the biennale. Here I am mindful of the early nineteenth-century imposition of landscaped terrain on this area of the city, together with plantings of numerous trees, at the command of Napoleon Bonaparte. Then comes the addition of the tree-lined Viale Giuseppe Garibaldi, later in the century, complete with a sculpture of the leader of Italian national unification (following a role in wars of independence in Brazil and Uruguay). Garibaldi stands above a sitting lion, in bronze, at the entry to an ordered, modern boulevard into the Giardini, leading away from busy, medieval parts of the city. The conjunction of the bronze monument of a national hero guarded by a wild animal, on the one hand, together with propped branches loosely clad with cattle hide flown in from Latin America, on the other, brings both pathos and bite for me as a viewer. I become newly aware of the vegetation and wildlife of the Venetian Giardini, which have long been cultivated as hosts for the biennial performance of progressive internationalism—becoming conscious that my pleasure in this nature-as-culture only distracts me from the anthropocentrism, colonialism, militarization, and urbanization that girds modernism. Since I am implicated in this modern nexus, as a cultural professional drawn to attend—often in person—the international performance, there are inklings here of exposure: the work, as shaped by its context, starts to unsettle my own shape.

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Looking at the display of Projeto Terra devised for the nineteenth Bienal de São Paulo in 1987, I am reminded of an architectural exhibition rather than an art show. I find generous quantities of information, in various different media, with some demonstrative elements. There is filmed documentation presented on a monitor. The panels, which would be used in later biennial outings, are grouped in clusters that suggest content, rather than form, is dictating the layout. Moreover, the raw materials for the sculptures in the sertão are presented without being assembled into shapes like those shown in the photographs. Postcards with such photographs on one side are free to be taken away—perhaps visitors to the Bienal will transcribe their own testimony regarding the São Paulo display on the other side, to share with family and friends.

The artwork is not simply presented in the Bienal pavilion through reportage that is easy to assimilate to conceptual art. A material, physical, bodily, and lived engagement is lured by the propped and lashed wooden poles, alongside the pinned cattle hides, and invited through the postcards. To reiterate, the wood and leather elements are not set up for direct sculptural appreciation in the Bienal pavilion. The accompanying documentary resources direct us away to their assemblage in, and with, the sertão, for passing locals there. While bringing distant contexts in northeastern Brazil—and recent activity in
these contexts—within reach, this display of *Projeto Terra* fundamentally points elsewhere: far away to those remote contexts. At the same time, the physical presence of these dead tree parts and animal remains insists on yoking me, *here* in São Paulo, to the *there* of the *sertão*.

Studying this artwork in the context of the Bienal de São Paulo, I have found it productively disruptive, rather than indicative. Its very installation mode disrupts the art context that nonetheless showcases it. Moreover, it seems to root itself less in the Bienal Pavilion, and—not least with the later Venice iteration of the work in mind—more in the wider situation of Ibirapuera Park, within the urban metropolis of São Paulo. Ibirapuera Park was created to mark four centuries since the Portuguese founding of the city. At the time of European colonization, there was already a village in this place. Indigenous populations were steadily decimated and, by the nineteenth century, farms and pastures predominated, with the cattle reared here driven to São Paulo’s Municipal Slaughterhouse. The name “Ibirapuera” comes from the indigenous Tupí-Guaraní languages, meaning “old trees” or “decaying wood.” The first step toward the construction of the park was to reduce the marshiness of the local floodplain through the planting of hundreds of eucalyptus trees, as introduced from the British colony of Australia. While chasing etymology, I will note that the word “park” comes from the twelfth-century French language, meaning “enclosed wood,” or “heath land” used as a game preserve—where wild animals are hunted in a controlled way for sport.

Revisiting *Projeto Terra* in the Bienal de São Paulo of 1987, under the curatorial theme of “Utopia versus Reality” and the geopolitical organic context of Ibirapuera Park, brings all this swirling into view. The effect is humbling, inviting questioning while quietly insisting I come to new terms for my centrality in relation to the environmental
problems of globalization and my own insignificance in terms of the outcomes. I am exposed—via settler colonialism turned globalized agribusiness—to an unresolvable reckoning with our shared planetary ecocide at the hands of human elites. I am made conscious of Earth as a history of arbitrary planetary events that exceed human signification, while finding my own current patch tethered more or less meaningfully to patches in Brazil and, between here and there, potentially everywhere else.

ENVOI

If documentation of the staged communities of Projeto Terra in the sertão is the spine of the work’s presentation in biennials at the end of the 1980s, then the flesh and blood, which invites other bodies elsewhere into their own shared engagement, is set by the use of wood and sometimes leather in the installation of that documentation—by the role played by dead tree and cattle parts. Still, I appreciate that the work may not mobilize any of the historical and environmental issues for you that it does for me: we may not have lived sufficiently overlapping lives; our bodies may be rooted and have circulated too distinctly. However, another work of art, exhibited in different contexts, might indeed connect us—materially and ecologically.

What I hope to have offered here is a method or means of approach, one pursued under the banner of investigating art’s exposability. This involves sustained attention to that which is overlooked but significant to the extent that it offers or amplifies lived connections, while looking beyond humans. These connections may seem particular to the looker but they act to engage and implicate the individual in lives distributed transhistorically, translocally, transcontinentally, and transoceanically—in the throes of
both unseparability (after Ferreira da Silva) and untranslatability (after Spivak). As a transdisciplinary method that involves meanderings in the company of many at different moments, there could be as much disorientation entailed as discovery.

While my intention is not to insist on *Projeto Terra*’s place in any canon of “global contemporary art,” nor to command any ontology in the name of “exposability,” I cannot pretend that my professional success might not be measured by artistic canonization or conceptual mastery. Nevertheless, I avow my lack of interest in such measures and my commitment, instead, to something more wildly ambitious: a response to Bernadette Mayer’s legendary classroom urgings to “work your ass off to change language and don’t ever get famous.”48 In this essay, I have worked in the linguistic slipstream of many, conscious that no one individual ever changes language, but that my labor can support that of others.

If my great-great uncle had his life’s journey inscribed in a bible, quasi-eternally, then I would like mine to be shared instead through numerous eclectic and ephemeral instances of art’s exposability. The current space-time, however you experience that durational field, may need art that has already come and gone, far away, but which need not be forgotten. What exposure (if not exhibition) of art is exposing for you and how might you disclose it? I would like to be in the audience, if you fancy inviting me.

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