

Education by Stone

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“Nature is a language, can’t you read?”
—The Smiths, “Ask,” 1986

The installation *Education by Stone* (*Educação pela pedra*, 2016) by Cinthia Marcelle (Brazilian, born 1974) was created by forcing sticks of chalk into the openings in the grout along the brick walls of MoMA PS1’s Duplex Gallery. Discussing dust, brick, and pedagogy, or the porous, dispersable materials with which Marcelle has worked throughout her career would be one way to approach this work; dissecting the ways in which her gesture is perhaps inspired by the occupations of schools by students that have taken place across Brazil in the past few years could be another. Thinking about how chalk has returned to PS1, where the air must have once hung heavy with chalk dust floating off of tiny hands and felt erasers being slapped together to be cleaned, offers another interpretive route. That chalk, too, is a stone—a very soft one, lodged with its cousins on the walls of the gallery—might be stressed. There are multiple ways to analyze Marcelle’s gestures, which grow with importance each time they appear and are subsequently dismantled, taken away, perhaps never to be re-enacted. This essay enumerates some possible readings; while it only brushes against the new gesture at MoMA PS1, it aims to aid in its understanding.

The work in Marcelle’s work develops from her observation of and engagement with labor—the forms it takes in a given economic system and its role in the process of producing an artwork.¹ There are different types of work at play throughout Marcelle’s practice: her artworks



Still from *Leitmotif* (*Leitmotiv*). 2011. Video (color, sound), 4:16 min.



Zero Landmark (*Marco zero*). 2007. Performance with bricks, cement, scaffold, calcareous rock, wheelbarrow, tools, and food, Museu de Arte Moderna, Recife, Brazil, 2007. Photo: Cinthia Marcelle

themselves, the forms of labor in the world that she draws on, and the observational work she does to inform her practice. Marcelle’s work is the work of reciprocity and exchange, formed from experiences of looking, gathering, and reading. Her gaze tends to focus on forms of labor that, when reframed in her artwork, are diffused or emptied of productivity.

In her video *Leitmotif* (*Leitmotiv*, 2011), for example, which is on view as part of *Projects 105*, a seemingly flat concrete surface is gradually covered by currents of water that move across the screen, propelled by workers plying wide brooms. In *Fountain 193* (*Fonte 193*, 2007), a fire truck drives in an endless circle, spraying water into the center of a patch of arid dirt. *Confrontation* (*Confronto*, 2005) shows a group of jugglers performing for motorists at red lights. Across these three works—only a fraction of a larger body of videos—a range of civic labor practices (firefighting, street cleaning, busking) are both displayed and unraveled. We see that the purifying spill of water grows into a whirlpool, a fire truck becomes a fountain watering a spot of dirt, and street performers finish entertaining without reaping any financial gain.

The same logic appears in the performances and installations that Marcelle engineers. In *Zero Landmark* (*Marco zero*, 2007), a crew of construction workers was tasked by the artist with building and subsequently demolishing a small, inaccessible room in the center of a gallery. For *Gray Manifestation* (*Manifestação cinza*, 2006), Marcelle staged a protest—a form of political work—drained of demands: a group of protesters dressed in gray hoisting banners and signs of solid gray is transformed from a remonstrative citizenry into a neutral mass. In *At the Risk of the Real*



At the Risk of the Real (*Sob o risco do real*). 2015. Wooden structure and sand, activated by performers. Installation view, Sharjah Biennial 12, 2015. Photo: Camila Valones

(*Sob o risco do real*, 2015), presented as part of the Sharjah Biennial, in the United Arab Emirates, Marcelle alluded to obscure Gulf-state labor disputes by creating a half-finished construction site that was traversed above the viewer’s head by laborers who were partially hidden from view through a provisional ceiling but whose movements resulted in the delicate rain of sand and dust throughout the space—construction at an almost invisible pace.

Marcelle’s artistic career roughly parallels Brazil’s emergence as a twenty-first-century global economic power in the era of financialization, a development that fueled a general optimism among its citizens that Brazil would finally fulfill its destiny as “the land of tomorrow,” flush with capital.² The rise of financialization, in which profit accumulates via large financial institutions instead of through traditional channels like commodity production, has accelerated the separation of capital from labor, creating a workforce that is even further removed from the accumulation of wealth. In the late 1990s, Marcelle was one of a generation of

artists—which also included Lais Myrrha, Matheus Rocha Pitta, Sara Ramo, and Marilá Dardot³—who emerged in her hometown of Belo Horizonte, the capital of the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. At the time the local art scene was rapidly expanding, in tandem with the city’s transition from an economy dominated by industry (especially mining) to a service economy.⁴ In this context, these artists turned equally to urban objects—garbage, bricks, tires—and organic things—dirt, sand, rock—to emphasize the materiality that newer economic structures appeared to leave behind.

Marcelle’s work looks beyond the appropriation of material to the actions of labor. It shows us the work that fiscal speculation has made it easy to forget; for while actual capital may have become increasingly distant from labor, workers are not freed from the imperative to build or clean. But we see something else, too. If financialization is profit emptied of work, then Marcelle’s artwork stages work emptied of productivity. This labor begins to

embody the disjunctions of contemporary monetary capital. Marcelle’s work allows us to see labor poetically performing the abstraction of capital that has become a marker of financialization.⁵

Marcelle’s focus on labor is in the tradition of the Brazilian modernists’ engagement with daily life, urban space, and workaday activities that began in the 1960s. “There is nothing more innovative,” Carlos Basualdo wrote of a generation of Brazilian artists that included Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, “than the free use of references that popular culture puts into play on a daily basis, as a survival strategy.”⁶ Popular culture, here, can mean popular, nonprecious materials like sand, dust, or even chalk. Seen within this lineage, Marcelle’s actions do not necessarily fit the art-as-work activity of the 1960s, or the staging and validation of domestic labor in art, or the outsourcing of the production of the conceptual artwork, or even the labor of wading through a shared cultural archive to produce new experiences and art objects rooted in pseudo-anthropological appropriation.⁷ They are actions drawn from labor as it exists in the world’s economic systems.

And what of chalk? In line with the legacy of Brazilian modernism, which shifted in the 1960s from the rational abstraction of Concretism to the social exercises of Neo-Concretism—the breach that has been called the “engineering of art’s absence within art”⁸—artists have returned to material by engaging with its discursive meaning.⁹ In the wake of this move, Marcelle deploys substances to evoke their social meaning instead of their role in the accumulation of mediums throughout art history. Chalk is a stone that was used for generations to imprint the structures of language and learning on students across the globe and, once, in this very building. There are still some chalkboards at MoMA PS1, reminding visitors of the building’s former identity. Today, as an art space, MoMA PS1 fulfills a different pedagogical function. But in returning chalk to the building’s gallery spaces, Marcelle shows us that these functions may not be so separate: if, as a school, PS1 taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, MoMA PS1, the art institution, trains its public for proficiency in a visual culture that it also defines.

When Marcelle’s sticks of chalk are fitted into the walls, they shatter and break to accommodate the uneven grout. When we see these shards of chalk distributed across the walls we are also witnessing the fragility and precariousness of inherited pedagogical systems. Marcelle has read the walls of this gallery perhaps more

than they have ever been read. The process of negotiating where each chalk rod should go was a process of reading the fissures and crevices that have deepened with time, the inexplicable holes and openings that have appeared along the way, and the areas that remain stubbornly even and flat. The process involved labor: a team of installers, working in concert, delicately fit or roughly smashed pieces of chalk into these brick walls. They worked to translate Marcelle’s observation into a form that is legible here, now, with bright chalk that is always slowly shedding its dust into the air. Mark-making has both been imprinted on and emerged from these walls. *Education by Stone*’s execution, like that of so many artworks, is the result of labor driven toward indefinite or even excessive ends.

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Notes

- ¹ As Marcelle has said, “Usually my ideas appear in the middle of a whirlwind of possibilities from everyday life: the movement of bodies (from which an entire project can develop); the attraction to common objects accumulation; and magic created through labor.” Cinthia Marcelle, interview by Marja Van Der Loo, in *Many Places at Once*, ed. Marie Martraire, Julian Myers-Szupinska, and Lauren R. O’Connell (San Francisco: CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2014), p. 27.

² This economic growth has resulted in one of Brazil’s worst economic recessions.

³ For more information about these artists, see the exhibition *Apodí* 69, which took place at PIVÔ, São Paulo, in 2015.

⁴ Today, Belo Horizonte has become a hub of the Brazilian economy in part, as with other Brazilian cities, for its attractiveness as a destination for the business-tourism industry of conferences and meetings.
- ⁵ See “Subjects of Finance: Melanie Gilligan Interviewed by Tom Holert” *Grey Room*, no. 46 (Winter 2012): 84–98.

⁶ Carlos Basualdo, “Tropicalia: Avant-Garde, Popular Culture, and the Culture Industry in Brazil,” in *Tropicalia: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture*, ed. Carlos Basualdo (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2005), p. 15.

⁷ See Helen Molesworth, *Work Ethic* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

⁸ Luis Pérez-Oramas “Lygia Clark: If You Hold a Stone,” in *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948–1988*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Luis Pérez-Oramas, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014), p. 31.

⁹ See, for example, the works in *Cruzamentos: Contemporary Art in Brazil* (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 2014).

Projects 105: Cinthia Marcelle
October 23, 2016–March 5, 2017
MoMA PS1

Duplex Gallery:

Education by Stone (Educação pela pedra). 2016. Chalk. Courtesy the artist and Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo

Cinema:

Leitmotif (Leitmotiv). 2011. Video (color, sound), 4:16 min. Courtesy the artist and Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo



Study for *Education by Stone (Educação pela pedra)* (detail). 2016. Chalk

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Cover: Study for *Education by Stone (Educação pela pedra)* (detail). 2016. Chalk

All images courtesy the artist and Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo

Projects

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Cinthia Marcelle

