Education by Stone

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“Nature is a language, can’t you read?”

The installation Education by Stone ( Educação pela pedra, 2016) by Cinthia Marcelle (Brazilian, born 1974) was created by forcing sticks of chalk into 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 manifestation(s) that Marcelle engineers. In this context, these artists—which also included Lais Myrrha, Matheus Rocha Pitta, Sara Ramo, and Mariél Dardot—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.

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 of 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 manifestation(s) that Marcelle engineers. In this context, these artists—which also included Lais Myrrha, Matheus Rocha Pitta, Sara Ramo, and Mariél Dardot—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.

In the late 1990s, Marcelle was one of a generation of artists—which also included Lais Myrrha, Matheus Rocha Pitta, Sara Ramo, and Mariél Dardot—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. 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 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. The rise of financialization, in which profit accumulates via speculation has made it easy to forget; for while actual 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 labor, then Marcelle’s artwork stages work emptied of productivity. This labor begins to 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.

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And what of chalk? In line with the legacy of 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 resources that popular culture puts into play on a daily basis, as a survival strategy.” 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. 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 Concreteism to the social exercises of Neo-Concretism—the breach that has been called the “engineering of art’s absence within art”—artists have returned to material by engaging with its discursive meaning. 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 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 Martine, Julian Myrka-Szupinska, and Lauren R. O’Connell (San Francisco: OCCO Watts’s Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2014), p. 27.

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Today, Bala Horaçite 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.

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