

Projects 21 : Cildo Meireles : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 16-May 1, 1990

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Meireles, Cildo, 1948-

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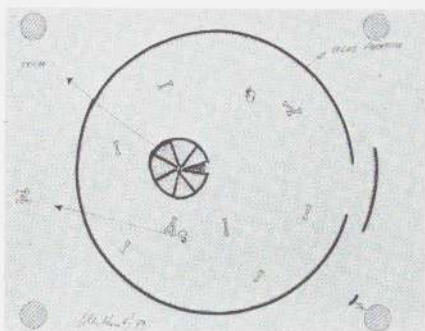
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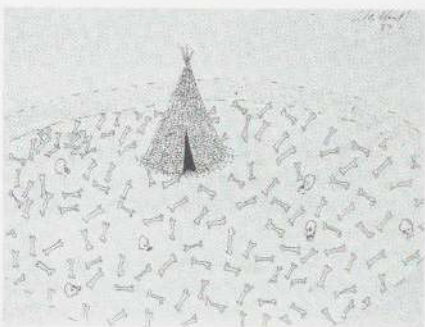
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The Museum of Modern Art
New York
March 16–May 1, 1990

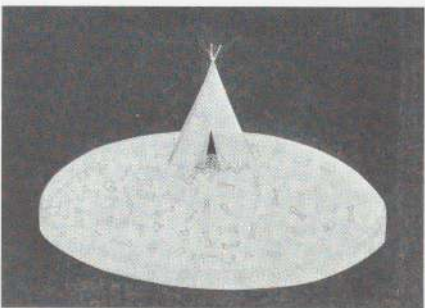
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Study for *Olvido* [*Oblivion*]. 1989. Felt-tip pen on paper, 10⁵/₈ x 14¹/₈" (26.6 x 35.3 cm). Courtesy the artist. Photo: Kate Keller



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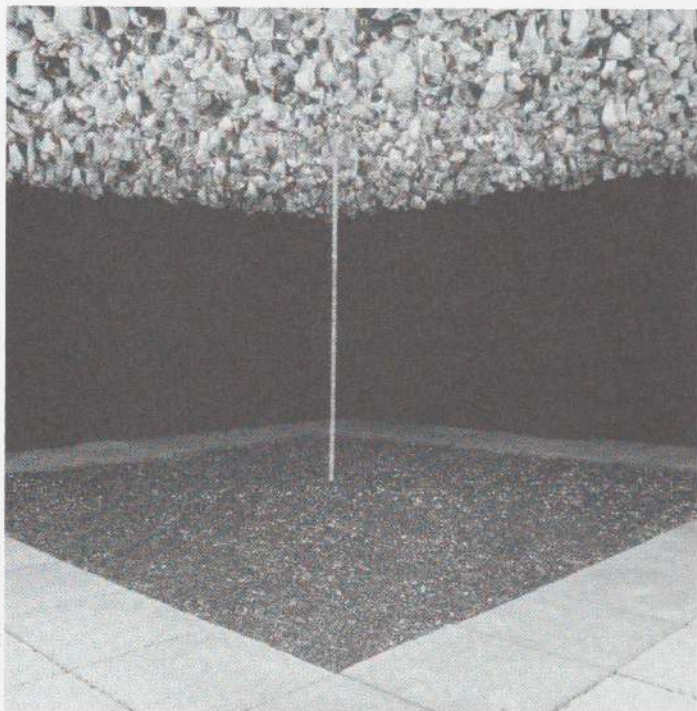


Study for *Olvido* [*Oblivion*]. 1989. Gouache and graphite on paper, 13⁷/₈ x 19³/₄" (34.7 x 49.4 cm). Courtesy the artist. Photo: Kate Keller

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Cildo Meireles

At age forty-two Cildo Meireles is among the better-known artists of his generation in Brazil. His concerns extend from the exchange and use values of merchandise to the characteristics and ramifications of geographical borders; from metaphor (which he defines as the manner in which an object comes to embody an idea) to the impact humans have had on the rest of nature. Although he acknowledges that an artist's output usually becomes to some degree recognizable, he has consciously shunned the modernist practice of self-definition through a particular form or iconography. He sees emphasis on personal style as an exigency of the marketplace, related to the notion of private property. His art, therefore, varies from large sculptures and installations to small, conceptual works; from figurative, emotional drawings to schematized, colorful paintings of soccer fields. The form and, to some

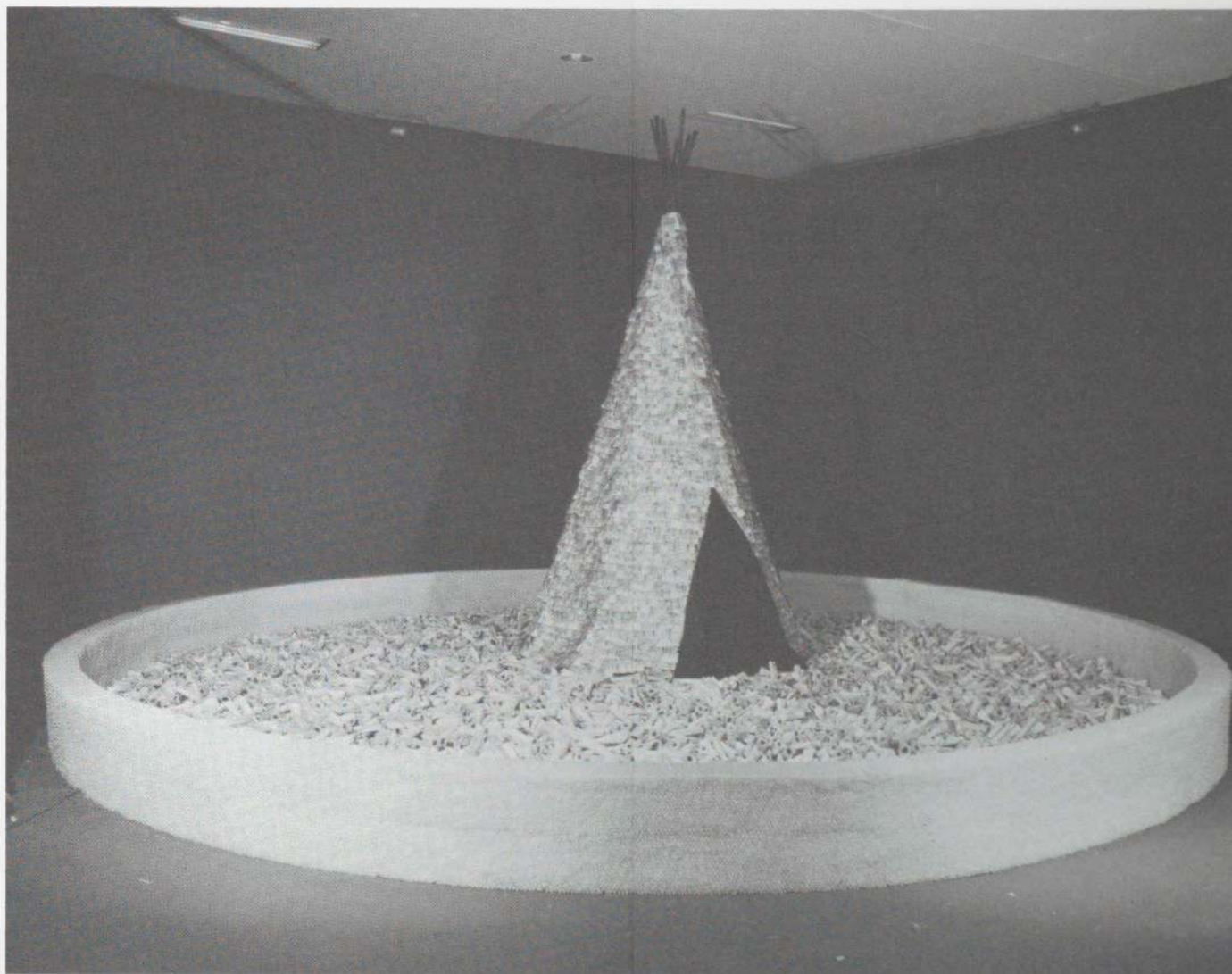


Missão/Missões [Mission/Missions]. 1987. Mixed mediums, 19' 9" x 19' 9" (594 x 594 cm). Courtesy the artist. Photo: Wilton Montenegro

Olvido [Oblivion]. 1989. Mixed mediums, approximately 11' x 20' 6" (330 x 615 cm). Courtesy Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo. Photo: Romulo Fialdini

in this instance via a deposit system.) For Meireles, Coca Cola, with its connotations of economic imperialism, functioned as a metaphor for money. The artist, who sees the soda bottles and currency as "anti-ready-mades," credits Marcel Duchamp as an important influence. Duchamp's ready-mades are anonymous industrial objects elevated and transformed by their art context. In the bank-note and Coca-Cola projects, Meireles altered mass-produced objects and retained their mundane context to send an individualized statement out into the larger world.

As is evident from these works, by 1970 Meireles had already developed his own brand of Conceptualism. To someone unfamiliar with the evolution of modern art in Brazil, the artist's work may seem so related to developments in Europe and the United States that it is difficult to imagine its antecedents are Brazilian. Yet



Meireles cites Brazil's previous generation of modernists, which includes Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, as his primary sources of influence. While he has shared with many of his American and European counterparts a deep interest in Duchamp and Yves Klein, during his formative years most of the contemporary art he saw was from his own country.

The social and political references in Meireles's work, like its formal influences, are Brazilian. They are also often iconoclastic. It is significant that the idea for *Olvido [Oblivion]* (1989), a work critical of the Church's role in the settlement of Brazil, grew out of an earlier commission for an exhibition commemorating three hundred years of missionary work in that country. For that exhibition, Meireles produced *Missão/Missões*

[*Mission/Missions*], subtitled *How to Build a Cathedral* (1987). Cow bones hang from the square, umbrella-like ceiling of the work, a central pole is composed of strung communion wafers, and the floor is covered with coins. A black, veil-like shroud surrounds the piece. In the broadest terms, this sculpture concerns the complicity of religious and business interests in the displacement and destruction of indigenous Indian cultures throughout the world. In particular, it refers to the willful destruction of the Craô tribe of Brazil. As Meireles tells the story, in about 1930 clothing infected with a deadly virus was purposely distributed to the Craôs, who had valuable landholdings. Some ten years later the surviving members of the tribe were massacred with machine guns by another group of property-hungry men. The artist's father, then director of a Brazilian federal agency, prosecuted the parties guilty of the shooting. Meireles believes that this is the first time Brazilians were

extent, the content of his art reflect his responses to private experience and public events. Politics, for example, became a dominant factor in his art around 1970 when the dictatorship in Brazil was at its most repressive; although still an important theme, it has been less of a focus for Meireles in recent years.

Meireles began making art in 1963 at age fifteen, and by 1967 he was producing works that address the formal and conceptual issues that would continue to occupy him. In 1970 the artist printed anti-authoritarian messages hostile to the Brazilian government on Coca-Cola bottles and on bank notes. Both works exploited existing methods of distribution to disseminate subversive ideas. (The soda bottles, like the bills, were in constant circulation,

punished for a crime committed against Indians. However, the powerful interests behind the slaughter sought revenge, and eventually Meireles's father was fired from his job.

Olvido is the artist's second treatment of this subject. In this sculpture, a teepee is the central structure; bones surround the tent; paper money from North, South, and Central America covers the exterior of the shelter; and a low wall of candles, representing the Church, encircles the entire piece. The floor of the teepee is covered with charcoal, and a low-volume recording of a chain saw used to fell trees emanates from within. For the artist, charcoal, like bones, stands for the world in its natural state, before human tampering, while money and candles suggest human institutions. The violent sound of the chain saw

(recalling a motorcycle or, significantly, a machine gun) suggests the ruin of nature by human beings.

But Meireles's art resists a single interpretation. He encompasses the sculpture in a circle, a form with no beginning or end—an apt symbol for his artistic vision. Bones traditionally symbolize death, but they are also part of the living body. The candles signify the Church and are made by humans; they suggest light and salvation, but, capable of destruction, they hint at damnation. Because they burn quickly they (like the bones) are reminders of the transience of existence. Although fragile and made of paper, money represents power; as a covering for the tepee, it takes the place of natural elements like bark and leaves, and, in providing shelter, suggests security. Like all of Meireles's work, *Olvido* transcends its specifically Brazilian references to make universal its indictment of oppression and its ecological point.

Meireles's art melds these concrete social and political concerns with abstract philosophical considerations that seem to deny the existence of a stable reality. The meanings of elements within a sculpture are always in flux. Meireles's evolution as an artist is consistent with this aspect of his vision. It seems appropriate that in his production it is difficult to discern a definitive stylistic, conceptual, or formal progression. A linear artistic development traces change, shifts in focus. In Meireles's case, the social and political themes and issues that occupy him today have been present in his work almost from the start. He continually recycles concepts and images, and forms that interested him twenty years ago may unpredictably interest him again. This does not preclude the possibility of growth. The artist continues to realize larger, more theatrical sculptures than before, works that have added power, resonance, and material weight. Over the years Meireles's art has, in fact, become richer, more complex, more poetic, and, visually, more beautiful.

Lynn Zelevansky
Curatorial Assistant
Department of Painting and Sculpture

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Designed to present recent work by contemporary artists, the new **projects** series has been based on the Museum's original **projects** exhibitions, which were held from 1971 to 1982. The artists presented are chosen by the members of all the Museum's curatorial departments in a process involving an active dialogue and close critical scrutiny of new developments in the visual arts.

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biography

Born Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1948.
Lived in New York, 1971–73.
Resides in Rio de Janeiro.

selected individual exhibitions

- 1986**
Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo.
Cinza [Gray]
- 1984**
Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro.
Red Shift
- 1979**
Centro Cultural Candido Mendes,
Rio de Janeiro. *The Sermon on the
Mountain: Fiat Lux*
- 1975**
Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro.
Eureka/Blindhotland

selected group exhibitions

- 1989**
Bienal de São Paulo
- Kanaal Art Foundation, Kortrijk, Belgium.
Tunga "Lezarts"/Cildo Meireles "Through"
- Musée national d'art moderne, Centre
Georges Pompidou, Paris.
Magiciens de la terre
- 1988**
P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York.
Brazil Projects
- The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx,
New York. *The Latin American Spirit*
- 1987**
Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris.
Modernidade: Art brésilien du 20e siècle
- 1984**
Biennale of Sydney, Australia
- 1977**
Biennial de Paris
- 1976**
Biennale di Venezia
- 1970**
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Information

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