

“I feel that the mundane has been incorporated”: a conversation with Maria Helena Bernardes

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Translated by Roberto Cataldo Costa

Abstract: In an interview with Eduardo Veras, artist Maria Helena Bernardes reviews different topics of her life history after the rupture represented by *Vaga em Campo de Rejeito*, which began in 2001 and marks her growing interest in a less expressive and more communicational dimension of the artist's work. The interviewee emphasizes the discovery – from situations of collaborative nature – of new ways of understanding daily life and the experience of being in the world. In the conversation, Maria Helena also comments on the exercise of writing and the pleasure of building narratives.

Keywords: palavras chave. Interview. Maria Helena Bernardes. Collaborative situations. Daily life. Narrative.

Spoken text and written text have different natures. What is written is often attached to the notion of permanence, while the oral appears as more ephemeral, evanescent. Interviews – conducted in person, using a tape recorder – are usually hailed as more performative, more authentic, more digressive. Written conversation renounces prosody (tones, pauses, rhythms and voice variations) and body language (gestures, facial expressions, displacements). Writing is believed to allow more logical and cohesive ordering of discourse, with the possibility for repentance and revision. Slips of the tongue, hesitations and subterfuges would be far less evident. However, none of those assure oral conversations any superiority over written ones – whether they take place by letter, email or other modalities of graphic dialogue. As Octavio Paz observes: “The differences between spoken and written language [...] are very deep; not so much, however, that they make us forget that all are essentially language: expressive systems with meaningful and communicative power”.¹

This preamble announces my option for email for this interview. I have followed Maria Helena Bernardes's work

for almost 20 years now and had other opportunities to interview her, including some for academic research. One of those conversations, in 2004, took place through e-mail, because she was spending a long time abroad, away from the city of Porto Alegre. Because both of us appreciate the format and because she masters written expression enviably, I chose that format once again. It was only two groups of questions, which the artist responded quickly, in just over a week, in September 2017.

Maria Helena Bernardes (Porto Alegre, 1966) holds a degree in drawing and printmaking from the UFRGS Institute of Arts. After intense research about the *void*, where she used to attach paper strips directly onto the walls of exhibition spaces, she closed her own studio and turned her production towards concrete experiences in – both urban and remote – public spaces and to narrating those adventures in lectures, conversations, books and, more recently, a website. In the interview that follows, Maria Helena revisits that trajectory and her gradual distancing from current notions of art and work of art, to embrace new forms of contact and interaction with people and places she did not even know: “I no longer feel the need for the architecture of a work to experience that readiness of mind, that horizontality and mobility between different people and worlds”.

Eduardo Veras:

If it's possible, I'd like to do a brief review of your career and your work since *Vaga em Campo de Rejeito* [Void in the waste field], from 2001, assuming that at that point there was a rupture or at least a turning point regarding your previous artistic work. I will propose some general and very specific questions, starting by *Vaga em Campo de Rejeito* itself. Taking into account that some time has passed now, how do you see your experience in the town of Arroio dos Ratos and all the learning it provided you?²

2. Between spring 2001 and summer 2002, Maria Helena Bernardes set out to look for empty spaces in the town of Arroio dos Ratos, state of Rio Grande do Sul, which she did not know. She ended up finding a coal waste field in the outskirts of the town, and a clear span in a construction, without any owner, right in the center of it, between the Bus Station and the Town Council building. With help from residents and the town government, she rebuilt a triangle with the same size and shape as the center void on the waste field. Shortly after that, she went on to narrate that experience in lectures, until the story became a book: BERNARDES, Maria Helena. *Vaga em campo de rejeito*. Documento Areal Series. São Paulo: Escrituras, 2003.

1. PAZ, Octavio. *O arco e a lira*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1986, p.23.

Maria Helena Bernardes:

You're right when you say that *Vaga em Campo de Rejeito* was a turning point in my work. I tried to write about it in 2012, when we donated materials from project *Areal* to MAC-RS (under Funarte's Marcantonio Villaça Award). I thought I'd leave an up-to-date testimonial along with film and photos that were donated, but I just couldn't write it... So I was happy you brought me back to reflect from a perspective that now, in 2017, also involves a distance from *Areal* itself, which, for me, closed its cycle.³

Even when I was doing the white wall installations (1996-98), I sensed that I hadn't found my work yet. *Vaga em Campo de Rejeito* represented an arrival to my more personal work as an artist and of course I was brought to it by previous experiences of working in studios and doing exhibitions. That work was like breaking away from all that, as I say, a radical break from all the "culture boxes", from the belief I had in the symbolic effectiveness of a type of art and place reserved for art. *Vaga em Campo de Rejeito* was an entirely exposed adventure, with no making of; I felt even much more exposed than in the experience I had in Eldorado do Sul with Ana Flavia Baldisserotto... In Arroio dos Ratos, I saw myself sitting in exile, not knowing very well why I was there, thinking that any gesture in that place would be very small and lost. And that distressed me a little sometimes. At the same time, I wouldn't go back because I felt free as I had never felt doing art. All that seemed a little crazy to me; I thought about what it would be like to sit there or 100 meters or 100 kilometers away and I knew that there was no such difference, that I had to get used to the idea that I carried everything I needed to do art and communicate it to the limits of own body's capsule. I had to unlearn the protocols and paths in which I had trained myself as an artist. While I was involved with *Vaga em Campo de Rejeito* (it was four months in Arroio dos Ratos, but before that, I spent four or five months wandering around Porto Alegre, recognizing and experiencing some situations with voids), some more experienced artists asked me why I had chosen to commit "suicide" as an artist, because I had shut down the studio, I refused to

exhibit... After the work was opened at the Watermelon Festival and the cycle closed, I began to narrate the adventure in many places, in several parts of Brazil, and people questioned the value of a work produced, presented and narrated by myself, without involving any curators or exhibition institutions... Interesting, isn't it? I don't think anyone would ask that kind of question today to an artist who works that way. But *Vaga em Campo de Rejeito* was really a transition. There, in the middle of the Waste Field, I saw myself as an artist and this awareness drew a very thin pellicle between me and the world around me. Then this pellicle disappeared, it dissolved.

Back to an earlier point: I think I didn't recognize the work prior to *Vaga em Campo de Rejeito* as what I would do for the rest of my life because I was focused on expressing an existential dimension through work. I wasn't seeking anything confessional, but the work was above all expressive. With it, I found a possibility that was more communicational than expressive. Even if there was nothing unprecedented in new my works that were out there by 2000, I think it was this perspective or communication stance that gave me the feeling of being unaccompanied at the time. All the artists with whom I was personally acquainted and exchanged ideas worked towards expression and an authorial differentiation that was visible on the work's surface. For a long time I wondered why I felt so lonely when there were so many people doing urban interventions, site-specifics works, and for so long... I wondered why *Vaga em Campo de Rejeito* seemed so different from that kind of action. Today I think that the main gift I gained from that experience with was to stop being an artist who – mainly – expresses herself and to become one who – mainly – communicates. That's a totally new battery that the experience with *Vaga em Campo de Rejeito* provided and that still feeds me.

EV:

I don't know if the walks, the narratives and the images you produced in Paris, from André Breton's book *Nadja* (1928), constitute a work. But that was how I saw it since the first time I attended a presentation about that experience (in a class by teacher Maria Ivone dos Santos at the [UFRGS] Institute of Art where you were invited). Can you review your motivations for that work? And clarify whether or not you consider it a work,

3. Project *Areal*, started in the year 2000 by Maria Helena Bernardes and artist André Severo, focuses on artistic displacements and actions outside the traditional circuit, as well as the publication of artists' authorial books. The series, entitled *Documento Areal*, published texts by both artists – one co-authored by Ana Flávia Baldisserotto, and also books by Karin Lambrecht, Hélio Ferverza, Elaine Tedesco, Marcelo Coutinho and Gisela Waetge.

since, unlike others, it was not recorded as a book? I don't even know if it has an actual title...

MHB:

Between June 2003 and May 2004, we lived in Paris.⁴ Even though we were struggling to learn and respect local codes, at one point we realized that we wouldn't reconcile ourselves with the city that made us deeply unhappy. For my part, I felt strong longing for Arroio dos Ratos and Camaquã (where I had worked before traveling) and I wondered how anyone could create anything in Paris – the city seemed so hostile and uninteresting to me. I'd spent most of my days at the Pompidou Center's Library, reading about the genealogy of Situationism, discovering Letrism, Henri Lefèbvre's books. I wanted to understand what linked the situationist drift to the surrealist wandering, so I spent the summer reading interviews, essays, magazines... The library had facsimiles of Breton and Soupault's *The magnetic fields*, of *Littérature* magazine with all surrealist games. This interest in the Surrealism of games of chance, of availability to the streets, led me to *Nadja*. The book revealed another side of André Breton's that I didn't know, I was taken over – that's the term – by the experience narrated in *Nadja*, of whose existence I didn't know. Little by little I realized how much was at stake in such a tiny book: a love story full of energy and shadows; a tragedy; a testimony about the life of a woman who was inadequate even to the standards of the vanguards. I was very touched by this "out-in-the-street" work, by Breton's commitment to live all that in a state of total availability to life. Fernando gave me a used copy of *Nadja* from the last pocket edition launched by Breton in 1964 (Gallimard). I started to read it in October 2003 and from that time until March 2004 I lived for that book. I thought that before returning to Brazil I needed to step on every sidewalk, sit on every park, walk around every corner, look at each hotel, be at every bridge, train station, coffee shop or bookstore mentioned in the book. With every plunge in *Nadja*'s world I felt a commotion I still remember. I pursued, found and photographed all the locations mentioned in those months. I understood why Breton wanted to illustrate the book with photographs as objective as "postcards": to contain

the Wonderful on every page of *Nadja*. I was not thinking about doing a work; I just wanted to possess that experience somehow: in those months, I only read about *Nadja* and Surrealism; I'd spend hours checking the images with the locations mentioned, it was difficult to find spaces that were not even proper places; I produced more than three hundred negatives... That experimental presentation you said you attended was a result of a need that emerged after my return, when time passed, to process another part of the experience: at one point, still in Paris, "petrifying coincidences" between *Nadja*'s past and the real sphere of my days started to startle me and I couldn't talk about them with anyone. I'd spend my days alone, walking miles and miles in a chilling cold in that city I disliked – after the vestiges of two ghosts, Breton and *Nadja*, who were my companions in Paris. I had never had such an intense and long experience without being able to put it in words. My story with *Nadja*'s vestiges ended at the apex of inexplicable coincidences. I came back with all those images, with all that knowledge and wonder, and after about six months I felt that I could begin to tell the story my own way: a testimony of my encounter with *Nadja*, the obsession the book arose in me (and which I later learned was not uncommon), my pursuit of ghosts. After that presentation you saw, I decided that I would only tell the story to groups of people invited by someone who invited me to tell it, going to the home of one of them. Eduarda⁵ invited me to present at the State University of Rio Grande do Sul (UERGS) and I accepted it because it was a university gallery; I gave a lecture and left a notebook with four texts called *4 fragmentos em torno de Nadja* [4 fragments about *Nadja*]. People could sit at a table and read them while listening to Fernando's composition for soprano, baritone and guitar, called "*Um beijo tão rapidamente esquecido*" [A kiss so quickly forgotten]. It's on YouTube with my photos, the song is beautiful.⁶ The publisher *Confraria do Vento* has recently invited me to publish those texts along with my intuitive translation of Breton's *Nadja*. I have already reviewed my writings and I am preparing to translate the book.

EV:

In *Vaga em Campo de Rejeito*, *Nadja* and a series of later

4. Here Maria Helena refers to her partner and musician Fernando Mattos, then doing split studies for his PhD in Music. Today he is a professor at the UFRGS Institute of Arts.

5. Eduarda Gonçalves, then professor at UERGS at Montenegro and now a professor at the Federal University of Pelotas's Arts Center.

6. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSb9quASJ10/>.

works, in *Dilúvio* (2002-3), in *Histórias de Península e Praia Grande* [Stories of Península and Praia Grande] (2009) and, more recently, in the *Observatório do Morro da Borússia* [The Borrússia Mountain Observatory], I see some common characteristics that I would like to explore one by one. The first one concerns the notion of travel and displacement. I get the impression that in all these works, a certain feeling of strangeness was important to underline the idea of being away from home, far from the most ordinary in everyday life. Does this "foreigner" place interest you or your motivation has to do with some search? (I remember that Steinbeck, quoted by Geoff Dyer, said that he had homes everywhere, but that he had not seen all of them yet: "That is perhaps why I am restless. I haven't seen all my homes".)

MHB:

It may be so, but I don't believe that this attraction to the foreign perspective, to this strangeness has been at the forefront at some point, as a goal, I mean. *Vaga*, *Dilúvio* and *Camaquã* were free experiences, with no conscious method for dispersion or for causing estrangement. After them, I spent a year trying to understand the reasons for dispersion, the absurdity in everyday life, the indistinction of art and work of art in other artists and in other contexts. From that point on, I understood that, at least from my point of view, the most difficult thing is to exercise that strangeness and that readiness of mind in the most familiar and ordinary environments – situations we consider familiar and we think we master.

EV:

Another consistency I perceive in all that series of works so distinct that followed *Vaga* is the preference for listening to the other, for everyday interaction with the other. It is not about "giving voice to those who have no voice" – something that may sound kind of boring despite its good intentions. I believe there is an authentic desire in your experiences to build something "with others" rather than "about others". Can you comment on these partnerships?

MHB:

Yes, that has been consistent since *Vaga em Campo de Rejeito*; I think it has to do with that finding of a communication stance I

mentioned before. Until *Vaga*, I wasn't aware of that in art, but it was a personality trait, according to what my friends and family told me – the willingness to talk and associate with strangers. But after that work, yes, there were a series of experiences that kept moving away from the idea of a work of art that is exhibited or that speaks to other people. I began to focus my attention on what was going on after my decision to encourage a collaborative situation on behalf of a – very open – idea of art, remaining in a state of readiness for partnerships, discoveries and changes in direction for as long as the experience lasted. Experiences such as what Ana Flávia and I lived (for six years) in Eldorado do Sul and other locations in the Jacuí Delta (whose description is in the book *A Estrada que Não Sabe de Nada* [The Road that knows nothing]), are loaded with events, relationships, narratives, landscapes, contacts with other worldviews. By the end of the cycle of *A Estrada que Não Sabe de Nada*, I was totally open to the possibility of exposing myself and engaging with people who came through those experiences in behalf of art. There, in Eldorado, there was another turning point: that readiness of mind to engage in dialogue and fellowship with anyone, anywhere without the tutelage of categories was, I believe, incorporated into other parts of life. I no longer feel the need for the architecture of a work to live this readiness of mind, this horizontality and mobility between different people and worlds. I feel that I don't need a project or a conceptual pretext – work, art – to support or confirm myself in this dimension of interaction with the world. Somehow I feel the mundane has been incorporated – and I experience the mundane differently from the time before I was an artist. I am now devoted to introspective work done at home, in intimacy, quite different from the process of street experiences. And I feel that this work doesn't essentially distinguish me – or itself – from the mundane out there. It has been a long exercise to get to this way of life...

EV:

Last but not least – perhaps above all – is the taste for telling these stories you collect and build. I always remember Walter Benjamin's text about the narrator, so often quoted but not always read with attention.⁷ Your narratives are so successful,

7. BENJAMIN, Walter. "O narrador – Considerações sobre a obra de Nicolai Leskov". In: *Magia e técnica, arte e política – Obras escolhidas*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1984.

I suppose it is because they are based on experiences – yours and others’. I don’t want to sound deep or dramatic, but do you agree with Benjamin’s idea that telling is a way of reconciling with what has been lived and even with the inevitability of death?

MHB:

Yes, Benjamin’s text is beautiful and sad, too. Reading it was important; I found important support and understanding through it, no doubt. It’s very touching when he says that we no longer consider the exemplarity of the experience provided by storytelling. By raising this aspect of death you touch a sensitive point. One of the things that drove me away from art made for exhibitions was the feeling that when we exhibit objects and images in a box isolated from life, it’s as though we were exhibiting bodies – well presented, well lit, of course, but they are still objects empty of life. The possibility of telling something experienced to a group of people is the opposite of that. The narrator has the possibility of activating an energy charge that travels and connects the bodies and souls of those who hear it. When you tell an experience in an engaged way, a new experience is produced as a collective, unique event. Some people have told me that when they heard this or that story in one of my presentations, they experienced the sensation of having left the room, of having been displaced as in a trip; others came to comment on a “movie” they had watched during the speech, remembering actions, colors, events of that supposed movie that had not been shown. I think a group’s meeting with a narrative is a powerful, transformative event, even for the narrator. Another aspect regarding what you said is that I believe the narrator is someone who resists erasure, who tries to reconnect him or herself and the listener with the strength of what was lived. That is an action of engagement with life; yes, it produces a kind of organism – this collective shaped by experience that is updated by speaking and listening together. When activated in the environment, that commotion is fluid, it runs through the bodies, it passes from one to the other, it establishes a sense of community, I believe.

EV:

Still on your preference for narrative, I imagine that you make

an effort to render these stories enticing as you tell and retell them either orally or in writing. Why did you make that effort? Is there really pleasure in the very act of telling them?

MHB:

Yes, no doubt about it. When experiences turn into stories, they have been edited by whoever tells them. The narrative is produced from interpretation, after some reading that emphasizes certain events rather than others, trying to allow certain meanings and reactions to surface rather than others. Among so many possibilities of meaning that vibrate in experience as it develops, some are captured, some are not. The personality of narrative, the myth it provides from what is experienced, the way the narrator imagines that he or she will impact listeners and hijack them into the adventure, making that narrator an active part in the myth... All this excites me, it motivates me, it has made me narrate through – direct – orality and writing countless times. In *Vaga em Campo de Rejeito*, writing emerged from orality, which preceded it. In *Histórias de Península e Praia Grande*, the stories were first given literary treatment and only later were they shared through public readings, with Fernando playing live and doing vocal direction of the readings in presentations for groups of people. They are different ways of telling stories, but I focus on the enchanting power of speech engaged in experience, in the production of that collective organism I mentioned, which lives and breathes in the shared adventure.

EV:

In the narratives of *Dilúvio* and *A Estrada que Não Sabe de Nada*, experience is shared from the beginning and it goes on until the end, culminating in the very configuration of the books, both signed in co-authorship. How did these partnerships happen – with André Severo and Ana Flavia Baldisserotto respectively?

MHB:

In the case of *Dilúvio*, I wrote the texts that are in the book, which also includes a DVD with video recording of the walks with André in the streams called *Dilúvio* (2002) and *Duro*, in *Camaquã* (2003). The title refers to an important moment for Areal, which was the walk in the *Dilúvio*. For us, throughout

the whole cycle of Areal, that encounter in the waters of the *Dilúvio* was a symbol of the project, for it was a cathartic gesture in all the distress that dominated the early stage of Areal. The publication of that book was a dream we had for years, of producing a publication about Areal itself and presenting it with that name, *Dilúvio*, with all it evokes. It was symptomatic that, after the first two years of Areal, we needed to walk in a stream that drains urban sewage between the two lanes of one of the busiest avenues in Porto Alegre. Despite the common view about the *Dilúvio*, we found out that down below we couldn't hear the sounds of the avenue and, despite all degradation, the sound of running water was pleasant. Except for the smell, the light intensified by the reflection on sandbanks and concrete banks, along with the movement of birds and fish, make the *Dilúvio*'s bed a pleasant place. Only those who look at it from the top and contact it through the image contextualized in the avenue could only call the *Dilúvio* a "no-place". There's a real place down there. I remember feeling relieved by all the tension preceding the walk, I found the enthusiasm of a youthful adventure again – it was exciting and liberating to live that unplanned experience as a work (until now, we have not seen it that way). I think that relinquishing control and framings, a leap in the dark in life and in art was the great adventure of Areal. The walk in the *Dilúvio* was a gesture of disenchantment that ended up restoring hope; it was a recharge of energy. I remember that the day after the walk, I ran to André's place to see the video footage recorded by Paula Krause and Alexandre Moreira. I dreamed of seeing the image of those two people as I saw a pair of herons one day, standing face to face on the stream. The herons suggested me that that place existed, that it was not just an image. In the video, we appear as awkward astronauts, walking and talking under a current of cars totally unnoticed by us. I started carrying some pictures of the walk in the *Dilúvio* in my purse and I occasionally peeked in just to feel the wave of excited enthusiasm they produced in me; I had no name for what I felt and I had no name for what we did, since we didn't consider it a work. One day, at a bus stop, I looked at the pictures and decided to ask a boy who was also waiting there if he could tell me what he saw in the photographs. "It's two people", he said. "And what do you think they're doing?" I asked. He looked at the pictures again and said, "They're talking".

I was very excited! At that time I had that idea of the body as a capsule containing everything needed to invent anything – from art to solutions to everyday problems. *Dilúvio* showed that the capsules could build the impossible: two friends talking on a sewage bed. That's why we wanted to present Areal's story through this conversation located beyond art and social and authorial interests, free from intellectualism... A not-knowing, almost a not-wanting that drove the early years of the project. The *Dilúvio* would lend a lens to look and rethink Areal eight years later, releasing the book and sharing the videos of the two walks was a very special landmark for us (in my opinion, that in the Duro stream was one of the most beautiful moments of Areal).

The six years working with Ana Flávia, in the adventure described in the book *A Estrada que Não Sabe de Nada* (2011), comprised an experience that gained substance, direction and feature very slowly. This slowness was intentional, a slowdown to the point of setting a crack that opened up more and more, swallowing the everyday life that used to compress our space of freedom and creation. We felt we had to let time run, not understanding what our roles would be with the groups of people we were meeting, not assuming, not projecting and not presuming anything before being and staying in a situation for a long time. We crossed places we didn't know, working intensely with a universe that was new to both of us and from which we came to think that we would never be disconnected – so intense the relations were. Particularly for me, *A Estrada que Não Sabe Nada* was very different from previous experiences. You ask me about partnership and the idea of co-authorship is indirectly involved in it. By this time, in Eldorado, I already knew I wanted to work in partnerships to protect myself from the vices of an authorial practice that result into personal artistic results. I found my longtime friend Ana as the ideal partner to share a long stage of artistic unlearning. I think we also gained more precise political awareness of the responsibility of relationships and partnerships that are available in experiences that are real at all levels – or which should be real at all levels. In Eldorado we didn't have "partners in art", but rather friends and acquaintances with whom we coexisted and interacted for the love of sharing stories or the need to solve problems – such as what to do with a pony received as a raffle prize when you live in an apartment... When we

decided to publish the book, we had been in Eldorado for three years; I wrote most of the text because Ana already had a school-age child and became pregnant with her second, so I took over most of the writing and she took care of the images and accompanied artist and designer Rosana Almendares in creating the heart of the book. I see *A Estrada* almost as a manifesto of how we can successfully create a micro-society of people rather than individuals. Perhaps this contributes to the fact that many people say they are touched by the story, whether when they listened to readings sessions, accompanied by Fernando who played Brazilian viola live or when they read the novel.

EV:

Something that was not evident in other narratives appears in *Histórias de Península e Praia Grande*: although each chapter is dated, different periods overlap all the time, in shuffling oscillation. The themes of passage of time, the different dimensions of time, and distortions of memory are evident here – perhaps more than in other works. Were those issues dear to you at the time the story was built?

MHB:

Then I began to try another way of writing. I wanted the text to encompass lived experience, showing that it had many more layers than the ones we perceive in the present time of a place. I kept a language close to chronicle – transparent as a window – but at the same time I tried to translate a feeling that I associate with the Brazil's southern coast: that impression that everything is transformed by cycles of redundancy and that whatever stands will inevitably collapse – ruin is an important character in the book, it's at Maravilhas, in the lighthouse isolated in the Lagoon, in the stories of the so-called Hell Road...). I wanted chronicles that embraced memories of others and my own, which talked about both the present and past of that place. I put myth and testimonial experience together and I saw that all the accounts are ghostly... At some point, narratives overflow that inapprehensible landscape, which escapes us even when we are immersed in it.

EV:

About Morro da Borússia Observatory, I'd like you to comment

on that change of support: from book format to a website.⁸ What were the motivations and what do you can produce?

MHB:

The idea of an Observatory began with my brother Júlio Bernardes, who is a partner in the little ranch we shared with Ana Flávia's family, in the Osório Hill. He teaches Philosophy at UNISC's campus in Capão da Canoa and, over the years, he was introduced to the lake network, *tropeiros'* stops (now towns), indigenous and quilombola [slave descendants] strongholds scattered along the chain of hills between Santo Antônio da Patrulha and Torres. Júlio was the one who suggested we bought the ranch on the hill when Ana and I needed a place to house the ponies that had to leave Eldorado. We moved there in 2012 with the ponies, and it soon became clear that the region was very vulnerable to real estate speculation; local farmers were enjoying the wave of bank financing to sell their land and sometimes they did not follow the minimum limit for fractioning land (the Osório Hill is an Environmental Protection Area). Speculation was advancing along the freshwater shoreline below and there were rumors that soon it would take over the hill. I was particularly distressed by that, imagining the ecological and symbolic damage ahead. The world up there is almost invisible to other regions the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The natives of the hill descend from the Xokleng Indians, and German, Italian, Russian and Azorean immigrants as well as from Brazilians from the Northeast and from São Paulo – because of "tropeirism" that left a very particular vocabulary still alive among farmers of Caráa, Maquiné, Três Forquilhas, Osório, Itati and Santo Antônio. Their cuisine has dishes that no one would call "regional" in Rio Grande do Sul, such as *rosquetes*, *paçoca de pinhão* and *corn couscous*, steamed in a couscous maker – it's amazing that I bought a couscous maker in Recife; I never imagined that I could find them in Osório markets! We realized that a wave of real estate speculation on the hill would erase a way of life unknown outside, so my brother suggested that we created a Socio-Environmental Observatory to strengthen the hill's environmental and human heritage and encourage resistance to disappearance. Júlio introduced us to a network of activists working on ecology, immigrants' memory recovery, rural

8. Available at <http://observatorioborussia.org.br/projeto/>.

feminism, and protection of indigenous people. Many people collaborated with the Observatory. Establishing a conventional observatory would require an enterprise involving certain rules and technologies that could compromise the freedom for approximation of contents I wanted. So we decided to call the website an "observatory of sensitivities" because, since this model didn't exist, we could work freely to produce an informal website that included narratives from several dimensions of reality, from "historical" facts to ghosts. The Morro da Borússia Sensitivity Observatory was selected for a FAC-RS grants in 2013. I produced the content generated by research with contribution from partners (Júlio Bernardes, Ana Flávia Baldisserotto, Fernando Mattos, Cida Herock, Débora Dutra, Danielle Engrazzia and Paula Krause) in workshops, executive production, image capture and editing, music tracks, statistical surveys, and graphic design.

One aspect that mobilized me to do this strong immersion in research was the unique identity of our coast in the Brazilian context – I think only [the Brazilian state of] Amapá's is more peculiar than ours, with salt beaches in the middle of the Amazon region!.

I have always been troubled by the way people from Rio Grande do Sul relate to the sea by turning their backs on the water. In Areal we had already explored the southern coast, where livestock are found on the shoreline and there are almost no fishermen... I found out that the Indians who lived in the state's north and northeast, the XoKleng, were bad swimmers and couldn't make boats because they weren't related to "big water"... Is this heritage reflected in the way Porto Alegre relates to Lake Guaíba? Or Rio Grande do Sul's residents, in general, to the coast? It has been a delightful work to look for accounts about that feeling of strangeness, that lack of intimacy with the sea – which, I think, is not justified by climate and topography, for there are fisherfolk living in conditions that are much more hostile than ours. For five years, thanks to the ponies, part of my life has been associated with the mountain and coastal culture of the north of the state. It's a whole different world. As for the format of the website, I did not think of it as a new poetic possibility; I don't feel especially attracted to the virtual world, although I love the possibility of democratizing knowledge.

The website seemed to be the most functional and

accessible tool to publicly share the contents we collected. Lilian Maus, who comes from Osório, told me that the Observatory is a live reference for some education, agriculture and cultural activism centers in the region since it is used by people. I'm very happy about it and I'm still researching to feed it again.

EV:

Finally, I would like you to comment on the relationship between your work as an artist and your activities as a teacher. Do you perceive them as very different things or there are similarities between them?

MHB:

I think the principles that guide me as an artist and the way I see art in life, in society, are present for those who attend my classes, but I want to relativize my opinions and publicly acknowledge that I see art and what it might represent for different people, communities and times as open and mobile. Other than that, as an artist I currently see few exhibitions, I'm very careful with the melancholic effect that art places have on me. I'm not enthusiastic about the lazy way in which our society produces and presents art; I'm not open to these fatalistic discourses that impose the world of cultural events – the boxes... – as naturalized places for art. This defines a specific audience for art that doesn't excite me either; people with very similar profiles, who conform a devitalized environment, rhetorical eugenics I think. So, since most art takes place under such conditions, it mobilizes me very little. My daily life does not include "what I'm going to do today as an artist" – I live, plant, get involved with things at the ranch, which I like very much, the house garden... and they give me repertoire and motivation to work. And, of course I'm always attentive to everything they tell me and other personal statements that mobilize me. As a teacher, I forget this apathy towards the social structure of art and I try to extract the most powerful thing I can find in the works and artists I present – and there are lots of nice things that I can find and even enjoy as a teacher. I always try to present art contents through a well-woven human and social context, making connections with the life lived by the people and collectives related to what we are studying. As in my personal work in class, I try to provide

a narrative that creates pleasure and engagement and that causes people to desire to get closer to that field of doubt, freedom and pleasure that is how I try to present art to them.

Maria Helena Bernardes: is an artist and a teacher. She co-authored the Areal Project and created the Morro da Borússia Sensitivities Observatory. Her books, essays and chronicles revolve around artistic experiences, oral narratives, reflections on art and adventures shared with other artists. Her publications include *Histórias de Península e Praia Grande/Arranco*, *Dilúvio*, *Ensaio*, *A Estrada que Não Sabe de Nada*, *Em Torno de Nadja*, *Pequenas Crônicas à Distância e Daqui Mesmo* and *A Praia*.

Eduardo Ferreira Veras: is an art critic and historian. He also works as an independent curator. As an Adjunct Professor at the UFRGS Institute of Arts, where he teaches and advises research studies in the Graduate Program in Visual Arts and in the School of Art History. His work focuses on art historiography and criticism in contemporary times, relations between word and image, artists in displacement, and interviews with artists. He is a member of the Brazilian Art History Committee and the Deliberative Council of the Vera Chaves Barcellos Foundation.

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