

## Artists in Conversation - Cao Guimarães and Marilá Dardot<sup>1</sup>



My earliest memory of Cao Guimarães is of a tall guy, a bit scruffy and very charming, who would always show up wearing slippers to our philosophy class at the Federal University of Minas Gerais in Belo Horizonte. He was a philosophy major; I was attending the course out of curiosity, as I was majoring in communications. That must have been sometime in 1995. He was already an artist; I did not yet know that I would become one.

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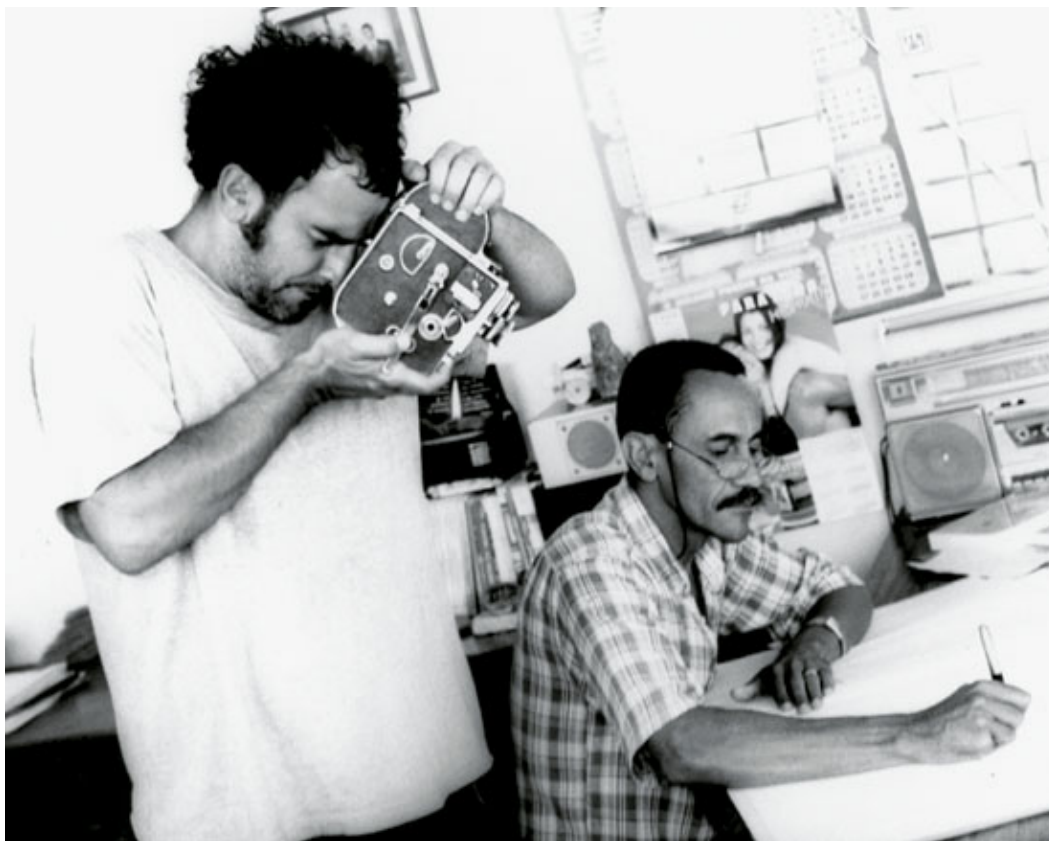
<sup>1</sup> Published by Bomb Magazine in 2008. The interview is available in:  
<<http://bombmagazine.org/article/3042/cao-guimar-es-and-maril-dardot>>.

We became friends then, I don't remember how—through mutual friends, or at some party, or during the long nights we'd spend talking in Belo Horizonte bars.

Since the late '80s, Guimarães has been producing his artwork using photography, film, books, and installations. He's well traveled and has shown his work at the Tate Modern, the Guggenheim, Gasworks, and the Frankfurter Kunstverein. His films have been shown at major festivals: Sundance, Rotterdam, Tampere, Cannes.

My own art production began a decade later, at the end of the 1990s, and went back and forth among installations, videos, books, and objects. I've shown my work in several venues in Brazil, including the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo and the Aloísio Magalhães Museum of Modern Art in Recife. In 2006, I participated in the 27th São Paulo Biennial, and this year I took art in the exhibition "Luz ao Sul," the São Paulo–Valencia Biennial in Spain.

I began this conversation thinking about fiction, something my work and Guimarães's have in common, but in the course of the exchange we found many more similarities between our processes: how we think about art, how we think about the Other.... Time, chance, death, and dislocation are a few of the interests we share.



Cao Guimarães, *O Fim do Sem Fin* (The End of the Endless), 2001, color digital video, 92 minutes.

**Marilá Dardot** Here I am, trying to figure out how to begin this conversation, and it occurs to me that it would be easier to talk about life than about art. To tell you the truth, I'm not too interested in art per se. Art only works when it manages to throw me around, far or near, forward or backward, sometimes a bit sideways: when I look at myself and I look at the other one in the mirror; when perception wanders along strange roads and overflows, when time becomes muddled and anxiety disappears. What matters then is not art, but the roads that lead to it and the places where art, in turn, leads us.

In the end, or rather, in the beginning, I find that creating art is only a way to understand all of that, and to try to change its configuration a bit: the configuration of time, the real, love, and solitude. And as you have said: everything begins by accident. Some will call that beginning a creative process, as if art were the goal. I'd rather call it desire. Or, like you, necessity.

I thus begin our conversation with a question about *Histórias do Não Ver* (Stories of Not-Seeing). Rereading your book—which was delightful and transported me elsewhere—I stumbled upon the word *estória* (story). I remembered from my childhood the awareness that in Portuguese we had two words — *estória* (story) and *História* (history), the latter with all the power that the capital H signaled—and that they were opposites. *Estória* was fiction, an invention, what my father would tell me at bedtime. “That’s a tall tale,” we’d say about nonsense and idle chatter. *História* was what we learned in school; it was the truth, and preferable to the word *estória*. I don’t remember exactly when I learned that one should not write the word *estória*, but I do remember that I reflected a lot on the matter. I stopped using the word *estória*, and everything became *história* (with an uppercase or lowercase H)—or, even better, everything became fiction.

In your book, both words are there, *Histórias* is in the title and *estória* too, as in when you heard “about the wedding traditions in particular regions of Muslim countries.” Then I was confused. Did I dream that I was not supposed to write *estória*? When did I realize the absolute impossibility of distinguishing between the two terms?

I consulted the *Dicionário Aurélio*: I found the entry for *estória*, which read:

“*Feminine noun*. See also: *história*.” It turns out that the recommended spelling for the word is *história*, and that the term applies to both the field of history and a fictional

narrative or popular story. A certain João Ribeiro proposed the adoption of the term *estória* in 1919 to designate popular narratives and traditional stories for scholarly work in the field of folkloric studies. The distinction was adopted but went beyond the limits of folklore, especially after João Guimarães Rosa published his book *Primeiras Estórias* in 1962. And so both of us grew up with that dichotomy, which attempted to distinguish “reality” from “fiction,” as if that were possible. I was very relieved when I saw the possibility denied by *Dicionário Aurélio* and by our language, which, in contrast to English, does not distinguish between *story* and *history*.

But, to go back to your stories, you translated your book title as *Stories of Not-Seeing*. That’s a good topic for the beginning of our conversation.



Cao Guimarães, *O Fim do Sem Fim* (The End of the Endless), 2001, color digital video, 92 minutes.

**Cao Guimarães** *Istória da carochinha* (fairy tale). *Istória pra boi dormir* (tall tale). *Istória do Brasil* (the history of Brazil). The “Master of Masters” (the main character in my film *The End of the Endless*, 2001) told me we should write the way we speak. And so we should drop the H and write *istória* instead of *história*, the way it’s pronounced. What you point out is quite interesting because it shows how a language can sometimes become bureaucratic, ignoring actual speech, the vernacular. In other words, the correct, erudite form of a language is often a piece of fiction. The actual body of language is like a gigantic amoeba that is constantly changing. It can never be

apprehended in its totality. But, since language is one of the components that defines a nation, a group of people, customs, and habits, and since human beings need these distinctions, we started to create limits and moorings for that body. Language is like mercury. It cannot be harnessed into a single form. The same goes for reality, and by extension, for history. There is no such thing as a single reality or an objective history, whether from a single viewpoint or infinite ones.

I am not interested in limits that generate a single form. On the contrary, I'm interested in the movement and/or processes that the body of the large amoeba undergoes. Art, as a language, and in contrast to what we want from languages, cannot have a final state. Art connects with universals and not simply the particularity of a certain people or culture.

My book *Stories of Not-Seeing* consists of experiences told through images and words. Experiences and realities prompted by a device—to be “kidnapped” by other people, blindfolded, and taken to places where I then registered my sensorial impressions with “blind photographs” and written narratives. Even though I was the one who began the process, the detonating agent, that is, the one who “cast the dice and left it to chance” and who went through the experience of being kidnapped, this process is shared—with the kidnapper and the reader of the book.

There's an interaction between the agents of the process and those undergoing it, an exchange of roles and values. The artist is no longer the only creative agent. The “kidnapper,” inasmuch as he creates a reality for the artist to experience, is also a creative agent. The reader of the book, the so-called spectator, becomes active in unveiling the realities that hide behind those images and texts, and mainly in establishing the relationship between them.

This type of participation also happens in a significant way in other pieces I've produced, such as the installation-film *Rua de mão dupla* (Two-Way Street), in which I ask people to switch homes. Both in *Stories for Not-Seeing* and in *Two-Way Street* I have a desire to share an experience, a reality that can be an action, an environment, or even a film or a book.

I see the same in your work when you prepare a sharing environment such as a library (which you call the *Library of Babel*), when you invite others to participate in “the process of building a dialogue” in your piece *Between Us*, or even in the reading of a book like Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (Hopscotch) in your installation of the same name.

I think about two issues that we both engage: What is the role of chance in your work and in your life in general? And what about the role of the Other?



Cao Guimarães, *Rua de Mão Dupla* (Two-Way Street), 2004, color digital video, 75 minutes.

**MD** Perhaps my entire life has been built around a series of chance occurrences. Fortuitous encounters, unexpected events, accidents. I never planned my life very much; I never thought of who I would become “when I grew up.” But I always liked taking chances. I intuitively took risks in those situations that chance had put me in and was open to experiences that had the power to unsettle me, to open up other possibilities. I also learned to accept events that seemed bad, treating them as possibilities for change rather than as losses. I learned that a problem is something that sets us in motion, it’s life. And so I find that chance is important for me as long as I remain attentive to it, because in that way I can affirm it. For, as Gal Costa vigorously sang, “é preciso estar atento e forte” (you have to be attentive and strong). There’s a beautiful passage in Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* that talks about the affirmation of chance in the encounters between the characters Horacio Oliveira and Maga:

The technique was to make a vague date in some neighborhood at a certain hour. They liked to challenge the danger of not meeting, of

spending the day alone sulking in a café or on a park bench, reading—another-book.... They would agree to meet there and they almost always found each other. The meetings were so incredible at times that Olivera once more brought up the problem of probability and examined the case cautiously from all angles.... What for him had been analysis of probabilities, choice, or simply faith in himself as a dowser, for her was simple chance. “And what if you hadn’t met me?” he would ask her. “I don’t know, but you’re here, you see.” (Translated by Gregory Rabassa)

Maybe I learned that from Maga: that chance matters as an opening, so that something may happen; whatever led to it doesn’t matter much, and the “What if you hadn’t?” doesn’t exist. Like her, I like saying, Yes.

The way I work is chaotic, and it always begins by accident. I write down ideas, phrases, I highlight books; but none of this is very systematic until a concrete idea appears. I go on living, absorbing, observing, feeling, exchanging. At a certain point, the work reveals itself as a result of anxiety, a problem, insomnia, issuing from a certain material or a retained image, a conversation. That’s where the daily work of completion really begins. This can be short or long, as it was with the installation *Rayuela* (Hopscotch, 2005), which took me a year.

Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* begins with a proposal: “In its own way, this book consists of many books, but two books above all.” Cortázar invites the reader to choose one of the two possibilities by reading the book linearly or by leaping between chapters following the alternative order he proposes.

The installation *Hopscotch* presents another possible way of reading the novel: most of the book’s text was digitally suppressed by me except for the sentences in which I found motion verbs and the page and chapter numbers. I wanted to propose a reading that would show the movement in the text, which, for me, constitutes the structure of the book, in keeping with the game of hopscotch. The installation encourages the viewer to move within the exhibition space, reading passages at random. What happens in between these dislocations is imagined and lived by others.

Like you, through my work I want to establish a relationship of complicity with the

other, the viewer, the participant. An instance of sharing, an exchange, a dialogue. I believe that our relationships with others are what constitute us, both in art and in life. In 2006 I invited some friends to play a game of dice with letters. There weren't many rules: simply to spell words using the letters revealed after the 13 dice had been cast. It was provocative, in showing the way a dialogue is constructed on the basis of what players are given by chance, by the circumstances. The games were always played in pairs, recorded, and shown simultaneously on 13 monitors in the installation *Between Us*.

The piece takes place in two stages: an intimate one happens when people agree to play the game I'm proposing, and consequently agree to behave, feel, and think about the situation they are experiencing. This also happens with you and your kidnapper in *Stories for Not-Seeing* or with the people who switch homes in *Two-Way Street*. The other level, which is more public, is the installation itself, which makes room for a certain violation of that intimacy when its viewer observes the thought process of the other when constructing each word. The viewer becomes a third player: he or she also tries to spell out words, imagines the possible ones that have not been spelled out. This happens too with the viewer who begins to decode the signs of the homes that appear in your *Two-Way Street*, or the reader who becomes an active participant by establishing the connections between words and images in *Stories for Not-Seeing*.

I see there is indeed a confluence in our procedures. Perhaps that is our way of experiencing what our projects provoke in others, and also the way in which others modify them, sometimes also provoking changes in us. I remember your last and unexpected kidnapping: it subverts the rule in a way that interests me. In the beginning, you didn't know that that kidnapping was a game, a joke, just like the others. The situation seemed to escape your control.

I find also that we both use procedures involving game situations, the establishment of rules. What is it that interests you about games? What is the role of chance in *your* work and in *your* life in general?





Marilá Dardot, *Entre Nós* (Between Us), 2006, frames from videos.

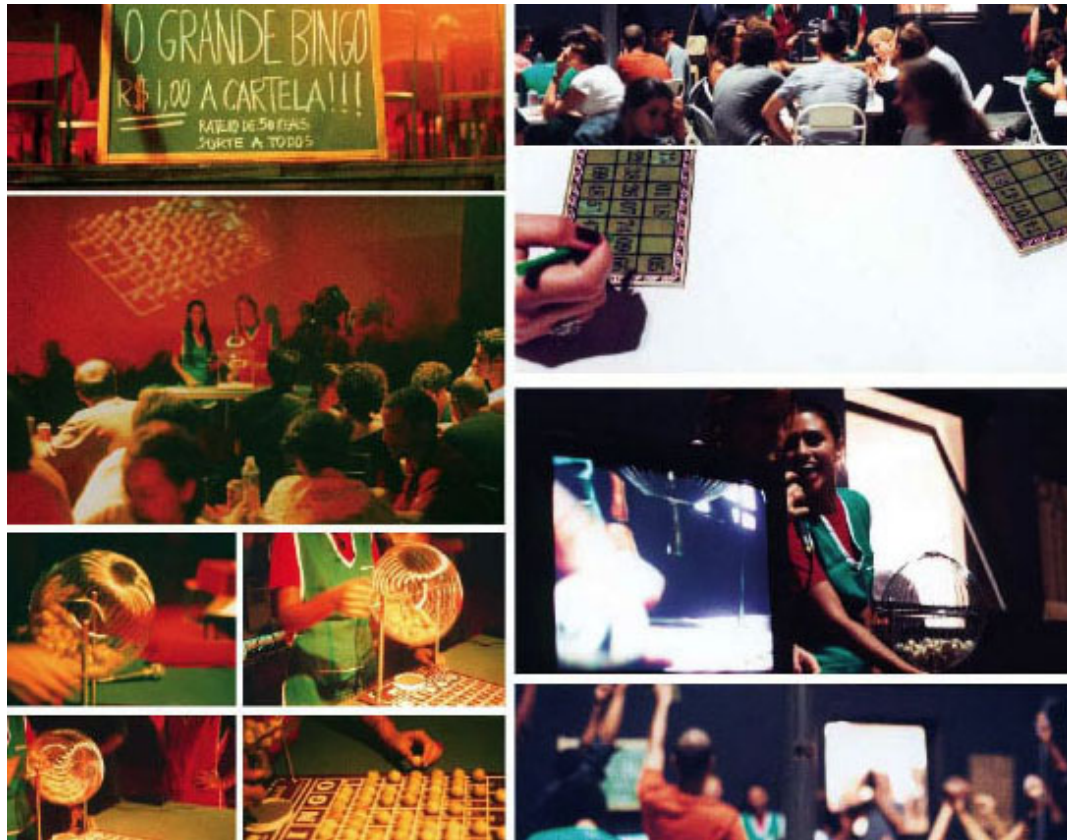
**CG** Games are at the core of any social relation. Games and lies. When we run into someone we ask, almost immediately, mindlessly, “How are you?” and we hear, almost automatically too, “Fine, thanks!” Both you and the other will instinctively affirm a false state of well-being in order to establish contact (at least in the beginning). We need to lie about our real state in order not to “scare” the other away. We need rules for social interaction, and the social fabric (which is also constantly changing) also needs rules in order to preserve a certain state, a way of life. But rules, like games, get old; they can’t keep up with social transformations. That’s why it’s necessary to lose control, almost to force a lack of control in order to reinvent rules as well as games.

When I invent a game, I’m interested in other forms of perceiving reality. I’m not interested in games as competition. I like my games to be open, games in which all participants have something to win. Not in the sense of victory, but in the sense of evolution. Generally, participants take part voluntarily and willingly. More than

participating, they offer themselves. They are courageous, in the sense that they open up their lives, their homes, their time, because they know they're participating in an experiment propitiating a lack of control, which means coming into contact with a world different from their own.

As is the case with most games, reason and chance play key roles in their development. But when the goal is not to win, you don't have to think too much; on the contrary, this allows for your porousness to emerge and, in turn, for a better absorption of the experience. When partially liberated from reason (in order to enter the space of games), you allow chance to become the helmsman of the situation. Albert Camus has a wonderful phrase on the subject: "Chance is the God of reason." Reason as the intrinsic and qualifying feature of the human race (and generally used incorrectly in order to affirm the superiority of the species) is subjected to another element, much more flexible and mysterious, and thus seductive: chance.

*Andarilho* (Drifter), my last feature film, deals precisely with something that touches upon this discussion—the relationship between walking and thinking. In contrast to Descartes, my phrase would be, "I walk, therefore I think!" I am a walker; I prefer walking to any other form of transportation. When I am walking, my thoughts wander aimlessly. I once began to try (in the second part of the walk) to go backward to recall my train of thought and discover the associations that had led me to think what I had thought at the moment of walking forward. It is really a fascinating exercise! I then thought about making a film about drifters, people who simply spend their life walking. If I, a domesticated, big-city walker, already notice my thoughts wandering in such a delirious way when I walk, imagine what happens to those who spend their lives walking! And, when I made the film and had contact with its characters, I felt the force of chance in their lives. One of the walkers, when arriving at the crossing of two highways (one leading to the country's north and the other to the south), told me that he didn't think much about the direction he should take, but that he simply followed intuition and chance. The same thing happens in our own heads when we are walking. How many ethereal roads, how many crossroads must a thought come upon until it takes shape? The gray matter of the brain, the gray matter of asphalt, surfaces, and labyrinths that both feet and thoughts go through. Are you interested in going somewhere or is dislocation what really matters?



Marilá Dardot and Cinthia Marcelle, *O Grande Bingo* (The Great Bingo), 2005. Installation views at Alfândega, Rio de Janeiro, and Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo, Brazil. Photos: Cinthia Marcelle, Marilá Dardot and Matheus Rocha Pitta.

**MD** I thought of a funny story that has a lot to do with our conversation about games. In 2003, Cinthia Marcelle and I created a piece called *O Grande Bingo* (The Great Bingo): It was a performance/game that seemingly works like any other bingo. The players each buy a card with 17 numbers for R\$1.00. Each player can buy only one card. The game begins: we call the numbers according to the balls drawn from the cage; at the same time, a close-up of the hand with the ball appears on the screen. When the card is filled, *bingo!*—everyone wins at the same time, because all the cards have the same numbers, except that they are printed in a different order. All the players get a prize which is the same amount raised by the card sales divided by the number of winners, that is, R\$1.00. *The Great Bingo* was carried out twice and on both occasions we were able to enjoy what was happening when the players realized that they all had the same numbers. They continued to play all the same, even more excited than before, and joyous when the moment of the shared victory arrived. The funny story is as follows: I was speaking with another artist, and he asked me about “that bingo game you did in which *no one wins.*” I was shocked, because for me and

Cinthia, and I believe that for the participants too, it was a game in which *everyone won*. In his statement, the force of a capitalist paradigm was obvious: it is as if *winning* always meant to have an advantage over others, never being in a position of equality.

Games create a situation that reveals one to oneself and to the other, as well as the relationship that is established and the context itself in which we are immersed. That's how I saw the game of dice in *Between Us*, the silent crossword puzzle in *Movimento das Ilhas* (Movement of the Islands); and also how Cinthia and I saw the game of bingo.

About dislocation: In my life I've always been guided by intuition, like the drifter in your film. Intuition is a way of being attentive to what happens, to bet on chance and the unknown. What is interesting about these detours, changes in course, departures and returns is that, after a while, they always reveal themselves to have been motivated by reasons other than those I had thought guided my choice. Or better yet, other than those that I had come up with to rationally justify a certain choice at a certain time. For me, dislocation didn't have an ultimate goal, its motive was change itself. And that's why I don't think about *where to go*, I think about *where I am*.

I remember choosing to write my first essay for a philosophy class on the figure of the wanderer. It began with a quotation by Nietzsche: "He who has come only in part to a freedom of reason cannot feel on earth otherwise than as a wanderer—though not as a traveler toward a final goal, for this does not exist. But he does want to observe, and keep his eyes open for everything that actually occurs in the world; therefore he must not attach his heart too firmly to any individual thing; there must be something wandering within him, which takes its joy in change and transitoriness."

The video *Hic et nunc* (Here and Now) that I produced in 2002 deals a bit with being open to the present and to change as part of my work process. Rosalind Krauss defines the verbs in Richard Serra's *Verb List* of 1967–68 as machines that are able to build his work. *Hic et nunc* was my set of machines. I began making my own list of verbs, which included the verbs *to forget*, *to dialogue*, *to err*, *to play*, *to move*, and again, *to forget*. Each of the 72 verbs on the list was written by my right hand on a whiteboard and then erased by my left hand: I write *to forget*, then I erase; I write *to experiment*, then I erase; I write *to multiply*, then I erase; I write *to want*, then I erase;

and so on, until I arrive once more at *to forget*. The video that records this process is played in a loop and projected onto the same whiteboard.

Today, five years later, I am still finding that my work process is guided by that fleeting quality, by that close attention to the present, without any pre-established forms or rules. It is made new every day. And the verbs change from day to day.

What is the process like for you?



Cao Guimarães, *Historias do Nao Ver* (Stories of Not-Seeing), 1998, book and video installation.

CG The other day I met an ex-classmate at the airport. It had been 30 years since we had last seen each other. To my surprise, she told me she remembered me as a good student, always walking around with a battered bookbag. I told her that I was never a good student and that appearances can be deceiving. I was always too lazy to complete assignments and fulfill duties, especially the ones I had no interest in. *Ócio*, the Portuguese word for *idleness* (from the Greek *scholé*), is derived from the word *school*. The day I found that out I felt a kind of confirmation of what I intuitively had been practicing from the time I was a schoolboy. One of the foundations of my work process is idleness.

I could thus say that one of the “machines” that can build my work is not a verb but a noun designating a state of being. At least in the beginning. Before acting one has to let oneself be overtaken by the desire to act, one has to let oneself be won over by that willingness. And I feel “willingness” as a kind of cloud or atmospheric coating that slowly begins to envelop my being; it generally appears when I’m comfortable, that is, when I’m available and open to the arrival of this willingness.

The “school” of idleness, contrary to what it might seem, especially in the world we live in, doesn’t easily grant diplomas. It’s what society rejects the most, because if the word “school” has acquired a positive meaning in modern society, the word “idleness” goes completely against what it values. The “idler” has become synonymous with “bum,” which negates the etymological nobility of the Greek word. Being idle means being open to knowledge. There’s a difference between “not doing anything” and “doing nothing.” When I’m “doing nothing,” I’m dealing with an absolute, Nothingness (a divine word!). When “I’m not doing anything,” I’m doing whatever, I’m a useful being to a society that privileges, precisely, “whatever.”

This suggests the old idea of the uselessness of art. To make a piece of bread and to paint a piece of bread. Between the verbs *to make* and *to paint*, there’s a noun, *bread*, which needs to be eaten. Which of the two breads is more nutritious—the one eaten by the mouth or the one eaten by the eyes? When I’m eating bread, I’m clearly delaying my death, but when I see a painting of bread, wouldn’t I be learning how to die better? To do Nothing, wouldn’t that be learning how to die?

After this entire discussion, I’ve arrived at a phrase that could be written on my tombstone: “I spent my Life producing Nothing in order to learn how to Die.” I know

that it's worth nothing but at least it's something.... There's yet another verb I would add to this "verbal machinery of the construction of a work": to die.



Cao Guimarães, *The End of the Endless*, 2001.

Because I think about death as transformation. One of my first films is entitled *Between— Inventário de pequenas mortes* (Inventory of Small Deaths). What follows is a brief text that I wrote on this work and that reveals my conception of death:

We are used to talking about one death only. As if the limit of one life were bounded on one side by birth and on the other by death. In case we begin to widen the concept of death, we will vertiginously deduce that it is present in everything, in each micro-particle of one life and that its boundaries are expandable. The limits are precisely this place where death and life mix together in the tenuous expressiveness of change. Millions of cells die in our bodies every second, we fill and empty our lungs with air every second. Between is the place and the moment of the passage. It separates what is inside from what is

outside, what passes from what remains, what goes through from what is left.

Another verb in your verbal inventory that is crucial to my work process is “to err.” I could almost affirm that I only get things right when I make mistakes! Because nothing shakes up certainties more efficiently than mistakes. And certainties are the things that most harden the human soul. Certainties trap our souls, they leave us without the desire to try different things, without access to newness. To make mistakes is to be free, to open the gamut of possibilities. When we give up certainties we liberate our being so that it may reinvent itself.

Finally behind these three powerful forces that permeate my work process—idleness, death, and mistakes (interestingly, three things considered deplorable in any factory or modern school, which proves that art has nothing in common with capitalist production, profitability, or whatever *is* learned in school)—there is a fourth latent and omnipresent force: movement!

Idleness, death, and mistakes generate movement. Idleness as the ability to absorb willpower and desire. Death as transformation. Mistakes as freedom of expression and the search for the new. Movement is life itself, a constant fluidity, a river that, while appearing the same, is nevertheless always different.





Marilá Dardot, *A Biblioteca de Babel* (The Library of Babel), 2005. Details from installation view at Fundacio Joaquim Nabuco, Recife, Brazil.

**MD** Your letter arrived on a day I suffered a small death. I was cutting some paper and suddenly the paper knife fell from the table and buried itself in my leg. It was not a big accident—the cut was only a couple of inches and not very deep, really—but from the time I was a child, the sight of my own blood makes me faint. The prospect of fainting is always worse than the accident itself because fainting means completely losing control, assuming fragility in a very concrete way, experiencing a small death. I was at home by myself, and I tried to regain control by putting salt in my mouth. I thought I was no longer dizzy when all of a sudden I found myself on the floor. When I managed to get up, I called my boyfriend asking for help. Asking for help is not something I would have done some time ago, because I used to confuse being strong with being self-sufficient. He came over, cleaned my wound, cooked lunch for me, took care of me. That's something my work has taught me: to acknowledge that I need someone else.

I agree with you regarding the verb *to die*, in the sense that I only create something based on an event that demands or requires me to change. Often, that appears in my work as a call for help, for company. Because such experiences of death are very lonely. And to transform them into work sometimes involves wanting to share that solitude, saying, “Come, let's do this together, give me a hand.” I find that in my work I try to be optimistic, I try to learn to live better. And to live better also means to die better.

That word that is also important in my process now appeared: *solitude*. Often, in my work, I want to invoke it; at other times, I want to get away from it. I find that art is a way of balancing those two states—being together and being alone.

To speak about idleness also means to speak about time, how to deal with it. In 2004 I produced a piece called *A meia-noite é também o meio-dia* (Midnight is Also Midday). It was an apparently ordinary clock that mechanically displayed a modified, slower notation of time. In this analog clock, to make a full turn takes the hands twenty-four hours instead of the usual twelve hours. The clock, then, always shows a different time, it's sometimes slow and sometimes fast and coincides with Brazil's official time only at noon. The piece strongly affirms my will to oppose the time we

now live in—a time in which speed and productivity are our greatest goals—and all the anxiety it generates. To affirm a slower time allows for idleness, contemplation, nothingness.

I was struck by the fact that your last phrase was “A river that, while appearing the same, is nevertheless always different.” This concept, derived from Heraclitus, also appears in my first artwork, *O Livro de Areia* (The Book of Sand), from 1998.

In Borges’s short story “The Book of Sand,” he encounters an infinite book whose pages never repeat themselves. I built an object based on that text and the fragment by Heraclitus in which he argues that no man can step twice in the same river. It is a book with pages made from mirrors, the image of infinity for Borges and of becoming for Heraclitus. The reader of this book, or any other book, in fact, will never find the same meaning in its pages, even if they remain the same. It is a eulogy to movement, to life.



Marilá Dardot, *O Livro de Areia* (The Book of Sand), 1998.

*Translated by Odile Cisneros*