

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artforum

Interviews: Rivane Neuenschwander

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Mira Dayal

ARTFORUM

The artist discusses language and residues in her Art



Image: Rivane Neuenschwander, *Work of Days*, 1998/2019–20, dust on adhesive vinyl, dimensions variable. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2019. Digital Image.

Fitting that this conversation was made possible through translation: The Brazilian artist Rivane Neuenschwander's oeuvre, spanning some thirty years, is dotted with experiments in the misuse, repurposing, and dislocation of language. Our interview was anchored by the words *carta*, *residue*, and *fear*. Echoing the approach of her room-size installation *Work of Days*, 1998, which was recently on view in "Surrounds" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, this text gathers some of the threads and effects of pieces she has recently shown and plots them against the grid of her career.

The first work I made that dealt directly with the imagery or concept of the map involved snails eating rice paper. I was interested in considering the luminous traces left by the snails as a sort of writing. I built a special wooden box for them, with water and food, and lined it with Japanese rice papers. It is important to note that the paper was letter-size: The title in Portuguese for this piece is *Carta faminta* (*Starving Letters*), 2000, and the word *carta*, in Portuguese, means both letter and map. In any case, it was by accident that the snails started eating the rice paper and that the remains ended up looking like cartography. After observing the snails for a while, I started covering some areas of the paper to heighten the appearance of continents in what they didn't eat.

Work of Days, 1998, involved a different type of mapping, in the sense of projecting a space onto a surface. I conceived this piece in London, when I was a sculpture student at the Royal College of Art, a time when my house and studio merged into one. The studios were small and expensive, so the kitchen table, the carpeted floor, and the bedroom walls became the only places for my experiments. For this work, I leave the house dirty for one to two weeks, then collect dust on sheets of contact paper that will cover the surfaces of the installation's room. For the MoMA iteration, it took me three months to collect what had gathered in my house, my friends' houses, my studio, and the places I went on trips. The work's dimensions always change to adapt to the venue. The only requirement is that the proportions of a domestic space be maintained—a low ceiling and the scale of an average kitchen.

In the late '90s, my work involved simple, ephemeral materials familiar to people living in Brazil: garlic peels, ants, dried flowers, soap bubbles, spice, dust, coconut soap, water, slugs. I liked to reflect on great philosophical themes—time, mortality, God—through insignificant and somewhat invisible things. *Work of Days* in particular shows the grandiloquence and drama of small events, offering the synthesis one finds in poetry. More specifically, it alludes to Freud's idea of "day residues," Duchamp's concept of *inframince*, and the stories of Clarice Lispector. My work calls for a slowing down, a sharpening of our perception toward microscopic, sensitive events: As the dirt gets stuck between the wall and the adhesive plastic, one has the impression that time is suspended, but decay is inevitable.

By introducing dirt from their shoes, the visitor collaborates in the making of *Work of Days*. This material is cumulative, anonymous, and public, unlike the delicate constellation of remains from interior life. Contamination is very welcome, even if this leads to some level of physical deterioration in the piece. Walking through the room, the visitor scrutinizes the traces of others, all those absent or actively absented bodies, and in turn becomes attuned to their own trails, a subtle testimony to their existence.

Over the past decade, I have been making works more closely linked to politics, sexuality, and subjectivity. The latest works express the pain and indignation that accompanies life in Brazil under the current government, which relishes violence, ignorance, and hate. Some of these newer works will be presented in May at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in New York. I believe fear is fundamental to how authoritarianism takes root. Like resentment, fear can contaminate an entire society, and many regimes know how to sustain that feeling permanently. I recently read *The Third Reich of Dreams*, by German journalist Charlotte Beradt, for which she compiled the nightmares of ordinary Germans between 1933 and 1939. Their visions clearly trace the rising terror under the Nazi regime.

Language has always been important to my work. For [...], 2005, which was included in the fifty-first Venice Biennale, I presented participants with modified typewriters: The keys remain unchanged, but in the output, the alphabet is replaced by dots and symbols. We know what we are writing, but the reader cannot understand what's on the page. I thought that

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this small subversion would have resulted in people creating indecipherable messages, but visitors started building letters with the dots, restoring the power of communication.

Lately, I've been interested in the slogans found in street demonstrations around the world. In Brazil, as in many other countries, we are experiencing a certain block of political imagination, and perhaps this is directly connected to the (mis)use of language. Because we speak the same language as those we fight, our demands for rupture tend to reiterate the established modes of social determination. Vladimir Safatle, a contemporary Brazilian philosopher who has had a great influence on my practice, has updated Vladimir Mayakovsky's statement that there can be no revolutionary art without a revolutionary form, one capable of breaking the social grammar of the hegemon. In order to break it, Safatle says, we must let language collapse to make room for emerging enunciations. What is grammatically impossible to enunciate today?

— As told to Mira Dayal