

PODCAST 1: SERIES DRY EYES

BY: JORGE MENNA BARRETO

ARTIST AND HOST: JORGE MENNA BARRETO

[Vignette]

After exploring the relationship between the globe of the eye and the globe of the Earth in episode 1, we cultivated the image of the desert as an “orchard in reverse” in episode 2, as we explored the work of Brazilian poet João Cabral de Melo Neto and drought and dryness in literature. The third and final episode of this podcast series is dedicated to the visual arts. Today, we'll delve into the work of Brazilian artist Antonio Dias.

[Introduction]

Welcome to *Olho seco*: a space that connects literature, art, and the socioenvironmental crisis. I'm Jorge Menna Barreto.

Now close your eyes and imagine a strong, hot sun, a sun that burns.

*[Sophia Faustino reads the poem “O sol em Pernambuco” (The Sun in Pernambuco) by João Cabral de Melo Neto]*¹

[Sound effect: burning sun / burning trees]

(O sol em Pernambuco leva dois sóis,
sol de dois canos, de tiro repetido;
o primeiro dos dois, o fuzil de fogo,
incendeia a terra: tiro de inimigo.)
O sol, ao aterrissar em Pernambuco,
acaba de voar dormindo o mar deserto;

¹ T.N. Each poem or verse cited in the podcast transcript appears first in the original Portuguese followed by published English translations where available and if not free translations.

*dormiu porque deserto; mas ao dormir
se refaz, e pode decolar mais aceso;
assim, mais do que acender incendeia,
para rasar mais desertos no caminho;
ou rasá-los mais, até um vazio de mar
por onde ele continue a voar dormindo.*

(The sun in Pernambuco carries two suns,
a double-barreled sun that shoots non-stop;
the first of the two, the fiery rifle,
sets the earth ablaze: enemy fire.)
The sun, upon landing in Pernambuco,
has just flown, sleeping, over the deserted sea;
it slept because it was deserted; but in sleeping
it revives itself, and can take off even more ablaze;
thus, more than lighting, it sets ablaze,
or to clear more deserts along the way;
or to clear them further, until an empty sea
where it continues to fly, sleeping.

This is the beginning of the poem “O sol em Pernambuco,” (The Sun in Pernambuco) by João Cabral de Melo Neto, read by Sophia Faustino: research assistant for this podcast, but, above all, a poet.

Keep dry my eyes by the Brazilian artist Antonio Dias is the work that opens this episode. The work and title were actually conceived in English as we shall hear.

[Audio description of the artwork/soundtrack music]

There are two square panels. Each features a textured background reminiscent of a granular pattern, similar to sand or concrete. On the left side, "KEEP DRY" is written, and on the right, "MY EYES," both in white capital letters that stand out from the background. The word "DESERT" is also positioned in smaller, red letters at the top of each panel.

[Interview with Iole de Freitas]

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What is the desert doing here? Like our great poet [Cabral] it is the question of the cut. The dryness in the cut. The cut in the word. The cut in thought. Cutting what is unnecessary.

KEEP DRY / cut / MY EYES / cut / DESERT

EYES / cut / DRY

Iole de Freitas, a central figure in contemporary Brazilian art, was Antonio Dias's partner between 1970 and 1978. Her perspective helped us examine Antonio Dias's work through the lens of aridity, both as a method and as a theme.

Painted in 1968, *Keep dry my eyes* is a work of contained, lean dimensions: 50 by 100 centimeters.

[Interview with Érica Burini]

But what I found is a longer poem, it's called "Colírio," then he changes it to "Eyewash," and says "Keep my eyes dry to see what money can buy."

[Voice of Jorge Menna Barreto repeating the following as if through a megaphone]

"I keep my eyes dry to see what money can buy."

An expression formulated by Antonio Dias, spoken here by the curator Érica Burini. Érica recently conducted in-depth research on Dias' work during her fellowship at the Institute of Contemporary Art in São Paulo in 2024.

[Sound effect: cutting blade/podcast soundtrack]

Antonio Dias was born in 1944 in Campina Grande, Paraíba. He began his career as an artist in Rio de Janeiro in 1958, where he studied with printmaker Oswaldo Goeldi.

In the 1960s, Dias developed his own language, blending constructive abstraction with figurative elements. His work stood out for its innovative use of textures, reliefs, and the fragmentation of space.

A crucial milestone in Dias's career was the work *Nota sobre a morte imprevista* (Note on Unforeseen Death), 1965. A diamond-shaped canvas, it breaks with traditional formats and incorporates elements of pop aesthetics. The experience offered by the piece is fragmented and enigmatic. Charged with tension, it powerfully reflects the social conflicts of its time.

[Interview with Iole de Freitas continued]

And all of this followed the wonderful works he did in the years 1965, 67, which were the ones that sometimes had things coming out of them. These works are incredible. So, you see how [his work] changed. Shifting from something that was completely intestinal. These were guts.

This phase of Antonio Dias's work is, as Iole de Freitas describes it, "intestinal." His works graphically expose blood and organs, elements that "come out of the canvas," like a visual dissection of the occult.

Aesthetically, they resemble comic books, but without following a linear narrative. They present a visceral, raw, and violent materiality, creating a disturbing sensory experience for the viewer.

[Interview with Érica Burini continued]

He had various transformations in his work. Here in Brazil, I think the image we have of his production is of the New Figuration period [of these "intestinal" works] perhaps because these [other] works [also] date from the mid-60s, 70s too, right, these dark canvases. That's when this idea of this dryness, this aridity of language, and these words related to this lexicon, and this imaginary emerge, right, these works really draw on [his time] in Europe, right, he lived for many years in Milan, then in Germany.

In 1966, Antonio Dias went into self-exile in Paris. He had already been creating works that directly criticized the Brazilian military dictatorship.

With the political climate becoming increasingly repressive, he decided it would be wiser to leave.

In 1968, with Brazil experiencing an authoritarian period following the government signing of Ato nº 5 (Institutional Act No. 5), Dias went into exile, first in France and then Italy, where he came into contact with the *arte povera* movement.

[Sound effect: staccato strings and podcast soundtrack]

This phase represented a radical shift in his work, with a reduced color palette and a minimalist, conceptual approach including at times foregrounding the use of text.

[Interview continued]

You know it's this idea of art without the image, right? I think in this case that the lack of image is not about an idea of scarcity, just as drought and dryness can be looked at from that perspective, but rather as an idea of imagination, and I think that in this case it fits perfectly with an analysis of these works by Antonio Dias, because he talks a lot about the emptiness of these compositions.

[Interview with Iole de Freitas]

[Antonio's] work *Arid* 1968, is a painting that has, he did this a lot, black edging all around it, then an inner [much thinner] edging that is not white, but beige, then [another thin] black line. All this was his invention, along with this crazy thing he did, which were these little splashes of paint that he made, to make it look like sand. So, when he was working with this idea of the arid, he was working with this surface, which is the image, the whole time he was working with the question of the image.

[Interview with Érica Burini]

At the same time that [these works] can be read like a text, they also invite some kind of mental fulfillment, right? I think that at

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some point it is also worth talking about some of his writings where he states how much he wanted to move away from retinal art, right? And the idea of ways of seeing permeates the entire project. Because we might have the idea that retinal art, the opposite of it, would be a mental art, but it is also an art of experience, right? An experience that also comes with the body, which is also a characteristic of Antonio Dias' work.

[Sound effect: staccato strings and podcast soundtrack]

Historically, the investigation of a "non-retinal image" is linked to conceptual art. The term "non-retinal" was coined by French artist Marcel Duchamp in the early 20th century to describe images that are not formed on the retina or by simple visual stimulation.

On the contrary, Duchamp was interested in the reduction of visual stimulation as a way of creating mental stimulation in the viewer. In this sense, the art object operates as a provocative device, often lean, economical, and minimal, where words are often an ally.

Let's use this idea of an "image that doesn't form on the retina" to discuss the broader issues of this podcast. Although we have seen more and more images and witnessed more and more events that prove the scientific hypothesis that we are in an unprecedented socioenvironmental crisis, the complexity of the phenomenon eludes us as a complete image, one that forms on our retina. Its historical, multifaceted, fragmentary, and durational nature poses a challenge for the mind to conceive, grasp, and understand. And, in a way, this vision that doesn't form on the retina, to borrow an expression from conceptual art, contributes to denialism. What we don't see "with our own eyes" doesn't exist, and thus socioenvironmental problems are seen from the perspective of a political agenda, as if they were a delusion of left-wing parties.

[Sound effect: Electronic beams]

What does art have to say about this "image that doesn't form on the retina," its existence, relevance, and urgency? And how can artists and image thinkers engage in the debate on the socioenvironmental crisis? How to look, how to see?

[Interview with Érica Burini]

Antônio Dias' work always escapes these very simple ways of categorizing, let's say that he is the artist who represents the obvious imaginary of Brazil or of the Northeast. He escapes these definitions, yet, at the same time, if a wilder analogy is allowed, I think [we can define] certain strategies of survival, in quotation marks, which are like the spines of a cactus, right? Somehow learning to survive in very adverse situations.

[Interview Iole de Freitas]

What matters is the mental thread. That razor-edged thread was what he sought...So, after addressing the environment [in his work], the notion of a prison within an area, that is [in fact] not arid, it has water, [yet] it doesn't have water, [so he's saying look at] what happens, look at the hunger, and I don't know what [else], and the politics, these dominated spaces and so on. Then he does this work: *Energy*, where there's hardly anything there, just a white canvas, and *Memory* [as well]. In *Energy*, the canvas is white, with black drips [and] those little splashes. I can't stand it when people think that's the cosmos—[the work] isn't remotely friendly, there was nothing like that there. It's an image, there's paint splashes, splashes, that's it, enough.²

This strategy of Antonio Dias is what marks his career: creating a visual and conceptual vocabulary that repeats, reorganizes, and takes on new meanings in each context.

It's curious how much of this vocabulary evokes dryness, aridity, and the desert. But not just as a physical space—the desert is also a symbolic territory.

[Interview with Érica Burini]

² T.N As Iole here is referring to specific works by Antonio Dias that are relatively well known in Brazil, the translation here is adjusted slightly from the original to aid podcast listeners and transcript readers more readily understand her references.

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He creates this idea of representing the desert as this white, yellow background, with these splashes, you know this background of just one color with splashes. ["Desert"] also becomes like a word in his vocabulary that might be somewhat decipherable, but that soon after also becomes an enigma, that's not so easy to interpret which is also why he often identifies with it, right? So in this case he places the prison, [that is] the desert, inside an area that is *wet*, right? The word is there [on the canvas].

So this humidity...[that we are presented with] this idea that the prison is this island of humidity in the middle of something very dry, right, the words *desert* and *dry* appear on the work, right? There are several of these compositions that also make us think about an idea of logic.

Because, in this case, I think that this transformation of the landscape into a procedure with Antonio Dias is happening at the very moment in which the image disappears. Here, there is this subtraction, in which the image is no longer represented, say as a landscape drawing, but rather, it gains this geometric aspect. [It is rather] a project that refers to a series of images that come from a very objective world, a graph, a map, [let's say] and at the same time also gains this total diffusion, because then this landscape needs to be completed a little by the imagination, by the person who is looking.

This idea of the negative procedure is very striking in Antonio Dias' work. It starts with this annotation of negative art with the negative country. And from there this is seen, mainly by [the critic] Sérgio Martins, who develops an entire book based on this thesis that Antonio Dias' main procedure is that of removal, and not of addition.

[Sound effect: Static noise]

Subtraction / Cut / Minus / Cut / Take Away

We start from things that are very...from images that are very crystallized, because they are so familiar, but when you put them in the order of the invisible, things emerge there. It would be very interesting, imagine, to be able to capture all of Dias' images of the desert and superimpose them on one another.

You just heard the artist Letícia Ramos. This attentive focus on re-examining our relationship with the familiar also permeates Letícia's work.

Her training and experiences have led her to explore the connections between city, nature, and the perception of space. Like Dias, she encourages us to rethink the place we occupy and how our interaction with the world shapes the landscapes we see.

[Interview continued]

I think that many of the concepts that I work on in my works, in my films, such as the perception of the city, of nature, of the landscape, of man within this landscape, of man with landscape, all of this, comes a lot from the concepts of modern architecture.

[Sound effect: cutting blade]

Letícia was born in Santo Antônio da Patrulha, a city in Rio Grande do Sul, located 75 kilometers from Porto Alegre in the south of Brazil.

Central to her career, Letícia tells us, while studying architecture, she acquired a formal, three-dimensional vision of the world—a perspective that, over the years, has continued to shape her artistic work.

[Interview continued]

I generally say that, once someone has graduated from architecture school, they stay that way forever. It's a real change to your vision of things and it is also formal, because we simultaneously begin to see things in three dimensions as we are learning how to represent these things, at least in a Cartesian way. Anyway, that's another discussion, so it brings this 3D [aspect to everything].

An aspect of Letícia Ramos's work is rooted in science. Fascinated by popular science and the way humans solve everyday problems, she builds her own devices to record what our eyes can't see.

[Interview continued]

I've always been very interested in popular science, which isn't just about building things that solve everyday problems, like that encyclopedia that tells you how to make a thermometer.

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For me science comes into my life when I start to think about image forms. For example, thinking about a photographic ontology or when we think about cinematography which also involves the device, the camera, these objects, they are scientific. So, [I see the world] from a scientific perspective.

When researching optical devices in the fields of art and science, Letícia investigates other ways of seeing the world:

[Interview continued]

[So let's say] there is some issue about the city that I'm thinking about, [perhaps] thinking a little about antennas, about what this means, this electromagnetic energy. How can I record this invisible energy? How can I create an image for what is invisible? Oh, so it must be a camera, where the negative is in direct contact with the air and so on. This creates a camera design that generates an image. And that's the image. I can intuit what it's going to be in terms of form and appearance, but I really don't know [how it will turn out]. So, it's a bit of this idea that the image becomes what this invisible thing is.

Her photographs represent phenomena largely constructed by the imagination, expanding the boundaries of visual reality and inviting us to question what we really see.

[Interview continued]

The photographs both try to represent an image of something that is invisible and represent something that comes from an imaginary construction of what that thing might be or of a recording of a phenomenon, which is, in fact, somewhat performative.

So these photographs, in general, in the case of my art production, are unique, they are photograms, they completely go against the idea of reproducibility. Sometimes, the camera doesn't even exist. So, everything that's connected to this more classical concept of photography doesn't exist in my work. Sometimes there's no negative, there's just paper and light. So, I like trying to find these paths for this expanded photography as well.

Think of photography as matter, not as this idea of an image that we already have crystallized as to what a photograph is.

[Podcast soundtrack]

The climate crisis is one of the biggest issues of our time. As scientists warn about global warming and biodiversity loss, this episode asks:

[Voice of Jorge Menna Barreto speaking the following as if through a megaphone]

What is the role of artists in this scenario?

For Indian writer Amitav Ghosh: "The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture and, therefore, of the imagination."

[Interview with Cristina Freire. Jorge and Cristina walking]

Cris: Come smell it, it's emperor jasmine. Oh, with the rain it... At night you'll see.

Jorge: Guys, what perfume is that?

Cris: It's emperor jasmine. You'll see it at night.

Jorge: Wow, it's very... I've never smelled that perfume before. Look, a beautiful jacaranda tree.

Cris: That's the first tree I planted. It was given to me by a friend. This is the first time it's blooming. A mimosa jacaranda. It's beautiful.

In October 2024, I visited my friend Cristina Freire at her farm, Sítio Jatobá, in São Luiz do Paraitinga, in the interior of the state of São Paulo.

[Sound effect: dogs barking]

I was greeted by the dogs Lilica, Lua, and Lino, whose barking announced my arrival to the humans of the house: Cris, Chico, and Lucas. Near the gate, the jatobá tree, which gives the farm its name, and a young jacaranda tree greeted us.

[Sound effects: sound of nature, birds tweeting, wind in the trees]

The trees, in some way, participated in this welcome. This scene, where human and non-human beings meet, already reflects the dynamics of this Atlantic Forest biodiversity refuge.

Cris was a researcher and professor at the Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of São Paulo (USP), where she was dedicated to studying the conceptual art collection.

[Interview with Cristina Freire]

So, I began a line of conceptual art research at the museum. That was in 1997. Then, I started working with a collection that no one had done anything with since the time it had been exhibited in the 1970s, together with the person who created it, Walter Zanini. And I remember that Professor Zanini, at the time, said, "Cristina, do you really want to work with this collection?" Because I kept calling him and asking things. I said, "Yes, I do." Then he said, "Be careful, because it's for life." Then I said, "No problem." I laughed too. Imagine, that was in 1997. The last job I did related to this was in 2019, so almost 30 years of work.

The Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo (MAC) is one of Brazil's most important institutions in the field of modern and contemporary art, with a collection of over 10,000 works ranging from Brazilian modernism to more recent expressions.

Founded in 1963, MAC São Paulo emerged at a turbulent time in Brazilian art, when businessman Ciccillo Matarazzo donated his art collection to the University of São Paulo, after removing it from the Museum of Modern Art (MAM).

Walter Zanini, an art historian and MAC's first director, played a key role in establishing the museum as a reference. He not only embraced new artistic trends but also challenged art to reflect the social and political changes that were marking the country.

An example of this, Cris tells us, is the case of the artist from Pernambuco, Paulo Bruscky, an artist whose work was fundamentally supported by MAC at a time of creative effervescence and social questioning.

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[Interview continued]

I remember that, when I did Paulo Bruscky's first exhibition, it was the first in a museum. I did Paulo Bruscky's first museum exhibition.

What happened? I went to Recife and picked up his works, and when I brought them back to São Paulo, the restorers were horrified because it was such a mess, dirty, and sticky. Why would they waste their time cleaning that up?

It was all like that. You had to go slowly, digging around and stuff. Then the scene started to change, we're talking here, about the late 1990s, early 2000s, where all this was marginal. Let's just say that, starting in the second half of the 2000s, it started to become mainstream. Everyone accepted it; it was already fully legitimized. Those who were completely forgotten became stars. They were everywhere. So much so that in Bruscky's first exhibition, the works that I had picked up in Recife had already been sold by his gallery in São Paulo.

I was furious, because then I began to see the instrumentalization of academic work. This happened throughout my career.

[Sound effect: cutting blade and podcast soundtrack]

Criticism of the art market was the first sign that Cris's work no longer fit into the field she had helped establish. Seeking something more radical, more aligned with the concerns of conceptual artists of the 1970s, she made a transformative choice in 2015.

Along with her husband, artist and historian Chico Rocha, and their teenage son Lucas, Cris purchased Sítio Jatobá in rural São Paulo. There, she began dedicating herself to agroecology, to her this was a completely new and challenging field.

This transition from conceptual art to agroecology reflects not only a change of scenery, but a transformation in how we view the world and a different way of imagining it.

[Interview continued]

So, there was nothing [here].

I had never worked in agriculture. I had never worked in agriculture. I started learning about agroecology here. So, I'm

very grateful, because this, for me, is an experimental school. It's an experimental school. I learn every day on this farm. Every day. So, I understand in a way what the museum meant for me... When I arrived at the museum and said, "I want to work with this collection. I want to give this collection a different meaning." And I have had a bit of the experience that I had at the museum here on the farm. When you see everything degraded, everything in a way that's not being valued, you think, "We can change that."

Agroecology, like conceptual art, is more than a practice—it's a way of looking at and inhabiting the world. In recent years, I've noticed a curious connection between these two seemingly distant fields.

[Interview continued]

We immediately joined a project called Conexão Mata Atlântica (Atlantic Forest Connection) which was a project to restore and transform production chains in the region between Rio and São Paulo, the largest Brazilian metropolises. And here the issue was restoring the Atlantic Forest, but with the issue of agroecology in mind. And it's a really cool group of people involved in agroecology. I went to learn about agroecology, I'd never heard of Ana Primavesi, I'd never heard of agroecology, and I started studying, and I became fascinated. And we timidly started doing things, because we understood this urgency. At the museum, I had understood this too. I remember saying: "Wow, but 20 years have passed, these works are here in the drawer, 20 years later, no one even knows who these artists are." So I felt a sense of urgency, because, for example, I had several video cassettes. I said, "Guys, we have to migrate this to another medium; it's going to get lost, before there isn't even anywhere to migrate it to." So, I felt a sense of urgency. And here, now, the urgency is the climate catastrophe.

Cris realized that her work as a researcher at the museum, dedicating herself to a neglected collection, has a lot in common with her work in reforesting her farm.

[Interview continued]

It was difficult to come to a place, where we knew everything, to come to a place where you didn't know anything.

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So we [just] began. That's why I associate curatorship with the curatorship of the land. It's care. What is a curator? It's the one who heals, the one who cares. The curate, as priests were called in the past, the healer. A curator is anyone who is involved in care. Care in the museum is the care of artistic heritage, in the case of the museum where I worked. Here, it's the care of natural heritage. We also have a documentation role. In the museum what we do is documentation. Here, we take a plant, discover what it is, what it's for.

Cris had already shared with me her journey into conceptual art and her transition to agroecology.

But it was when we sat at the table in the kitchen of her farm, listening to the wind in the trees, that the deepest connections began to emerge.

[Interview continued]

Do you hear wind in the city? What inspires you when you hear that wind?

I started to remember sounds that I had forgotten.

When I was very little, we had a lot of bamboo near my house, and when it was very windy it would...

[insert sound of wind and bamboo]

I had forgotten about these sounds, but they brought me back wow! It made me fearful but, at the same time, they showed me that no, I was safe.

It was like dusting off an antique table, then removing the varnish to reveal the raw wood underneath.

[Interview continued]

I started to get really happy, really happy to be finding here, in this other context, what I had been looking for there, back in the beginning. You know? So, I said, guys, it has moved here, it migrated. But the partnership is [now] with the plants. That's another story. You know what I mean? The partnership is with the plants.

[Podcast soundtrack]

[Interview with Júlia Rebouças]

I did my doctorate on [the Brazilian curator and critic] Frederico Morais, something that I think keeps me moving. There's a quote of his that I love, where he says, "Professor, artist, critic, I don't know, I just know that I'm alive and very connected."
So, it doesn't really matter from where he's acting, what he's being at that moment. He can be anything, he can be nothing, and what matters is that he's alive and very connected.
So, I think these are the little shocks that keep us alive and very connected. I want not to let routines, structures, institutions or the market numb or alienate our body.

You just heard the voice of the curator Júlia Rebouças. She's from Sergipe and currently lives in Belo Horizonte. Her interest in art began during her undergraduate degree in social communication.

[Interview continued]

I saw an exhibition at MAMAM, at the Aloisio Magalhães Museum of Modern Art [in the city of Recife in Brazil's Northeast]. An exhibition that had a big impact on me. It was an exhibition by Rivane Neuenschwander and Ernesto Neto.
I think [I connected to] some things that were already in place there. This possibility of creating, of inventing, of us always...overcoming this idea of consensus. Always challenging our own understanding of what is true or what we take to be solid foundations of the world. I understood that there was a whole pact there, an alliance for us never to believe in these truths.

Today, Júlia is the curator and artistic director of the Inhotim Institute.

One of the things that most captivates me about Júlia's curatorial process is her exploration of words. One of her curatorial projects, the 36th Panorama of Brazilian Art at MAM São Paulo, focused on the term "sertão"³ (semiarid Brazilian region).

³ *Sertão* refers to the semiarid region in northeastern Brazil, comprising parts of the states of Alagoas, Bahia, Pernambuco, Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte, Ceará, Maranhão, Piauí, Sergipe, and Minas Gerais. The word also refers in general to Brazil's hinterlands similar to the Australian outback. *Olho seco*, episode 3, podcast series, 2025, by Jorge Menna Barreto developed with the support of a seed grant from the Office of Research of Universidade California, Santa Cruz and Instituto Mesa.

Before delving into the edition organized by Júlia, it might be worth remembering the history of MAM's Panorama itself, which also emerged from a context of aridity.

[Flashback]

A pioneering initiative in Brazil with a collection of national and international modern art, the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM) was founded in 1948.

In 1963, Cicillo Matarazzo transferred the entire MAM collection to USP (University of São Paulo), leaving the museum both without a collection or a space.

Subsequently MAM moved through a number of temporary locations until, in 1969, it found a new home under the Ibirapuera Park marquee, in a space that had previously housed the Wax Museum and a makeshift storage facility for the São Paulo Biennial.

It was there that the museum received a second chance.

To celebrate its new home, technical director Diná Lopes Coelho hastily organized the 1st Panorama of Contemporary Brazilian Art, bringing together 102 artists, including Mira Schendel, Maria Leontina, and Anna Bella Geiger. Today, Panorama is one of the country's main exhibitions of Brazilian contemporary art. In 2024, Panorama held its 38th edition: *A Thousand Degrees*.

[End of flashback]

We're back! Júlia was going to tell us about her process in organizing her edition of Panorama.

[Interview with Júlia Rebouças]

[*Sertão*]. It's a word full of imagery, full of meaning; it's political. It's a completely political word. It's also completely cultural. Its political inscription is its inscription in the field of culture, I think,

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above all. But it's also a word of geography, of a state of mind, a word of place. So, it's so many things. Above all [it's a way to] think about the political and geographical aspect of the very proposition of a “panorama” of Brazilian art.

I think the idea of outlining a panorama is a colonizing gesture. It's a gesture that seeks to create a border, that seeks to delimit a territory, however broad the panorama, however broad the view. So I attempted to take that on. I wanted to use that word *sertão*. That's why it became the title of the exhibition. It started as a working title, because that's all I was thinking about. And then I began to say, there's no other way, it has to be that word, it's here [with me]. It's an insurgent word against the bandeirante exploitative gesture. It resists attempts at exploration. This concept, it resists.

These words from Júlia take us back to the first episode, when we talked about the different views of the *sertão* with Ana Luiza, Francis and Rondinelly.

[Interview with Francis Lacerda]

The *sertão* comprises [several] geographical areas. So, for example, here in Pernambuco [is one area]. The IBGE [Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics] divides regions. You have the *sertão* region. Now however there are several *sertões* within this *sertão*. For example, the *sertão* of Pernambuco is different from the *sertão* of Ceará in several areas, because Ceará is entirely semiarid.

[Interview with Ana Luiza Saraiva]

I'll start by telling you that the *sertão*, this *sertão* is such a broad term. The portion that we usually call the *sertão*, which is our semiarid region, is not uniform. It's not uniform. It's not uniform... It has similar features, but it's not uniform. In fact, there are significant differences both in total rainfall and in seasonality.

[Interview with Rondinelly Medeiros]

Brazil's dry *sertão*, to introduce one more term because this term semiarid is [actually] in dispute. I think that if the term *sertão* conveys something diffuse, hazy, and without specific contours, the term semiarid rather speaks to a dispute between two fields, the scientific and governmental, and then social movements come in trying to appropriate this term as a social marker, so it has taken on more institutional contours.

Olho seco, episode 3, podcast series, 2025, by Jorge Menna Barreto developed with the support of a seed grant from the Office of Research of Universidade California, Santa Cruz and Instituto Mesa.

What fascinates me here is how such a dense word can be transformed into a curatorial project. How do you translate something with so many meanings, and so many reinterpretations over time, into an artistic experience?

[Interview with Júlia Rebouças]

My curatorial process is a work of image production. When I think about an exhibition, I think about the images of the exhibition, not images of works per se, but images of place, of experience, of context. So I was imagining how someone might see it and I thought, I immediately thought like this...

Outside, it will say *sertão*, in big letters, and there everyone will [already] have a series of images [in their mind] and when they get inside, I want people to say “this is not *sertão*.” So yes, I wanted the exhibition to contrast with all this discourse that we get tired of hearing around this word.

[Voice of Jorge Menna Barreto speaking the following as if through a megaphone]

Create an image by subtracting another.

[Interview continued]

It's the place of doubt, Jorge, it's the place of the unknown, of doubt, of I don't know, or I don't know what it is, or I don't know how it happened, or I don't know why it is like this, or... and this also mixes with something else that is fundamental, which is the idea of faith, and again, a faith that is not necessarily religious, or not necessarily sacred, but, which is faith, which is this belief in the unknown too; it's a bet on something that I don't know how to name.

[Voice of Jorge Menna Barreto speaking the following as if through a megaphone]

Something I can't name.

[Sound effect: cutting blade / podcast soundtrack]

Timothy Morton, a literary critic and philosopher, discusses hyperobjects, phenomena so complex that they escape our perception throughout our lives. These include climate change, plastic in the environment, nuclear radiation, and the internet.

These are slippery ideas that challenge our perspective and the very language we use to describe them.

[Sound effect: electronic beams]

The *sertão* perhaps fits the definition of a hyperobject: it's complex and elusive on all counts. This open-ended question that is the *sertão* also invites our imagination.

[Interview continued]

This possibility of creating other modes, other alliances, other repertoires, other images, including those of the future...another vocabulary.

This “semi” [of semiarid] is a universe of possibilities. Between the semi and the total end, between the idea of absolute aridity and the semi everything happens. So, I think we are also in a semi-ending. We're in a semi-collapse. Like when Hélio uses the word “quasi,” Hélio Oiticica uses the word “quasi” a lot, like in “quasi-cinema.” What's in this “quasi?” What's in this “semi?” It's time for us to go all in, to use a different repertoire, a different way of handling language and talking about it.

I'm also constantly thinking about and trying to imagine artistic practices that are...that are aligned with this idea that it's possible to build...It's possible to build nature. It's possible to forge this place of existence where nothing needs to be left behind. [I'd like to] think that... the price of this is not destruction, that the price of existence is not self-destruction.

This series began with ways of seeing: an investigation into the relationships between perception, environment, and the way we inhabit the world. From the globe of the eye to the poetry of João Cabral de Melo Neto, we explored how the act of seeing—both literal and symbolic—not only reflects but shapes who we are and what we do. João Cabral taught us that aridity need not be merely a theme. It can also be a possibility, a style that transforms the dry into form and thought. In this final episode, we have brought together these ideas with other voices to reflect on the role of art and

imagination in times of crisis.

We live in a world where the language we use often seems incapable of grasping the complexity of what we are facing. It's as if we're narrating a present with expressions that were useful in a past that no longer exists.

This affects our ability to recognize the true scale of the socioenvironmental catastrophe that is occurring around us and, more seriously, to respond to it.

Art and literature, however, can open cracks in this horizon. They have the power to create images and expressions that not only suggest how to see, but also invite us to act, to feel, and to imagine collective alternatives, or to *co [pause] move*, to move together, to quote Júlia Rebouças.

[Interview continued]

When you spoke about the machine that moves us [Cabral citing Le Corbusier about artworks as machines that move us], this creation of something that moves us, I also thought about moving together, a moving, a shared movement, and also about this structure that creates this shared movement.

[Sound effect: Plucking string instruments]

If the difficulty of perceiving the climate crisis paralyzes us, perhaps it's because we lack not only awareness, but also more precise images. Perhaps the art of the challenge, as readers, language artisans, and inhabitants of this planet, lies in rescuing and cultivating other ways of perceiving and narrating, and thus, perhaps, rehydrating our ability to collectively respond.

[closing track]

[Sound effect: roosters crowing]

[Sophia Faustino reads the poem “Tecendo a manhã”⁴ (*Weaving the Morning*) by João Cabral de Melo Neto]

1

*Um galo sozinho não tece uma manhã:
ele precisará sempre de outros galos.
De um que apanhe esse grito que ele
e o lance a outro; de um outro galo
que apanhe o grito que um galo antes
e o lance a outro; e de outros galos
que com muitos outros galos se cruzem
os fios de sol de seus gritos de galo,
para que a manhã, desde uma teia tênue,
se vá tecendo, entre todos os galos.*

2

*E se encorpando em tela, entre todos,
se erguendo tenda, onde entrem todos,
se entretendendo para todos, no toldo
(a manhã) que plana livre de armação.
A manhã, toldo de um tecido tão aéreo
que, tecido, se eleva por si: luz balão.*

1

One rooster does not weave a morning,
he will always need the other roosters,
one to pick up the shout that he
and toss it to another, another rooster
to pick up the shout that a rooster before him
and toss it to another, and other roosters
with many other roosters to criss-cross
the sun-threads of their rooster-shouts
so that the morning, starting from a frail cobweb,
may go on being woven, among all the roosters.

2

And growing larger, becoming cloth,
pitching itself a tent where they all may enter,

⁴ “Tecendo a manhã” translated by Galway Kinnel in: *João Cabral de Melo Neto: Selected Poetry 1937-1990*, ed., Djela Kadir (Hanover/London: University Press of New England) 1994, p.136

Inter-unfurling itself for them all, in the tent
(the morning), which soars free of ties and ropes -
the morning, tent of a weave so light
that, woven, it lifts itself through itself: balloon light.

Thank you for following us.

The complete transcripts of this episode in Portuguese and English are available on our website. The link is in this episode's description.

[Agradecimentos]

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Podcast interviewees voices have been interpreted in English by: [A definir]