

Jonathas de Andrade Gives Voice to the Dispossessed

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The artist's work, on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, explores the historic and contemporary injustices that inscribe life in Brazil



Jonathas de Andrade, *Jogos dirigidos (Directed Games)*, 2019, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

It isn't easy to define the work of Jonathas de Andrade, which often examines the very words we use to define ourselves. Language is central to the artist's practice – which spans sculpture and installation, video and photography – for its power to either liberate or marginalize its subjects.

The title of De Andrade's 2013 installation *40 nego bom é um real (40 Black Candies for R\$1)*, for instance, refers to a popular cooked-banana sweet from northeastern Brazil. Featuring 16 silkscreen prints on wooden panels and seven engraved boards, the work details the recipe for 'bananada' and plans for a production line in an imaginary factory to make it. These are shown alongside 40 risograph portraits of workers – both on the factory line and in the fields – as well as written records of their account settlements with other employees.

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Nego – Portuguese slang for black – may denote intimacy and affection, but can also be used as a racist slur. Brazil, which only legally abolished slavery in 1888, remains largely economically dependent on black workers, most of whom are still today underpaid and have unequal access to education, healthcare and other resources. The *nego* candy, then, serves as a metaphor for structural racism, hidden beneath a veneer of civility yet rotten to the core. Rather than depict black workers as victims, however, De Andrade's piece lends them agency: in these exuberant images, saturated with bright, tropical colours, their expressions and gestures appear unselfconscious and unrestrained.



Jonathas de Andrade, *40 nego bom é um real* (40 Back Candies for R\$1), 2013, installation view. Courtesy: the artist, Museu de Arte do Rio and Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo

40 nego bom é um real is part of a more ambitious project, the 'Museu do Homem do Nordeste' (Museum of Northeastern Man, 2013–ongoing), which refers to an anthropological museum of the same name, in the northeastern city of Recife, where De Andrade lives and works. It was founded in 1979 by the anthropologist Gilberto Freyre, who espoused the notion of a mellowed and mestizo Brazil, which derives strength from its hybrid culture and ethnic diversity. While the museum's collection of more than 15,000 objects celebrates the historical and social formation of the region, it nonetheless separates artworks from artefacts according to mostly Eurocentric classifications.

In an effort to align the museum more closely with its postcolonial subjects, De Andrade placed small ads in local newspapers soliciting workers to pose for posters for the institution. The resulting *Cartazes para o Museu do Homem do Nordeste* (Posters for the Museum of Northeastern Man, 2013) vary in format depending on the nature of each encounter: some subjects sit for intimate portraits; others pose heroically, chests bared; others still are in repose, apparently enjoying the end of a long working day. There are many Northeastern Men here, forcing viewers to confront problematic stereotypes that traffic in ethnic exoticism. De Andrade's photographs carry an erotic charge that is highly ambivalent. Are these men being objectified by the museum, its patrons or the artist himself? By lending a human face to an anthropological display, the work prompts viewers to question their own relationship to all such institutions, and the living cultures they treat with false objectivity.



Jonathas de Andrade, *Cartazes para o Museu do Homem do Nordeste* (Posters for the Museum of Northeastern Man), 2013, digital prints, wood, iron, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist and Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo

The project also includes *O Levante* (The Uprising, 2012–13), a film documenting Recife's first horse-and-cart race, which De Andrade organized in 2012. The artist defied a municipal restriction against farm animals entering the city's historic centre by inviting hundreds of participants to compete on its cobblestoned streets and bridges. The sound of *brega* blasting from their boomboxes loudly chafes at Recife's logic of gentrification and reveals – despite official urbanization efforts – that the boundaries between rural areas and the city are fundamentally porous. The video footage, as well as the accompanying photographic documentation, shows farmers in tank tops and football shirts charging through the city centre. Their stern, focused expressions belie the thrill of the race, suggesting a different kind of uprising might be underway. Here, a vulnerable population treated with official silence responds with thunderous noise. Once again, De Andrade's work brings them into the foreground, casting light on the diversity of Brazil.

'Museu do Homem do Nordeste' is a work in progress: each time De Andrade exhibits the installation, he incorporates his latest research. When it was shown at the Museu de Arte do Rio in 2014 – following a first iteration at São Paulo's Galeria Vermelho – it included a piece with another hard-to-translate title, *Suar a camisa* (Working Up a Sweat, 2014). De Andrade approached labourers on local farms as they were heading home after their shifts and asked them to trade their sweaty shirts for new ones. The compiled 'catalogue' of 120 colourful tops – distinguishable by their advertising brands, political campaign slogans and football logos – hung from wooden mannequins in a snaking line, creating a powerful presence and blocking visitors' easy passage through the gallery. It was as though the space had been occupied by low-wage labourers who, without a safety

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net to fall back on, have suffered the most from Brazil's ongoing economic recession. In fact, since 2013, the country's unemployment rate has more than doubled. De Andrade's installation also recalls those who have demonstrated publicly throughout Brazil against the government's economic policies, rising fuel prices and entrenched corruption.



Jonathas de Andrade, *Suar a camisa* (Working Up a Sweat), 2014, 120 shirts and wooden supports, dimensions variable. Courtesy © the artist and Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; photograph: Nathan Keay

Socioeconomic despair is also the underlying theme of a new installation, *Um pra um* (One to One, 2019), commissioned for De Andrade's solo exhibition of the same name at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Chicago, which opened in April. Clay bars mounted on a large gallery wall trace the floor plan of an improvised settlement, which developed along the railroad tracks in Recife to house many of the city's poorest families. True to its title, the site's layout is reproduced here at one-to-one scale, in the earthen material of its floors. Though imposing in the context of the gallery, these homes are clearly cramped and inadequate. By inviting viewers to temporarily occupy the same space as the marginalized inhabitants of these dwellings, the work induces us to empathize with, or even take responsibility for, the conditions of their extreme poverty. Here, as in so much of his art, De Andrade lends visibility to individuals mostly overlooked by society.

For the way it engages with human bodies at scale, *Um pra um* reflects Brazilian dramaturg Augusto Boal's notion of 'the theatre of the oppressed', which proposes that all spectators are also actors because they participate in the interpretation of the actions they observe and, in the process, produce new meanings. To this end, De Andrade's works can often be read in conflicting ways: are the assembled shirts of *Suar a camisa* a reference to the anger of the disenfranchised poor or a tender monument to their unfairly recompensed labour? Do horses running amok in central Recife represent an 'uprising' of the city's underclass or a celebration of a lost privilege?

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Jonathas de Andrade, 'One to One', exhibition view. Courtesy: © the artist and Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; photograph: Nathan Keay

The artist again addresses questions of inequality in *Infundável mapa da fome* (Endless Hunger Map, 2019), another new installation at MCA Chicago, which concerns the Sudene, a government bureau that, together with the Brazilian army, mapped the entire national territory in order to better keep it under state control. (The programme still exists today, albeit in digital form.) The work's title refers to the writings of Josué de Castro (1908–73), a physician, diplomat and geographer from Recife, whose groundbreaking books, *Geografia da fome* (Geography of Hunger, 1946) and *Geopolítica da fome* (Geopolitics of Hunger, 1951), sought to explain the socioeconomic roots of famine in his country and around the world.

De Andrade assembled 42 existing Sudene maps, which together cover the entire territory of the Kayapo Mekranoti people in southern Pará state, and invited 19 Kayapo women to add to the maps the markings that they often use to adorn their own bodies. The result is a constellation of black and white flags that suggests an occupation – not by the army or a resource-extraction company, but by the indigenous nations themselves. An accompanying key credits the woman who decorated each map alongside a photograph of her hand and a written interpretation of her geometric design. Symbols for water and air reclaim a territory marked by conquest and deforestation for the native bodies nurtured by its land.

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Jonathas de Andrade, *Eu, Mestiço (Me, Mestizo)*, 2018, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Alexander and Bonin, New York; photograph: Joerg Lohse

The show at MCA Chicago also includes a newly commissioned video, *Jogos dirigidos* (Directed Games, 2019). Set in a village in the state of Piauí, where approximately ten percent of the indigenous population is deaf, the video documents the local community's unique forms of communication and ritual. The artist recorded their movements and gestures, with particular focus on expressions of belonging, exchanges about social life in the arid hinterlands, the challenges of raising and caring for children, their experiences of frequent harassment, and their memories of lost loved ones.

Language, as anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss defined it, only acquires meaning from the relationships it establishes. It thus strengthens bonds while also reflecting inequality in all its forms – social, racial, economic – in terms of what is said as well as what is left unsaid. De Andrade's work calls attention to these 'social silences': structural problems most would simply rather not address. The difficult-to-translate puns and street slang of his titles are further evidence of the way he plays with the social ambiguities of language to tease at their underlying contradictions. Ambiguity can breed silence, and where silence prevails, there is always plenty of social and political noise.

Translated by Steven Mines