

## **Nick Herman with Maria Thereza Alves**

# How Can You Propose That You Are The Future?

*In the summer of 2018 I curated a group exhibition titled Bounty at Grice Bench Gallery in Los Angeles that included a version of Alves's work Utopia: A Photo Text. Bounty took the familiar concept of a future reward and explored its historical permutations, focusing especially on the intertwined roots of religion and colonialism—subjects that Alves confronts directly in her practice. This interview was an opportunity to follow up on this initial conversation.*

**Nick Herman: In your works including *Nowhere* (1993) and *Post Eldorado Amazonas* (1991) you confront the power and dangers of myth, perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the myth of the so-called “New World.” In *Utopia: A Photo Text* (1993) you engage fiction directly by talking about the history of Brazil and the colonial origins of its name.**

Maria Thereza Alves: The theme of utopia is one that I have thought a lot about in the context of colonialism. Thomas Moore's *Utopia* remains probably the best-known reference. Also, in the context of Brazil this phenomenon can be seen in many absurd ways, for example in the city of Manaus, famous for its opera house in the middle of the Amazon. During the heyday of the rubber boom Enrico Caruso sang there. So this is a very strange idea, transplanting Europe to the middle of the Amazon forest; Thomas Moore describes his utopia specifically as located in the Americas because that is where there was abundant land and “not enough people.” And he felt that if the native people did not wish to join then they should be killed, which is of course what happened anyway. And then we have the more modern example of Oscar Niemeyer's design for Brasilia; although Niemeyer was more socially progressive, he still clear-cut the forest and began with a blank slate.

Another basis for my interest is the town of Tlayacapan, in Morelos, Mexico, near where I once lived. This town is famous for both its indigenous history and the colonial monastery constructed by the Augustinians in the 1500s. It and the entire town are based on the golden mean. So this idealized aesthetic system was imposed on both the town and its occupants. We have a multitude of examples where European ideas of a perfect city were superimposed onto existing civilizations. All this made me want to research and cite the countless examples whose repercussions are ongoing. Paying attention especially to architecture and the land and how these value systems were imported.

**NH: It's interesting how in their specificity and outright absurdity some of your examples reveal themselves as resembling fiction and further, that the visionary ideals are all authored by a single person and are totally hierarchical, there is no communal element to their utopias.**

MTA: Exactly. It comes down to a single authority designing the ideal and suppressing contrary views.

**NH: Are there specific examples that continue to embody this myth of the new world and the role of indigeneity?**

MTA: Well one thing I constantly refer to is the different histories of genocide within Latin America itself. For example the scale of colonial genocide in Brazil was much higher than in Mexico. And for many years this perplexed me. Why were the rates of indigenous genocide near 50% in Mexico and over 90% in Brazil? Today in Bolivia, Peru, and Mexico, a person can still see indigenous cultures and communities, whereas in Brazil and Argentina you don't see that presence easily—it

remains only in small pockets. The other question I have always wanted to investigate is why was there such a high rate of abandoned children in Brazil? I think at one time it was twenty million abandoned children for a population of one hundred million. This is one of the questions I pose in the work *Utopia: A Photo Text*.

I think one of the reasons was that the social structure in Mexico, for example within the Náhuatl, was very hierarchical and based on a tribute system. They had rigorous bookkeeping that maintained the vassal state system; everything was recorded: cotton, blankets, turkeys, chocolate. So if you have that kind of hierarchical structure all you have to do is eliminate the head-person and put a puppet or a European and the social system continues. But in Brazil there was not a widespread tribute system. Instead, indigenous groups elected a spokesperson, who was often later falsely identified as a Chief, but who was in fact elected consensually by the community. And this person basically every day had to prove that they were worthy of this position of trust. So in Brazil, if the colonizer eliminated this person the community could just elect a new spokesperson. So the genocide rates were much higher. They never accepted the hierarchical structures and that's why so many were killed, because they offered a supreme model of democracy.

**NH: Earlier I had asked if there were any words that you believe have resonance today and I am struck by your use of the word democracy when discussing pre-colonial Brazil. You seem to believe in this word still.**

MTA: What I believe is in this communal way of electing a spokesperson that is everyday involved in the process of meeting the community's needs. In the Guaraní community people meet every evening after dinner and discuss everything that happened during the day, they also have many cultural events, so it is hours of shared space. If you want to call it democracy or something else you can. But I like this idea of coming together and reconstructing the community daily.

**NH: What you're describing is hyper local. It's the opposite of a far away *Utopia*. The local is what you know, it's totally tied to place.**

MTA: Exactly. And people discuss and decide what needs to be built, what materials need to be found, how to manage the land. But you know, I lived in a squat when I was younger, and we tried to manage our responsibilities based on this model and it was very difficult, so I recognize the obstacles in contemporary society.

**NH: The seed is a recurring motif in your work, especially in your investigation of ballast in the ongoing work *Seeds of Change*. A seed embodies a kind of optimism for the future but it also alludes to buried evidence in the case of ballast, illuminating a dark past. In your work *Wake: Flight of Birds and People / Seed Catcher* (2015) you created a garden-like space in Dubai to encourage birds to rest and in doing so, drop seeds. In this way I feel like you are cultivating a new land, and by extension a new future. How does the seed relate to this idea of community?**

MTA: My piece in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates was interesting because of the difference between soil and sand. The whole city is built on sand and of course, sand moves much more easily than soil during storms. So in this context, and given how much money exists there now,

they want to plant more vegetation and create a different ecology. So it was a very unique opportunity to conceptualize how a society can rethink and shape its relationship to trees and vegetation. So that's what I was trying to think about, how plants can be used to change the landscape—and change the consciousness of a place.

**NH: What's interesting is how this idea stands in contrast to the Niemeyer example. Instead of using architecture as a reason to cut down a forest, you're using architecture as a way to germinate a forest.**

MTA: Yes, well, you know in Dubai there isn't a lot of celebration of the past, which is seen as having been very poor, and instead all the focus is on the future—and the future is the shaping of their landscape. So it's another utopia in the making where again there is a dismissal of the original place and the fantasy of something better.

**NH: This conflicted relationship to the past makes me think of the tragedy that recently happened in Brazil, where the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro was completely burned.**

MTA: It is shocking; this is something I have been writing about for the introduction of a publishing project I am currently working on called "Decolonizing Brazil." When I was reading the articles that were coming out in the newspapers about the fire the first reports lamented the loss of a fresco from Pompeii, Egyptian mummies and Greek statues! It was only as a footnote that they reported the loss of the entire archive of Brazil's indigenous history and Brazil's native language archive.

I will give you one example; there is an indigenous researcher who was using these archives to prove that his people existed because they have been declared extinct by the government. Now he can't prove that he represents the legacy of his people, that he represents this continuation, because the records have been destroyed. José Urutau, an indigenous leader, linguist and researcher at the National Museum said, "It was a linguicide, an epistemicide, when they exterminate all knowledge, the culture of a people."

**NH: This question of language is so important. Can you talk about how you use language in your current work? What you are doing now?**

MTA: So I mentioned this project called "Decolonizing Brazil" that I have been working on in collaboration with indigenous students from UFSCar (Universidade Federal de São Carlos) in Sorocaba. It is a multifaceted project that includes a website, performances, and a series of publications, all exploring the history and current life experience of indigenous students at the university.

I worked with the students in Sorocaba for more than two months. They had wanted to do a book recording the history of Brazilian indigenous intellectuals who are rarely published unless it has to do specifically with indigenous subjects; for example, an indigenous person is not invited to give a talk in a poetry festival unless it is about indigenous poetry. It's always with the agenda of isolating indigeneity as if that is separate from "society" which is perceived to be non-indigenous... so the students became more interested in recording these leaders who are fighting for their lands and have no voice and have no place in the narrative of Brazilian history. Also, there is no study or even acknowledgment of any indigenous language on the campus and so we decided to make

a simple introduction and publish it as a series of magazines; we will then use the publications to substantiate the need for a curriculum. We are focusing on seven languages spoken by the students: Tikuna, Baniwa, Tuyuka, Kambeba, Tukano, Waujá, and the Yebámahsã; all are available on the website along with audio recordings of Kuripako and Cariri.

During a workshop nearby the campus at the Ipanema National Forest (FLONA of Ipanema), the students researched the local history which is the site of the first iron mill in Brazil and which resulted in the decimation of the forest for fuel, along with the use of enslaved Tupiniquims and Africans. In response to this widespread ignorance of indigenous history, the students took part in performances to *retomar*, or re-take, an ancient indigenous path that cuts through the area and is named after a white man. These actions were in support of an ongoing local movement that has been trying to rename it the "Tupiniquim Trail." There is so much history that has been suppressed in this area and in the rest of the country. There are indigenous groups that are still being displaced and forcibly removed from their land.

**NH: How are you feeling about Brazil's future now? It has been a difficult few years after such optimism earlier in the decade. However, many still feel that Brazil represents an idealized future because of its profound diversity.**

MTA: Well this is the thing... I don't think this myth of the future is possible. Once you commit genocide I don't think you have a future... to state it clearly. Once you have destroyed the original people of the land I don't see the viability of a future... because it will always be like this culture that is not of the place. What culture can come from this? What you brought is death, so if your foundation is the culture of death, how can you claim that you are the future?