

Maria Thereza Alves

(São Paulo, Brazil, 1961)

At the end of the 1980s, Maria Thereza Alves was among the founders of the Brazilian Partido Verde (Green Party), and it was also following her lead that the battle for the protection of indigenous minorities found its place alongside those for the protection of the environment. Her artistic activity may therefore be seen as an extension of this political commitment. The investigation into the trauma of European colonisation throughout Central and South America led her to reflect not only on the devastating impact that it had on the society and the culture of the natives, but also on the less visible transformations inflicted onto the natural environment. Her works – installations, publications and workshops – tell forgotten tales of dried-up lakes (*The Return of a Lake*, 2012), forests cut down (*Decolonizing Brazil*, 2018) and fruits that have disappeared (*This is not an Apricot*, 2009) in the wake of the greed of the rich Spanish and Portuguese colonists.

Alves's best known and most ambitious project is *Seeds of Change*, presented since 1999 in various port cities, including Marseilles, Liverpool, Antwerp and New York. At the heart of this study there are the ballasts made out of stones, soil and other simple materials which were once used to stabilise the weight of ships. Over the years, these ballasts – offloaded on arrival at their destination and then recycled – ended up contaminating the local flora thanks to the seeds of plants introduced unwittingly from their ports of origin. The artist, inspired by the provenience of this stowaway vegetation, retraces the history of the journeys of discovery, of the trade routes and migratory phenomena with maps, diagrams and workshops involving the inhabitants of the cities in which the project is staged in an active manner.

Una proposta di sincretismo (questa volta senza genocidio) ('A Proposal for Syncretism (this time without genocide)', 2018) is the work purchased for the collection: presented in Palermo during the twelfth edition of Manifesta with a title intentionally in Italian, her investigation continues into the complexity of the concept of autochthonous. The installation brings together the evocations of Alves's stay in the Sicilian city: the second-hand tiles found on a market stall, her visit to the Majolica Museum and the Botanical Gardens, the shop signs and the ornamental motifs of local craftsmen, with parrots and birds of paradise, considered a symbol of welcome and of good fortune. What struck the artist most was the way in which the massive presence of exotic vegetation has been introjected into Palermitan visual imagery. In this work, we find traces of it in the prickly pears, which in actual fact are cactus plants native to Mexico, in the great jacaranda tree and in the flowers of the silk floss tree, introduced for the first time to Italy from South America by the Botanical Gardens of this city, no less. Through the Sicilian example, that of a crossroads of so many cultures, Alves shows that sometimes it's possible to obtain a degree of pacific syncretism which is not imposed from above to the damage of the native population.

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