

**GRADA KILOMBA'S DESOBEDEIÊNCIAS POÉTICAS**  
BLACKENING THE WHITE CUBE

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Translated by Toni Crabb

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In 2019, "Desobediências poéticas", the first solo exhibition in Brazil by Grada Kilomba, was held at the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, with curatorship by the same institution. Kilomba's work has earned a wide international reputation as a rich, challenging interdisciplinary project in which she acts as artist, psychologist, poet and essayist. As an intellectual, born in Portugal with origins in São Tomé and Príncipe, West Africa, her thinking is woven from different critical angles including postcolonial studies, psychoanalysis, and anti-racist feminism. Much of her theoretical and artistic work focuses on questioning colonial regimes of knowledge; analysing the everyday manifestations of racism and its traumatic effects on the forming of black subjectivity (Kilomba, 2010). "Desobediências poéticas" has these struggles as its background, and is embedded within the broad context of an intellectual project seeking individual and collective decolonisation while exploring other languages for producing knowledge such as staged readings, performance, creative writing and video installation.



Video installation: "Illusions Vol. II, Oedipus" of Grada Kilomba (2018)  
Photography: Jenny Fonseca Tovar

Desobediências poéticas was comprised of three video installations: *Illusions Vol. I, Narcissus and Echo* (2017); a previously unexhibited version of *Illusions Vol. II, Oedipus* (2018), *The dictionary*, and an installation, *Table of goods* (2017). Grada Kilomba was interviewed by the Afro-Brazilian feminist Djamila Ribeiro in 2017 on the opening of her video installation *Oedipus*, which was originally commissioned by the Berlin Biennale and included in the Pinacoteca de São Paulo exhibition. In the interview, Kilomba frames her practice as an unveiling of the racism which prevails in hegemonic institutions such as the museum or academy.

The fact that we are seen as different, and that this difference is considered problematic, means that we are excluded from the structures of power; this is quotidian academic racism (...). This system is accustomed to defining everything - to blocking spaces, narratives and ourselves. Through a process of decolonisation we begin to enter into those spaces; we start to narrate and bring in forms of knowledge that have never before been present there; naturally, this is experienced as something threatening. (Kilomba, quoted by Ribeiro, 2019, p. 11).

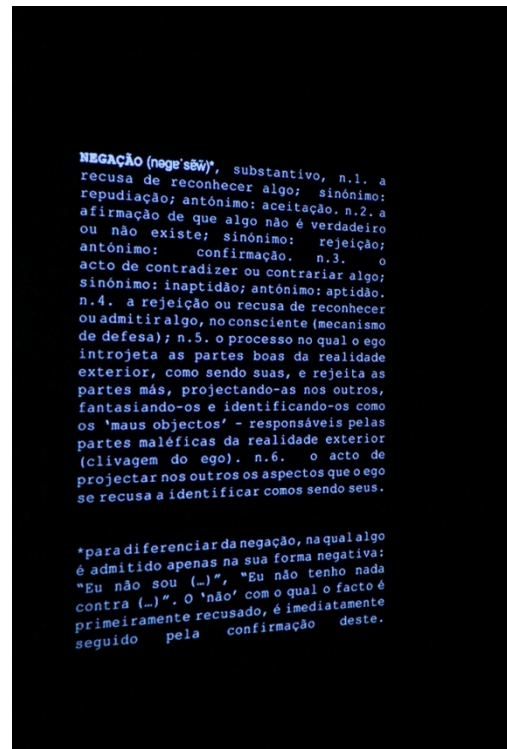
We feel that there is a kind of dialogue between the political position expressed here and the whole of the "Desobediências Poéticas" exhibition, both in the way the exhibition space is conceived and in the types of aesthetic and messages it presents. The four parts of the exhibition are situated in four rooms within "Arte in Brasil: una historia en la Pinacoteca

de São Paulo”, an exhibition of the museum's heritage running from the colonial period to the 1930s and proposing “A reading of the formation of artistic visibility and the constitution of an art system in Brazil.”<sup>1</sup> Kilomba's exhibition breaks into the space at the point where the viewer has had to walk through the rooms titled “Colonial Tradition” and “Travelling Artists”.

The pieces in the exhibition are juxtaposed in the space so as to question the art system and forms of white visibility, occupying it with black bodies, voices, affect and experience. Subverting museographical interpretations, we consider the “Arte en Brasil” exhibition to be inserted into Grada Kilomba's rather than vice versa, so that it is actually black orality and corporality that are disrupted by colonial Brazilian visibilities. We might also think of the two exhibitions as flows of forces and historical powers, tensing the museum space; opposing, complementary, or hierarchical forms whose hierarchies are disturbed with the coming and going of visitors.



Exhibition Piece: “Arte en Brasil: una historia en la Pinacoteca de São Paulo”  
Photography: Jenny Fonseca Tovar



Video installation detail:  
“The Dictionary” of Grada Kilomba.  
Photography: Jenny Fonseca Tovar

On entering the first two video installations we are received by Grada Kilomba's deep, penetrating voice, which transports us directly into a different level of perception. This is the voice of a black woman disrupting the silent atmosphere of the museum, demanding to be heard, to be amplified, as in one of her video installations where her body is surrounded by microphones. Kilomba embodies the figure of the Griot in a tradition that

connects the oral narrative of African cultures with the act of storytelling as a means of resistance against extermination by white powers. Kilomba insists on the idea of narration as resistance, and her own resistance aims to “blacken”<sup>2</sup> the great foundational narratives of Western culture - that is, Greek mythology.



Video installation: “Illusions Vol. I, Narcissus and Echo” of Grada Kilomba (2018)  
Photography: Jenny Fonseca Tovar

The first piece we saw was *Illusions Vol. I, Narcissus and Echo* (2017), a two-channel video installation mounted in front of stands for the audience to sit in. The piece stages the myth of the beautiful Narcissus, desired by all but unable to love anyone except for his own image. Echo, a nymph who fell deeply in love with Narcissus, was condemned by the goddess Hera, wife of Zeus, to repeat the last word she heard. Echo followed Narcissus, who failed to notice her because of his self-obsession. One day, Narcissus was staring into a pool of water and fell in love with his own image, thinking that his mirrored self was loving him back and uncomprehending of the fact that this was in fact Echo and her cursed repetition of “I love you”.

Kilomba blackens the myth of Narcissus, rendering it a paradigmatic example of white identity. White dominant culture is a culture of unloving, unable to give love to the “others”. Its passion for its own image traps white people inside the myth of universality, absence and neutrality. It is a narcissistic world, constructed in the manner of the “white cube”, an



inevitable reference in the codes of contemporary art, whose space is inhabited by a whiteness “that burns”, as Frantz Fanon expressed it.

Narcissistic, narcissistic; this patriarchal white society we live in; fixed on its own self and the reproduction of its own image, rendering all others invisible. I, I am surrounded by images that do not mirror my body. Images of white bodies with perfect smiles, always seeing themselves and reproducing their own image as the ideal love object. (Kilomba, 2019a, p. 14).

The second video installation maintains the format and aesthetic of the first. “*Illusions Vol. II, Oedipus*” (2018) is an oral and bodily recounting of the Oedipus myth which displaces the son’s murder of his father and desire for his mother, shifting the reading to outside the hegemonic family and onto current society, which murders black bodies not in acts of fate but through systematic, premeditated, patriarchal, racist and colonial necropolitics.

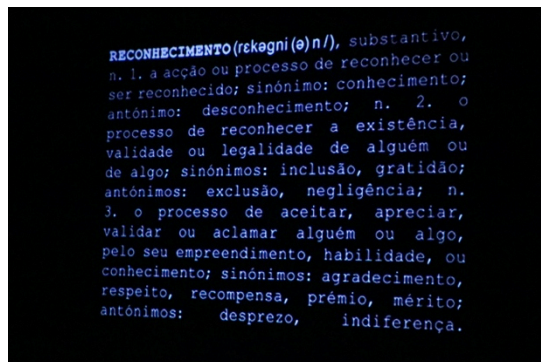
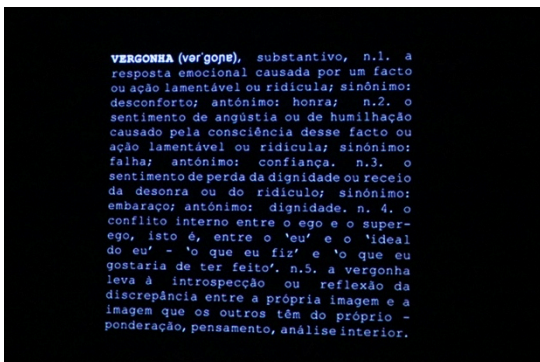
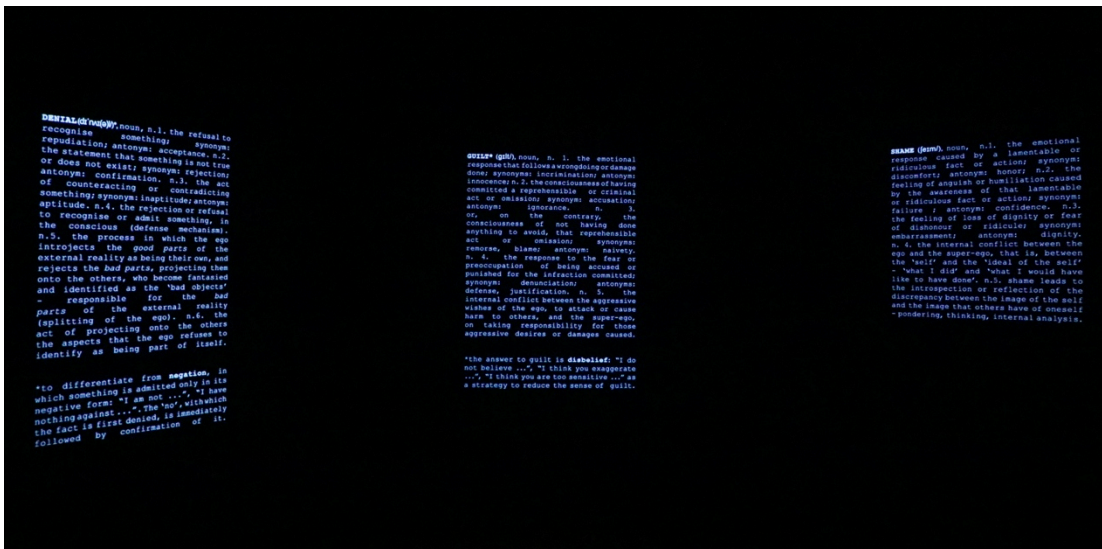


Video installation: “*Illusions Vol. II, Oedipus*” of Grada Kilomba (2018)  
Photography: Jenny Fonseca Tovar

There was something that captured us in *Illusions Vol. II*. There is a movement in the performance accompanying Grada Kilomba’s narrative that restores humanity to black people. We see the bodies of the black artists interpreting Oedipus’s victims bound in red ribbons representing the ongoing project of anti-black genocide. In a symbolic act of emancipation, the ribbons are destroyed; this is nothing less than an affirmation of life over death, where the “object” turns subject; an act of restitution of the voice, and of self-love<sup>3</sup>. The destruction of blood ribbons is a symbol of self-decolonisation.

Music is essential in these video installations. "Horizon Aflame", a piece by South African pianist Neo Muyanga, is a political and musical reference accompanying the narration of Narcissus and Echo. Kilomba weaves an interesting, plural map of sensibilities which challenges us to apply decolonising interpretations to Western dominant discourses, to blacken them, or – why not? - send them up in flames.

Kilomba's third piece, a previously unexhibited version of "The Dictionary", is a five-channel video installation. Each screen presents consecutive definitions of five words: denial, guilt, shame, recognition and reparation. The meanings of these words reveal a process which, according to the artist, seeks to build collective awareness of society's inbuilt racism; this, however, should not be grounded in morality, but in the responsibility of creating new configurations of power and knowledge.



Video installation detail: "The Dictionary" of Grada Kilomba. Photography: Jenny Fonseca Tovar

The Dictionary poses highly questions highly pertinent to Brazil's current political situation, where there is a tangible intensification of violence against black, quilombola and riverine communities. This includes increasing

persecution of Afro religions, systematic murder of black children in repressive police operations in the favelas, mass incarceration of black youths and the stripping away of black student quotas in the country's public universities. This is a sombre moment, a regressive cycle in which denial seeks to deaden reparation.

Kilomba, in her book "Memórias da plantação" (2019), insists that reparation demands justice from the world of whiteness, and that this is a demand for structural change, a call for those of us who occupy positions of racial privilege to address our own responsibility for the way in which racism is reproduced. "Desobediências poéticas" challenges visitors, in particular the white museum-going academic public, to break out of our own comfort zones and accept that racism is not a moral issue, but rather one that demands transformation, action and commitment to black struggles.

These steps (denial, blame, shame, recognition and reparation) reveal awareness of racism more as a psychological process requiring a great deal of work than a moral issue as such. Instead of asking the usual moral question, "Am I a racist?", white subjects ought to ask themselves, "How can I dismantle my own racism?". When that happens, the question itself sets off the process. (Kilomba, 2019, p.46.)

The exhibition closes with "Table of goods" (2017), a sculpture in which cocoa, coffee and sugar symbolize the centuries of death endured by black communities as a result of Transatlantic trafficking, slavery and colonization. The piece deals with the idea of the "unspeakable" (Kilomba, 2019a, p.6) as a traumatic imprint of colonial violence manifested in mental and spiritual damage which is scarcely socially acknowledged. Here again, Kilomba reveals her interest in bringing hidden issues to light and showing that black bodies and their feelings matter.

By way of a conclusion, we would say that "Desobediências poéticas" is an invitation to question our adhesion to the values of whiteness. It is a call to blacken our manners of perceiving, apprehending and feeling reality; and to blacken, too, our poetics, curatorial activities and other practices in contemporary art. It incites us to stand outside ourselves as Echo, outside our position as echoers of the white Narcissus and his language. Grada Kilomba's narrative is more than pertinent in this time of growing authoritarianism and reinforcement of colonial patterns of power; we must fight for the reparation of black communities, and to build committed forms of knowledge that will not reproduce the colonial, Eurocentric, patriarchal system.

Desobediências Poéticas invites us to listen to our own Southern voice, "*To narrate and bring to light forms of knowledge that have never been present in hegemonical spaces*", and to embrace forms of aesthetics and ethics that

offer reparation to black, feminine, subaltern bodies. It remains for us to say that Kilomba's work is a gift; it brings a light of hope into a time when Brazilian (and Latin American) society seems determinedly attached to its role as Echo.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Accessed: <https://pinacoteca.org.br/es/>

<sup>2</sup> The idea of recuperating narratives erased by white colonial order echoes the long-standing principle in Brazilian black feminism of "blackening" culture, history and politics (Carneiro, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Self-love, in black feminist thinking, is conceived in relation to the self as opposed to the "self-love" of patriarchal, racist society, which relates to others, and where the inner voice of black women is rarely seen as important.