Re-visiones # Seven

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GUEST RESEARCHERS

The Phantom Matrix (Old Structures, New Glories)

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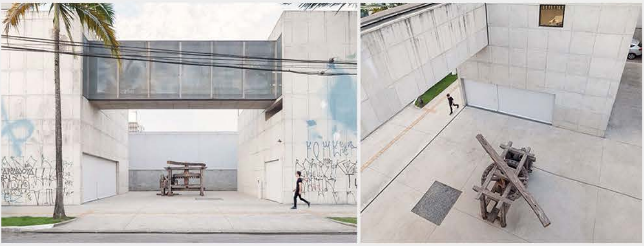
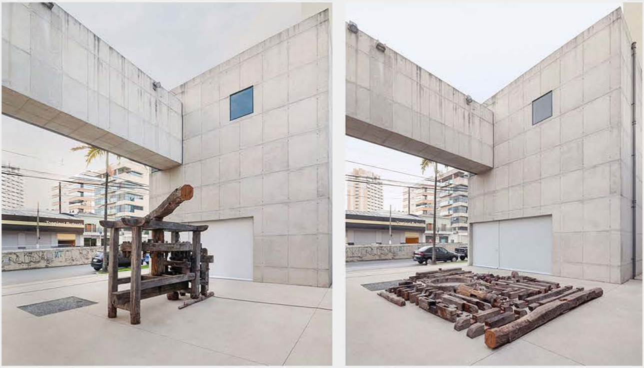
Visual artist

The Phantom Matrix (Old Structures, New Glories) was a new commissioned work that engendered an installation, which transformed itself in successive moments. Elaborated within the framework of Situ Project [1], in São Paulo, it comprised the use of a 150-year-old sugarcane wood mill, an electrical motor and other components.

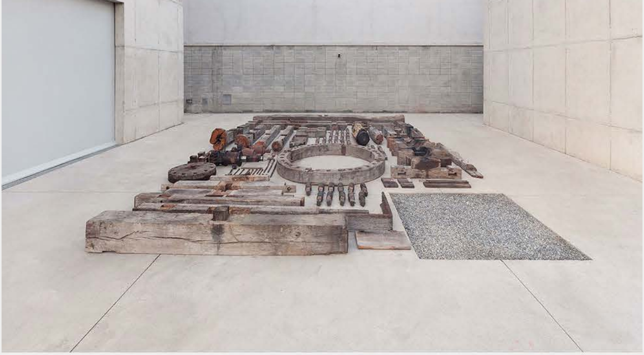


This site-responsive project was based on a historical and geographical research of the district of Butantã, in São Paulo. While delving into the colonial past of the site, I discovered that in the seventeenth century, São Paulo's first sugar cane mill was built there (at what was then called Ubatatá farm). These mills were devices used to grind sugar cane in early colonial times and were powered by humans (slaves) or animal traction (cows or horses). They can be regarded as one of the very first economical matrices and proto-industrial devices employed in the exploration of the global colonies. This device is therefore a sort of evidence regarding a specific type of relationship between power and land ownership that precedes what would be the structuring model of the Brazilian territory, which has prevailed over the last 250 years and is far from being overcome: still today, this model is expressed by a late urbanization loaded with many disorders arising from a patriarchal and patrimonial society whose political, economic and social powers are concentrated in the hands of a minor elite, which by extent are also owners of large portions of land.[2]

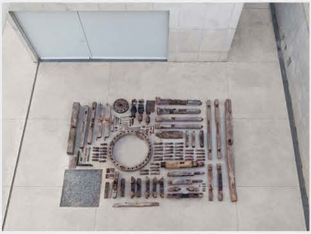
So it seemed interesting to me to go back and refer to such type of forgotten 'economical roots' to contrast a neglected past against the new rhetorics of modernization and development that fill the many empty promises of progress as well as against the fictionalizations of local history, which obliterates the colonial violence and its destructions (of nature and its populations) to favor the construction of an imposed pseudo European (and white) national identity that praises such processes as a heroic conquest of the new land. And all these are key elements employed in both the idea of São Paulo as a global and industrial megalopolis as well as in the troubling heritage of slavery that still echoes in the many forms of racial oppression and exclusion today.

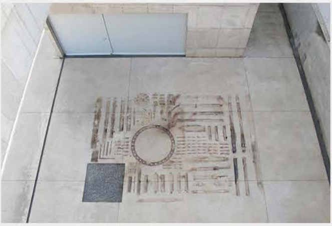


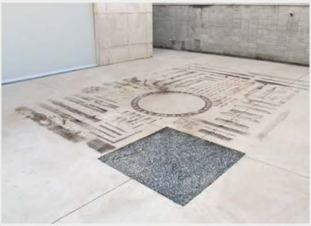
In this spatial and public intervention, I employed an original wooden sugar mill, considering it as an artifact with which I could structure the entire project to address the notions of historical narratives, memory and disappearance, and in this sense, to articulate the intrinsic materiality of these spheres with their conceptual agencies. A phase zero involved locating, purchasing and transporting the mill. Phase one comprehended its exhibition in its raw and initial state. Further movements involved putting the mill in motion without producing anything (by the use of an electrical motor), its subsequent dismantling and the rearranging of its pieces in a sort of cataloging grid –similar to those used in forensic processes, accident sites or even in the dismantling and dissection of old artifacts. The last phase of work on that site consisted of removing all the pieces from the space, leaving behind imprints of the mill's parts in the floor as well a soundtrack of recordings linked to the mill's functional stages and working processes executed in different parts of the process.



By bringing this type of colonial engine back to the neighborhood where it first appeared, I aimed to create a collision between two different historical epochs. And what could just be regarded as an operation of rescuing a historical fact of the city became a process of displacement, presentation, dematerialization and disappearance. This colonial piece, a proto-industrial device, became a live artifact which vanished again during its own exhibition, evoking the same erasure and disappearance processes that permeate the spatial development of cities as well as the very history of urbanism, as also the economies and cultures that inform it. With these successive actions, I ponder upon the notion of 'heritage' that occurs in parallel to the imminent obliteration of certain historical buildings, cultures, information and societies. The work provides, in the end, a space for reflection that makes possible to question whether the modernization project in Brazil effectively meant a rupture with its colonial past or if, in fact, it is just the continuity of a colonizing process, with its logic of repression still prevailing in so many contexts.



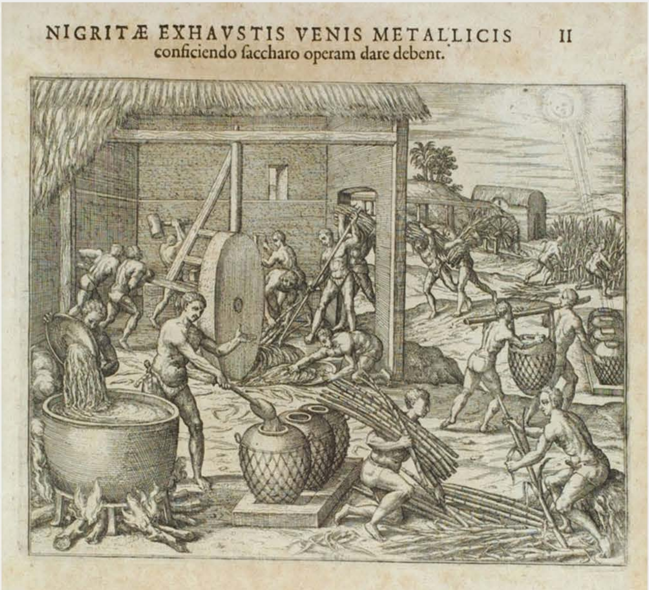


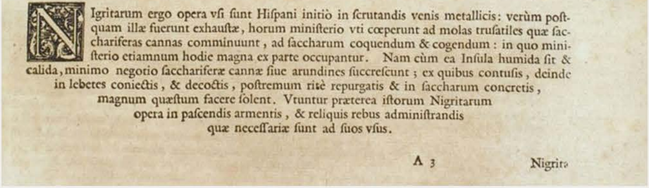


A last stage is planned to be developed, where all these elements and realities could merge in a new exhibit, composing a material display that would become an overlapping of times, places and narratives.

A Collection of Artifacts

What follows as an essay of images here is a draft for this situation, for a possible after-life of this project, where the dismantled device (the sugarcane mill) would coexist with other historical and cultural artifacts which are, by their extent, evidences of the much larger chain of relations and networks that were already articulating the exploitation of an emerging global and colonial economy which grounds what we have until recently called globalization –as well its implications regarding the drastic effects we are experiencing in the so-called new era, the anthropocene.


NIGRITÆ EXHAVSTIS VENIS METALLICIS conficiendo ſaccharo operam dare debent.
II

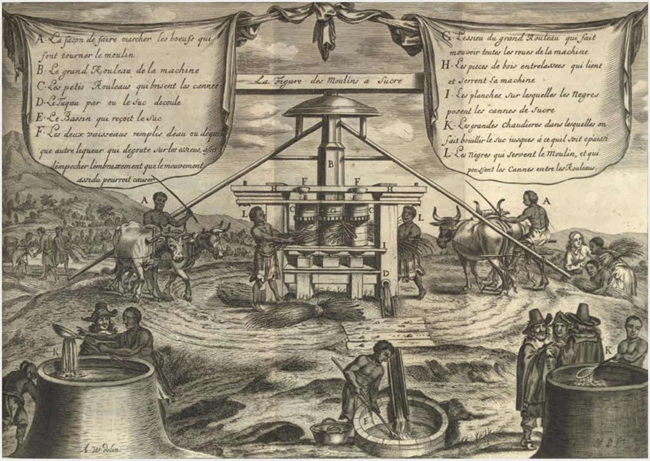


Nigritarum ergo opera vſi ſunt Hiſpani initiò in ſcrutandis venis metallicis: verùm poſtquam illæ fuerunt exhauſtæ, horum miniſterio vti cœperunt ad molas truſatiles quæ ſacchariferas cannas comminuunt, ad ſaccharum coquendum & cogendum: in quo miniſterio etiamnum hodie magna ex parte occupantur. Nam cùm ea Inſula humida ſit & calida, minimo negotio ſacchariferæ cannæ ſiue arundines ſuccreſcunt; ex quibus contuſis, deinde in lebetes coniectis, & decoctis, poſtremum ritè repurgatis & in ſaccharum concretis, magnum quæſtum facere ſolent. Vtuntur præterea iſtorum Nigritarum opera in paſcendis armentis, & reliquis rebus adminiſtrandis quæ neceſſariæ ſunt ad ſuos vſus.

A 3 Nigrit

Girolamo Benzoni, *Americae pars quinta nobilis & admiratione* (Frankfort, 1595), part V, fig 1. (Copy in Library Company of Philadelphia)"Nigritae in Scrutandis Venis Metallicis Ab Hispanis in Insulas Ablegantur . . . I."

This is one of the earliest known illustrations of slave labor in the New World, and is the fanciful depiction of the De Bry brothers, the Flemish engravers (who never visited the New World), based on a brief passage in Benzoni (and, perhaps, other voyagers): "When the natives of this island (Espanola) began to be extirpated, the Spaniards provided themselves with blacks (Mori) from Guinea [...] and they have brought great numbers thence. When there were mines, they made them work at the gold and silver [Benzoni, fig. 1, above]; but since those came to an end they have increased the sugar-works [Benzoni, fig. 2], and in these and in tending the flocks they are chiefly occupied, besides serving their masters in all else" (See *History of the New World* by Girolamo Benzoni, of Milan. Shewing his travels in America, from A.D. 1541 to 1556. First translated and edited by Rear-Admiral W. H. Smyth. London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1857; original published in Venice, 1565, p. 93. Imagen info


A·La façon de faire marcher les boeufs qui font tourner le moulin
B·Le grand Rouleau de la machine
C·Les petis Rouleaus qui brisent les cannes
D·Le Tuyau par ou le suc decoule
E·Le Bassin qui reçoit le suc
F·Les deux vaisseaus remplis déau ou de quelque autre liqueur qui degoute sur les essieus, afin dempecher lembrazement que le mouvement assidu pourroit causer
La Figure des Moulins a Sucre
G·Lessieu du grand Rouleau qui fait mouvoir toutes les roues de la machine
H·Les pieces de bois entrelassees qui lient et serrent la machine
I·Les planches sur lesquelles les Negres posent les cannes de Sucre
K·Les grandes chaudieres dans lesquelles on fait bouillir le suc iusques á ce quel soit epaissi
L·Les Negres qui servent le Moulin, et qui poussent les Cannes entre les Rouleaus
A
B
C
D
E
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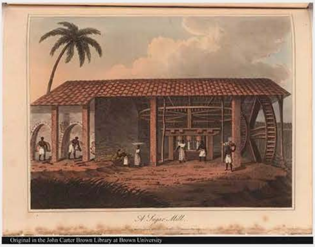
H
I
K
L
A.W. delin.

Charles de Rochefort, *Histoire naturelle et morale des îles Antilles de l'Amérique [...]* (Rotterdam, 1681), p. 332. Copy in Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library. Various phases of sugar-making are identified by letters, e.g., A, "la façon de faire marcher les boefs que sont tourner le moulin" (the way in which the cattle that turn the mill are walked); L, "les nègres qui servent le moulin, et qui posent les cannes entre les rouleaus" (the blacks who service the mill, and put the canes between the rollers). The same illustration appears in the 1665 edition of De Rochefort.


A Sugar Mill.
Original in the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University

Koster-Henry, *A Sugar Mill*, ca. 1793-1820, Travels in Brazil. Publication date: 1816. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown

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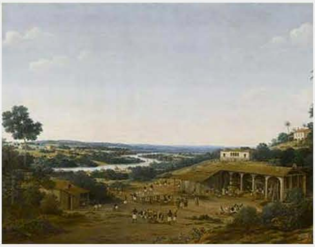
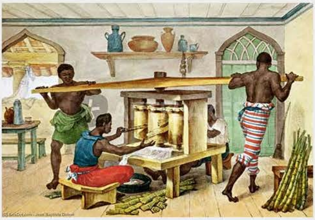
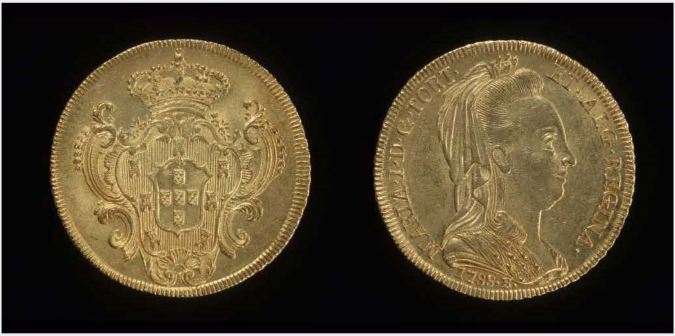


Vue d' engenho real au Brésil, dit aussi vue d'une sucrerie au Brésil. Oil on canvas. 117 x 167 cm. (Musée du Louvre, ca. 1650-55.)

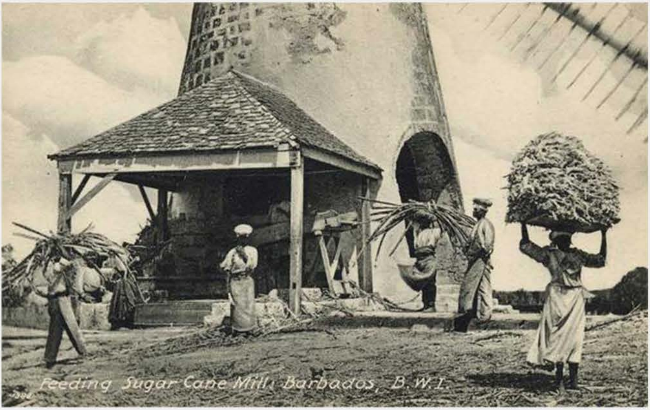


Small Portable Sugar Mill, by Jean Baptiste Debret (1768-1848, France).

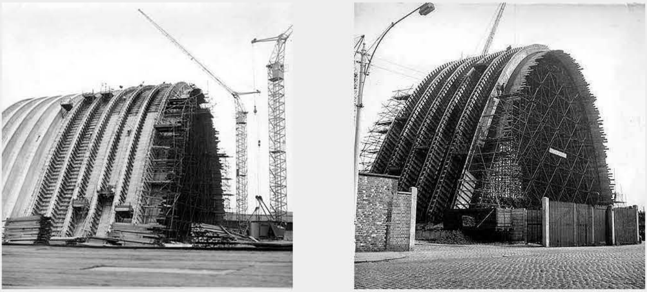
This piece of cane was brought from the West Indies by Private R. W. Cattely of the 1st Battalion - The Connaught Rangers. The Barbados garrison was one of the largest in the Caribbean. British troops were stationed on the island throughout the 18th and 19th centuries before being withdrawn in 1905. National Army Museum, London.



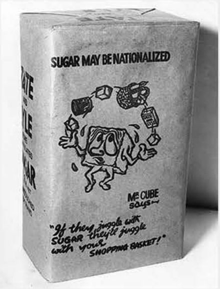
A gold Coin of 6,400 reis with an effigy of Dona Maria I, from the British Museum Collection. The Queen issued a decree in 1785 which prohibited the establishment of factories and manufactures in Brazil, arguing that with the development of factories and manufactures, settlers ceased to cultivate and exploit the riches of the land, and to make agriculture prosper in the *sesmarias*, as promised by those who received them. Those who disobeyed the license would have to pay a fine to the crown and to whoever had reported it. There are claims that such an act was aimed at improving relations with England (a long-standing partner of Portugal), favoring their nascent textile industry and other sectors of the country that needed new markets for the flow of early industrial production.


Feeding Sugar Cane Mill, Barbados, B.W.I.

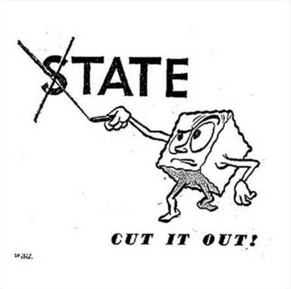
People feeding cane to be crushed by this windmill in the Caribbean Barbados (no date). Imagen info



A section of Tate & Lyle's poured concrete shell of Love Lane sugar refinery, Liverpool, under construction. Photograph: 1956 ©Historic England Archive, ref- OP02386.


SUGAR MAY BE NATIONALIZED
TATE
LYLE
SUGAR
Mr CUBE says—
"If they juggle with SUGAR they'll juggle with your SHOPPING BASKET!"

A Tate & Lyle bag of sugar carries an anti-nationalization slogan: "If they



Mr. Cube, 1949 (character created against the risk of nationalization of juggle with sugar they'll juggle with your shopping basket" (1949). Tate & Lyle Sugar Co. Photograph: Hulton Archive / Getty Images.

In Brazil, the sugar cane industry still employs people in its cutting, and quite often they are subjected to working conditions that may be considered similar to slavery. One of the largest contemporary releases of slave labor occurred in 2005 at Gameleira Distillery, located in Confresa (MT), in which 1,003 workers were released. Only in 2007, 5,990 workers were freed from working conditions analog to slavery in Brazil (http://reporterbrasil.org.br/dados/trabalhoescravo/) and every year the local government releases the *Lista Suja* (Dirty List) in which they include all the companies that were prosecuted and fined. There is currently a bill (PL 432/2013) approved in 2017 by the Brazilian National Congress and Government, which 'increases flexibility' in the law against slave labor, reducing the criteria of what can be considered as slave labor and analogous slave work in Brazil.

Imagen info

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[1] The project was developed in the first half of 2016. https://projetositu.wordpress.com/2016/03/18/671/

[2] A recent research acknowledges that now in Brazil, 6 people concentrate and handle an amount of wealth that is equivalent to the sum of the wealth of 100,000,000 people (which means almost half of the country's population).