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Wake in Guangzhou: Steps for an Ecological Aesthetics

– Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra

*This plant world that strikes us as so tranquil, so resigned,
where all seems to be acceptance, silence, obedience,
reverence, is on the contrary one wherein the revolt
against destiny is at its most vehement and most obstinate.*

– Maurice Maeterlinck¹

We need to rethink what ‘nature’ means in an age of transplants.

– Alan Bewell²

In late 2008, Berlin-based Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves spent six weeks in the port city of Guangzhou looking to awaken dormant seeds she had found buried in the city’s former merchant quarters. Previously known as Canton, Guangzhou had been, for two centuries, the only entry point to China for foreigners, mainly merchants involved in the trade of tea, silk and spices. Until the First Opium War (1839–42), merchants were subject to strict regulations, including not being allowed to bring along their wives or stay beyond a limited time. Alves, therefore, not only sought to explore the alluring and diverse physiognomies that

¹ Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Intelligence of Flowers*, trans. Philip Mosley, Albany: SUNY, 2005 [1907], p.2.

² Alan Bewell, ‘Traveling Natures’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol.29, no.2–3, 2007, p.91.

might spout from Guangzhou's long-dormant seeds, but also to arouse the forgotten stories leading to the seeds' presence in China: stories of travel, migration, encounter and colonialism. Yet, Alves's botanical research in Guangzhou and its artistic *dérive* should not be reduced to the task of compiling and archiving stories. Exhibited in 2008 as an installation at Guangzhou Museum of Art, the piece resulting from this research was rather an intervention into the present-day city. It raised the possibility of a theoretical and ethical reconceptualisation of the metropolis from a post-human, eco-critical perspective.³ Alves's research-led installation, in other words, acted upon what Jennifer Wolch describes as the *zoöpolis* – a 'renaturalised, re-enchanted city' that reintegrates people, animals and plants⁴ – to configure, assemble and map what anthropologist Gregory Bateson described as a thinking system, a complex mind.⁵

Wake in Guangzhou: The History of the Earth is the full title of Alves's work, which belongs to a series of projects by the artist that have focussed on the polysemic notion of *wake*: *Wake for Berlin* (1999–2000), *Wake in Guangzhou* (2008) and *Wake: Flight of Birds and People* (Dubai, 2015). The series began in Berlin, as an investigation into the history and memory of the soil of seventeen sites within the German city and the possible reasons for the presence of certain seeds in those locations.⁶ This led the artist to approach the city not from the well-established topos of its architectural ruins but from the perspective of long silent and invisible elements of its landscape – thereby shedding light on relationships of power, stories of conquest and the actions of humans and nonhumans in the shaping the urban environment. Similarly, *Wake in Guangzhou* may be seen as both an exploration of the aesthetics and rhythms of plant life and a deeper search into the entangled histories of botany and migration.

³ The work was subsequently exhibited at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts as part of the exhibition 'The Way Things Go' (2015), curated by Rirkrit Tiravanija. A part of the installation will be exhibited at Galleria Enrico Astuni in Bologna in June 2017.

⁴ Jennifer Wolch, 'Zoöpolis', *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, vol.7, no.2, 1996, p.28.

⁵ See Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1987.

⁶ The installation *Wake for Berlin* was exhibited in BüroFriedrich in 2001 and in the Jüdisches Museum in 2011.

Revisiting this work in the context of what has been called the biggest refugee crisis since World War II allows us to consider the ethical value of this alternative history of human and biophysical flows.⁷ *Wake in Guangzhou*, in other words, took on the task of botanical exhumation in order to erode often pernicious boundaries: between purity and contamination, between the native and the foreigner, between nature and culture, between objecthood and life. I shall suggest that these boundaries began to be fully reassembled and reconceptualised with the rise of cybernetics in the 1950s, leading in the past two decades to a heightened interest in forms of communication and co-production between living and nonliving entities; in hybrids. Cybernetic ideas have also given rise to new approaches to ecology and semiotics aimed at casting non-anthropocentric accounts of complex urban-biological assemblages.⁸

In view of the contemporary saliency of these new epistemologies and their pertinence to impending ecological and human cataclysms, and in light of Alves's long-standing commitment to green activism and indigenous movements, I will offer a reading of Alves's *Wake in Guangzhou* from the perspective of Bateson's ecological aesthetics. Having founded in 1979 the New York-based Brazilian Information Center in an effort to lobby for the rights of indigenous peoples in Brazil, in 1987 the artist cofounded the Brazilian Partido Verde (Green Party) in São Paulo. These experiences and political commitments have, in turn, taken various forms in Alves's art: from making visible past practices of commerce with indigenous bodies and associated issues of 'heritage' repatriation in works such as *Fair Trade Head* (2007), to an extended investigation of the desiccation and sudden return of Mexico's Lake Chalco that considers the inadequately acknowledged colonial history of water management, in *El retorno de un lago (The Return of a Lake)*, 2012). My in-depth reading of *Wake in Guangzhou* will put into dialogue what T.J. Demos describes as the 'political

⁷ UNICEF, 'Latest on the Refugee and Migrant Crisis', *UNICEF* [blog], available at https://www.unicef.org/ceecis/resources_28329.html (last accessed on 15 May 2017).

⁸ See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999; and Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain: Sketches of Another Future*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

ecology' of Alves's research-based art and the epistemological possibilities emerging from her visual and narrative approach to the zoöpolis.⁹

Travelling Seeds: Situationism Redux?

Wake in Guangzhou is a piece resulting from an extended period of historical investigation and informed by the research of botanists, for example Heli Julita, with whom Alves sustained a technical and intimate epistolary relationship during the course of the project.¹⁰ The visual outcome of this research was a large-scale diagrammatic installation occupying two long walls in the Guangzhou Museum of Art. The piece brought together Alves's ink drawings of plants from various countries and black-and-white and colour reproductions of historical photographs and paintings, accompanied by synthetic pieces of contextual information written directly onto the museum walls. The mural-size diagram linked the plants with their stories. Arrows extended from historical images of the long-distance journeying and lives of men and women involved in the circulation of goods, and pointed to the pleasing shapes of the shrubs and floras that today constitute Guangzhou's living and dormant natural landscape.

Despite the various research elements embedded in the piece, I see it less as a work of research than as a performance capable of conveying what Néstor García Canclini calls, in his recent book *La sociedad sin relato (Art Beyond Itself, 2010)*, an 'epistemological experience'.¹¹ I would describe the performative or experiential character of the work as resulting from a pendular oscillation between, on the one hand, the critical curiosity that moves research along and, on the other, the artist's interest in affectively impacting the

⁹ T.J. Demos, 'Return of a Lake: Contemporary Art and Political Ecology in Mexico', in *Maria Thereza Alves: The Return of a Lake* (exh. cat.), Mexico City: Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, 2014, p.30.

¹⁰ See Teobaldo Lagos Preller, "'Wake" de Maria Thereza Alves: Palabra y proceso vegetal, saberes en expansión', *Revista de Estudios Globales y Arte Contemporáneo*, vol.3, no.1, 2015, p.448.

¹¹ See Néstor García Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself: Anthropology for a Society Without a Story Line* (trans. David Frye), Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014, p.16. Originally published as *La sociedad sin relato. Antropología y estética de la inminencia*, Madrid: Katz, 2010.

viewer, to the point of disregarding the possible paucity of evidence or imprecise sources. As an epistemological experience, therefore, Alves's *Wake in Guangzhou* did not prove an idea or a theoretical proposition but attempted to perform its nature, scope and consequences. The names of the plants and the historical sources were neither recorded by the artist in her notebooks nor made known to viewers. The investigation could thus be described as a concatenation of historical *objets trouvés*, whose origins were in turn left behind.¹²

The use of primarily affective methodology in the production of research-led art does not diminish its 'experientially epistemological' value. One of the central propositions of Alves's work is that there are politically and ecologically pernicious consequences to misreading natural landscapes as native, indigenous, static, pure or uncontaminated. A second proposition questions the fundamentally anthropocentric character of received natural and political histories from colonial times to the present neoliberal era of globalism, and makes visible the challenges these received histories pose to the task of forging a complex eco-critical history. Both propositions are not only compelling but also mobilise the spectator affectively through feelings of disquiet, unease and awareness.

We tend to assume, as Alan Bewell suggests, that 'mobility and travel are a human privilege. Nature is local ... something that is visited and revisited, not something that itself travels, coming across the seas and fundamentally changing lives, for better or worse'.¹³ This narrative obscures the fact that, as the author adds, 'natures have been travelling for a long time. On winds, rivers and tides, or in the stomachs, fur or feathers of birds and beasts. ... Human beings have been instrumental in this process.'¹⁴ Indeed, if bees, bats, birds and water are key to the processes of pollination and fertilisation amongst plants, allowing seeds to

¹² In an email, Alves wrote me that she visited two archives and two libraries but did not keep track of the sources. She recalls 'a book of the paintings by an Italian priest who was the court painter under I think Emperor Qianlong. Another was a book on merchants of Guangzhou in the seventeenth or eighteenth century.'

¹³ A. Bewell, 'Traveling Natures', *op. cit.*, p.89. See also A. Bewell, *Natures in Translation: Romanticism and Colonial Natural History*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017.

¹⁴ A. Bewell, 'Traveling Natures', *op. cit.*, p.89.

travel relatively short distances and increasing genetic variation within species, humans have likely allowed the most plant varieties to travel the farthest. Within this immensely diverse ensemble of travellers, some human seed carriers have sought to spread crops in order to control and ‘domesticate’ distant lands, while others have unknowingly born seeds to new environments. Therefore, excavating the origins of seed banks, as Alves has done, is not only a botanical endeavour but also a search for the possible cultural origins of transplanted species; it involves the exhumation of a remarkable multiplicity of stories of human flux and cultural exchange. This biotic archive lying inaudibly underground has thus allowed the artist, upon its awakening, to compose a rich hybrid archive of historical narratives and plant forms. The assemblage of these components may be understood as part of larger ecological and cybernetic systems, in which information flows between and affects humans and nonhumans alike. This hybrid archive is also constitutive of what may be described as a global history of locality.

The stories Alves awakened in *Wake in Guangzhou* ranged from the travels Moroccan scholar Ibn Battuta¹⁵ (c.1304–68) to the life of Soong Ching-ling (1893–1981), the first female pilot in China and wife of Sun Yat-sen, the country’s first president. During her lifetime, Ching-ling met such figures as Mahatma Gandhi, Mao Tse-Tung and various Russian, American and Indian visitors likely carrying seeds to China. The artwork recounted, too, the importance of Mongols in spreading seeds over 25 per cent of the earth’s surface; and the distant journeys of Jesuit missionaries including Matteo Ricci, who studied in Rome and travelled to Goa, Macau and Guangzhou. *Wake of Guangzgou* also touched upon the history of colonialism by memorialising the work of female tea leaf pickers, and recalled the presence of Dutch and French merchants in Guangzgou – how they attended, for instance, the birthday celebrations of Emperor Qianlong (1735–96), whose army invaded Vietnam and

¹⁵ Battuta travelled to, among other places, Guangzhou, Damascus, Cairo, Hebron, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Iraq, Iran, Mombasa, Anatolia, Afghanistan, the Maldives and Vietnam.

Burma and battled the Dzungar people. During Qianlong's reign, China received tributes from Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, France, Java, Sumatra, Melaka, Burma, Vietnam and Sri Lanka. The arrival of seeds in large numbers as a result of colonialism also entailed departures en masse. For instance, the first British diplomatic mission to China, led by Lord George Macartney in 1793, failed to achieve its desired objective of relaxing trade restrictions on British merchants, but it did bring 400 varieties of Chinese plants back to Europe.

Each of these stories, among the many present in *Wake of Guangzgou*, demonstrated that it is not only humans who travel but also plants and animals, and that plants and animals have frequently been the reason for human travel, even if this has been largely understated in our accounts of the past. Furthermore, travelling plants are not just a curiosity, they bring meaning to distant places, and possibilities for action – 'natures, like words, do not travel alone,' writes Bewell. He adds that 'these biotic translations also brought new histories and meanings to their new homes':

Alongside our assumption of nature's stability and permanence, another story needs to be told: of natures on the move; of natures uprooted, deterritorialised, and transplanted to new parts of the globe; of immigrant, creole and transnational natures; of newly emergent natures composed of the struggling mixed entanglement of indigenous species with exotic, foreign or introduced ones.

The colonial world may be described, according to Bewell, as the 'midwife of modern natures'.¹⁶ Indeed, as much as colonialism dramatically accelerated the movement of peoples

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92 and 90.

around the globe, it too transformed natural landscapes through the transfer and exchange of other biotic forms.

The possibilities for nature's travel have preoccupied a wide array of botanists and historians of science. Professors such as Reverend John Walker at the University of Edinburgh established connections between economic interests and natural history aimed at yielding knowledge capable of transforming 'the natural world as part of a broader imperial and commercial order'.¹⁷ Yet despite the unprecedented possibilities for biotic exchange arising from colonialism, 'this expanded movement of natures did not ... lead to an increase in ecological diversity, but instead to the greater global presence of fewer plants and animals'.¹⁸ In this sense, *Wake in Guangzhou* could not be farther from a Situationist map of random and affective *dérives*. Alves's work instead outlined the various shifts, displacements, transplants and transfers stemming from the workings of (colonial) power.

Steps for An Ecological Aesthetics

Yet in discussing this piece, the Situationist urban topos cannot be so easily abandoned. *Wake in Guangzhou* is as much a critical intervention into received history, as it is a reflection on the city and the constitutive elements of urban life. As Wolch suggests, the process of urbanisation has tended to be understood as led by the conquest and control of nature. 'The moral compass of city-builders', she writes, 'pointed toward the virtues of reason, progress and profit, leaving wild lands and wild things – as well as people deemed to be wild or "savage" – beyond the scope of their reckoning.'¹⁹ Late-capitalist urbanisation has exacerbated these tendencies. Yet it has also brought together, as if closing down a circle, the sterilising logics of mass-scale and financialised urban development and the seemingly

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.95.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.90.

¹⁹ Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. See also Matthew Gandy, 'El resurgir de Zoópolis: biodiversidad, paisaje y ecologías cosmopolitas', *Urban*, vol.5, March–August, 2013, pp.9–14.

ungovernable return of the wild, in the form of towering amounts of waste and impending natural disaster. In this context, urban theory's disregard for the actant power of nonhuman life risks taking such a high toll that we must reimagine the very idea of the metropolis in order to face its uncertain future. A trans-species urban theory such as Wolch's is akin to the idea of a cyborg city. It takes nonhumans seriously in seeking to understand the complex historical and natural processes shaping life in the metropolis; it sees them against the backdrop of globalising economies, considering what this means for animals, plants and other beings.

Alves's work – by uprooting colonial history from the seed world up while exposing today's metropolises as deeply embedded in a cultural and biological postcolonial condition – situates us at the core of Wolch's call to attend the need to renaturalise the city. Indeed, the urban and political dimensions of Alves's work were already perceptible in the first instantiation of *Wake*, undertaken in a city, Berlin, undergoing intensive urban renewal. The artist 'dug under' Berlin in order to collect seed samples and research possible narratives leading to their presence in seventeen historically significant sites. As in the case of *Wake in Guangzhou*, Alves saw the work as about networks of interrelations and ways of understanding them. It was about the 'daily witnessing of our stories', she has written. 'I see *Wake* as a story that we have involved ourselves in simply by walking around Berlin. Each step links us to mini-stories of a passer-by, or of a bird flitting from a bush to a rooftop, perhaps on its way to Africa from Siberia.'²⁰ Stories are, for Alves, links – bonds between humans as well as nonhumans. They frame the distribution of our perception of the world, and correspondingly, our perception of our sense of self.

The seeds Alves awakened are not, therefore, sheer residues, but signifiers of systems lying silent beneath layers of city concrete. The artist's evocation of an awakening is not

²⁰ Maria Thereza Alves, 'Wake for Berlin, 1999–2001', statement available on the artist's website at <http://www.mariatherezaalves.org/works/wake-for-berlin?c=47> (last accessed on 15 May 2017).

limited to facilitating the germination of seeds; rather, it involves collecting historical photographs of the people who might have brought them to the site. *Wake in Guangzhou* thus generated, according to Teobaldo Lagos Preller, an already global archive of local memories²¹ – a composite of images, stories and plants blended together by the synchronic temporality of the seeds’ awakening as well as their common presence at a given site. Yet positing the seeds as objects to be collected, classified and archived rather than as fully fledged actants – constitutive of the larger ecology of the *zoöpolis* – ultimately limits the artwork’s epistemic and eco-critical potential. We could conceive of them as belonging to an embodied and extended mind, per Bateson’s innovative reconception of the notion of ecology.

After his immersion into post-War cybernetic theory,²² Bateson brought information and systems theory to the study of ecology. His radical conceptual and methodological reframing involved questioning ecological and systems thinkers’ traditional focus on energy and material flows. This was in order to suggest, as Jon Goodbun writes, that ‘ecosystems had to be considered to be communicating and informational systems, and even as mental systems, as minds’, and that ‘we are constantly participating in cognitive systems that extend throughout our environment’; he saw aesthetics as a means to gain this ecological awareness.²³ ‘Art, as *process*’ was, for Bateson, capable of ‘linking us to our context’, the latter being understood in the rich sense of the extended mind.²⁴

²¹ T. Lagos Preller, “‘Wake’ de Maria Thereza Alves”, *op. cit.*, p.442.

²² Post-War cybernetic theory was first crafted by American mathematician Norbert Wiener in collaboration with, among others, Mexican physiologist Arturo Rosenblueth. It was then appropriated by academics from various fields through what are known as the Macy Conferences in New York (1946–53). These conferences were attended by Wiener, Rosenblueth, Bateson, W. Ross Ashby, Julian Bigelow, Margaret Mead, Heinz von Foerster and John von Neumann, and various others..

²³ Jon Goodbun, ‘Gregory Bateson’s Ecological Aesthetics – an Addendum to Urban Political Ecology’, *Field: A Free Journal for Architecture*, vol.4, no.1, 2010, p.41–42.

²⁴ Jon Goodbun, ‘Gregory Bateson’s Ecological Aesthetics – an Addendum to Urban Political Ecology’, *Field: A Free Journal for Architecture*, vol.4, no.1, 2010, p.41–42, emphasis original. See also Noel G. Charlton, *Understanding Gregory Bateson: Mind, Beauty, and the Sacred Earth*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008, p.102.

Refashioning or ‘awakening’ nature, according to this framework, has much larger consequences than what one might envision from a strictly humanist or anthropocentric perspective. Indeed, this process would mutually affect plants and humans at various levels of communication and exchange. The significance of this vision for Alves’s *Wake in Guangzhou* is therefore difficult to disregard, for it shifts the position of the artist (and the viewer) from that of archivist to that of thinker and communicator, taking part in complex systems of (information) processing and exchange. Viewers are, moreover, able to recognise in this work an ontological claim about the ultimately frail and disabling borders setting individuals, cultures and living systems apart. One becomes increasingly aware that it is only by way of their entanglement that they act, ‘think’ and produce change. Alves produced in *Wake in Guangzhou* a thinking system able to dwell on and debunk political histories of national or natural purity. The diagrammatic visuality of the installation already suggested its relationship to an understanding of the mind as reticulose and plastic, capable of interconnecting narratives and adapting to shifting modes of learning and sentient experiences.²⁵ But it is through the processual act of awakening dormant seeds that the work sets its thinking potentiality into motion: tuned to a nonhuman temporality, the work ignited a form of memory and intelligence that decentres human communication in favour of a myriad of, often invisible, biotic interactions. This conception of mind is not only largely absent from the history of modern knowledge, and seemingly impossible to conceive in the hyper-modern environments we inhabit, but may also be Gaia’s only possible redeemer. For the ‘wake’ not to become a vigil, that is, we ought to return to the land, exhume it, understand its idea of time; for land, too, we are. Our common migrant histories thus testify.

²⁵ Stemming from neuroscience, the notion of neuroplasticity or brain plasticity refers to the adaptability and mutability of the brain resulting from learning, behaviour or the environment at all stages of human development. Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2009, p.xii.