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Expanded Scenography from the Global South

Renato Bolelli Rebouças

Abstract

This article starts from the discussion and reflection on contemporary scenographic production and its expanded practices to present the concept of an expanded scenography from the Global South, whose aesthetic, spatial, and language principles include different socio-cultural epistemologies in diverse countries, in its various manifestations.

Based on the concept of epistemologies of the South, presented by sociologist Boaventura de Souza Santos, I seek to approach a scenographic epistemology from the South, whose perspective is connected with a process of extraction and destruction, the street and unconventional spaces, environment, climate and the ritual, including examples from Latin America, Asia, and African continents.

Key words

expanded scenography, Global South, epistemology of the South, destruction, environment, ecology

This article presents the perspective of an expanded scenography from the South, seeking to investigate the creative procedures and practices carried out in the Global South that have suffered colonisation processes. Based on the definition of the epistemologies of the South proposed by sociologist Boaventura de Souza Santos and Maria Paula Meneses (2009), I use the notion of expanded scenography presented by Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer (2017) to reflect on a scenographic making intrinsic to the socio-political, geographical, cultural, and spiritual realities present in the Southern countries, including the experience of their artists, in varied languages and perspectives.

Following this definition, I present a theoretical-practical research platform developed since 2010, organised around four conceptual axes – precariousness, materiality, performativity, and transdisciplinarity – as formulators of a *poetics of destruction*. To this end, I take my practical research as an object of study, representing Brazilian production, and also including artists and works from different continents.

Combining related concepts presented by Brazilian authors such as Milton Santos, Ailton Krenak, and Antônio Bispo dos Santos, I propose an understanding of a transdisciplinary *ecology of knowledge* through the confluence of the perceptions, including indigenous and Afro-diasporic matrices – connected to nature and the environment, ancestry, socio-political events, and a continuous process of destruction of their landscapes and peoples. In this way, to the detriment of the theatre-making established mainly in the countries of the Global North, of Euro-American origin, located inside the scenic box of the theatre building, I seek to reflect on the existence of a scenographic epistemology in the Global South.

Scenography expanded

The investigation of contemporary scenographic practices has provided a vibrant arena for the creation, production, discussion, and theory of artistic making, involving different disciplines, procedures, and ways of working that go beyond the classic concept of scenography itself and what it represents, despite its wide and multiple scope. In parallel to a long tradition of the scenographic model on the stage of the theatre building – whose dominant architectural forms have defined the relationship between stage and audience in much of the theatre established in the West since the European Renaissance – the understanding of scenographic making unfolds, multiplying its definition, as the expressions *scenic space* or *scenic environment*, or even the notion of *environmental scenography*, proposed by Aronson (2018) taking the definition of Richard Schechner (1994), in which the viewer's position is 'something incorporated within the frame, surrounded by the frame, or by several distinct frames' (ARONSON 2018: 8).

The notion of *site-specific* can also be included in this expansion, as, for example, Mike Pearson's work with the theatre company Brith Gof. According to Pearson, site-specific performance is adjudged for 'investigating the spatial dimension of contemporary identities, representing "formal and aesthetic but also political choices"'

(PEARSON 2010: 8). By obtaining other places, the scenographer expands his/her way of acting, as his/her relationships ramp up a 'dynamic of positioning, relating and difference, as a fully embodied experience' (ZUPANC LOTKER 2016: 12), in an interaction that can result in both encounters and conflicts. He/she experiences the different performativity of spaces, materials, devices, and equipment manipulated by performers and even themselves, opening the investigation of new fields, presented in contemplative, immersive, or interactive experiences, varying scale, intention, mode of operation, activation, and audience participation.

The principles of this *scenography expanded* – a term that goes beyond the theatrical making itself – determine spatial, material, and sensory relationships of the body (both from performer and audience) among environments, objects, and atmospheres, presented by Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer (2017). This concept emerges from the widening and restructuring of scenography and the new configurations of the scene/performance. Focused on the multisensorial aspects of contemporary performance, the expanded scenography widens its language in a performative and transdisciplinary practice, involving not only the aesthetic and concepts, but also its atmospheres, smells, acoustic, and technical relations, contexts, social groups and their intersections.

The expansion of scenography goes from the object to the situation, taking place in space-time. If 'expanded scenography does not represent a complete break with theatre practice, but it does represent a new way of thinking about the spatial, material and design-based aspects of performance' (MCKINNEY and PALMER 2017: 2), scenography communicates not only through its characteristics but also its socio-political-cultural-economic context, imaginary, symbologies, and modes of reception. These immersive environments – usually found spaces (unusual or abandoned, external areas such as public spaces and Nature) – dematerialise the idea of set design as an element created from the sketch, connecting directly with its ambiance and atmosphere.

From this understanding, scenography becomes geography and territory: urbanised and politicised, belonging to the field of relations and the critical dimension of reality. The work is neither construction nor the designed space, focusing its potentiality on the diagram of relationships it produces in the environment. The scenographic space converts its representation or support into a relationship agent. In this transition, an equivalent change can be seen in the audience, which acquires a more active attitude, going through the places, exploring instead of just contemplating them. If the roles and functions of scenography are amplified, therefore, from what assumptions do we imagine this expansion globally?

If expanded scenography is 'reframing debates and changing established epistemologies in theatre and performance discourse and related cultural, historical, social and political fields', as Aronson and Collins point out (quoted in MCKINNEY and PALMER 2017: 3), would it be possible to delimit or, rather, understand and discuss differences between the scenographic practices performed in the Northern and the Southern countries?

Expanding scenography from the Global South

I propose to examine the expanded scenography which perspective is located in the South, from the identification of an *epistemology of the South*, a term discussed by the sociologists Boaventura de Souza Santos and Maria Paula Meneses: ‘metaphorically conceived as a field of epistemic challenges seeking to repair the damages and impacts historically caused by capitalism in its colonial relationship with the world’¹ (SANTOS and MENESES 2009: 12). It is a ‘set of epistemological interventions exposing the suppression of knowledge carried out, over the last centuries, by the dominant epistemological rule’ (SANTOS and MENESES 2009: 12), becoming a starting point for such perception. This conception ‘overlaps in part with the geographic South, the set of countries and regions that were subjected to European colonialism and that, except Australia and New Zealand, did not reach levels of economic development similar to that of the Global North’² (SANTOS and MENESES 2009: 12).

As a result, consequence and unfolding of artistic making and its overlays with the socioeconomic and political-cultural system, the expanded scenography located in the Global South defines scenographers who are placed in a situation before the constituent aspects of their *reality*, that is, the extraction and widespread devastation of fertile and abundant landscapes and traditions, as well as the tireless construction, demolition, and reconstruction of their places. How does this condition affect the relation with the expanded field of scenography? What or how would the expanded fields of these realities be in their diverse contexts, not only situated in the South but regarded from it?

This amplitude configures a multiplicity of languages that can be better understood by disciplines such as geography, through operations that determine the global production of places. According to the Brazilian geographer Milton Santos, we are ‘faced with a dialectic of territory, of the geographies of inequality promoted by the world system, which allow us to see the territory as a historical dimension of the globalization process’ (SANTOS et al. 1998: 11), whose processes intensify in the peripheries, leading to their occupation strategies.

Thinking about a scenography that expands from the South involves complex issues that occurred since the colonial period – as the apogee of scenographic production carried out in the scenic stage theatre in the Renaissance and Baroque periods – and the many impacts, confrontations, and reactions developed from this process. Yet, the invention of modernity celebrated as a symbol of progress interfered decisively in our perception and imagination, compromising how we create visual and spatial representation. From this dualistic worldview, opposing Western civilisation to ‘exotic peripheries’ (SAID 1990: 90), the antagonism between culture and nature was imposed,

1 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from Spanish and Portuguese are mine.

2 The Global North includes Europe, North America and Russia, but it is essential to consider, however, that the United States and Canada also had processes of colonisation of their native peoples in the American continent.

consolidating a strategy later updated by the Industrial Revolution, dividing the rural and the urban.

In different cultures of the Global South, such as Brazil, it has long been claimed that their theatrical history began with the arrival of Europeans and the construction of buildings based on the cultural model of the Global North, with a frontal relationship with the public. However, we must consider that artists from the North have used non-hegemonic forms in different periods of history, including the colonial period. In Florence and many parts of Europe, these hierarchical forms were preceded and countered by street performances – fairs, comedies, carnivals, circus, and folk performances – destabilising the official theatre.

Thinking in a decolonial way (QUIJANO 2005: 137), or better, in an anti-colonial³ way (CÉSAIRE 2020), involves full attention to countless practices and imaginations that were historically consolidated as ‘natural’ and ‘normal’, as the creation of categories of classification, its hierarchies and the consequent exclusion of knowledge that was not part of this specific perspective. This condition manifests in how we understand each territory and its habits, reaching the anthropological dimension until the theatre making. In this sense, the understanding of the South and its implications implement scenographic discourse and practice connected with the native peoples and ritual practices, environment, the climate, considering the many manifestations.

It establishes its expansion not only towards other artistic languages, but also other disciplines, such as urbanism, geography, social sciences, cultural studies, anthropology, archaeology, which analyse sociocultural and material aspects of the territory. Thus, geography is one of the most capable of showing the dramas of the nation and place because it is imposed as a historical condition to the extent that territory has become an essential instrument for intervention, ‘the place where all actions, all passions, all powers, all strengths, all weaknesses end, where the history is fully realised’ (SANTOS 2007: 13).

Thus, it is essential to consider that *the designer is not neutral*, and each choice he/she makes carries his/her beliefs, values and also, limitations and prejudices in the ways of seeing and understanding the world. For example, the idea of ‘the other/different’, seen in a harmful way, formed the basis of the European civilisational pattern, hiding the strategies of domination, which intended to make people believe that some traditions were inferior and should be abandoned. And expressions such

3 The term ‘decolonial’ emerges as a proposal to confront the coloniality of Eurocentric hegemonic thought (modern, post-modern, post-colonial studies), critically deconstructing it in theoretical and practical terms, thinking from other subjects and places) and different conceptions of the world. Theorists include Catherine Walsh, Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Walter Dignolo, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, and Diana Taylor, among countless other authors, mainly Latin American. It is about dismantling the mentality acquired by colonialism in all structures of knowledge and subjectivity. The term ‘anti-colonial’ refers to actions that assert themselves against the colonial/neocolonial system and its offshoots (such as imperialism and capitalism), in other words, against its purpose of domination and political-economic suppression. This practice can be understood as an anti-colonial struggle or revolution, for example, against racism, LGBTQIAPN+ communities, and the patriarchal model, with thinkers such as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire (Martinique), Homi Bhabha (India), among others, as its legacy.

as *exotic*, *experimental*, or *exception* have historically been used by the North to name poetics outside this ‘official’ model. By asking what the scenographer sees expanded from the historical contexts of the Global South, I answer: fractures, discontinuities, destruction. It is in this sense that in the context of the South, there would be no other narrative dimension than that of colonialism.

This discussion can be understood in different cultural contexts of the South differing in terms of economic limits, the use of ancestral technologies, the various understandings of public space (as a place of dispute, violence, and fear in Latin America, for example), or also as an ancestral connection with the spirituality, like in India. The first step is to understand the idea of a *set designer in a situation*. Unlike the theatre’s stage, whose typology and mechanisms, although varied, are pre-established and systemic, nothing is fixed here. Its rules are not set. All the elements are significant and convey multiple potential *scenographic* information, which can be appropriated. Thus, their characteristics create connections that affect our perception in an expanded way, visually and sensorially.

In this sense, as the Portuguese artist and theorist Grada Kilomba (2019: 67) points out, it is important to ‘recognise the margin as a complex position that incorporates more than one location’, in a model of multiple actions that dialogues with centres and outskirts, understanding them as multiple centralities. This condition forms its languages and universes of these imaginaries, which question, provoke, and counter-propose themselves. It carries its perspective, logic, and understanding of world relations.

Scenography expanded from the South acts between worlds, encompassing complementary experiences, examining a broader dialogue between places, cultures, and continents. ‘In this critical space, we can imagine questions that could not have been imagined before; we can ask questions that might not have been asked before’, as academic Heidi Safia Mirza (quoted in KILOMBA 2019: 68) points out. For that, it is necessary to cross the dimension of ideological denunciation and pass through the damages this system has caused, to value the existing ancestral knowledge that remains as contemporary resistance in the face of a world that relativises the difference. This condition refers to the experience of countless Latin American, African, Asian, and Eastern European artists on their racial, gender, belief, and tradition diversity.

In this confrontation, the South emerges as the protagonist of counter-hegemonic globalisation, crossing over from modern Western ‘abyssal thinking’ to ‘post-abyssal thinking’ (SANTOS and MENESES 2009: 43), which is inclusive and allows for plurality between epistemologies.

Research platform in Southern expanded scenography

Since 2005 I have been developing a research platform to investigate, create, and systematise procedures and concepts focused on artistic situations of abandonment, memory, and gentrification. The platform brings together a set of works that inves-

tigate the performative power of residual places, objects, and materials, following a trajectory of my artistic experiences in unconventional spaces carried out over approximately 20 years in Brazil and England.⁴ The investigation started from my poetics to the understanding of a national, Latin, and Global South dimension, as well as in relation to fulfilment, imaginary, and aesthetics.⁵

To compile some aspects of this perspective from the South, I propose four axes of investigation: *precariousness*, *performativity*, *materiality*, and *transmediality*. When addressing possible outcomes of these relationships, the material condition of the expanded scene elements and their relational character matches with precariousness (a theme that constitutes our daily life at different levels) enabling coexistence with situations of performative character, given their entropic nature. Such operations, which happen through various ways and procedures, by pointing the varied narrative flows between languages, give rise to creations that cross the media, producing complementary narratives, which results in a heterogeneous set of artistic practices.

Initially, the *precarious* is taken as a value not to aestheticise what is supposedly lacking from a Euro-American model but to affirm other modes of realisation. Thus, I am referring to the occupation of non-theatrical spaces in different states of deterioration, as well as the collection and use of unused and abandoned objects and materials, whose temporality reveals its *poetics of destruction* – understood from the global consequences of the Anthropocene to our invisible actions in everyday life. In the face of this rift created by man on Earth, *destruction* can be viewed as humanity's most significant and efficient process, with the most drastic effects in the countries of the South. From this perspective, I seek to demonstrate how the transformation of landscapes, based on the invention of the urban and its accelerated growth process, has manipulated our outlook.

In theatre-making, precariousness occurs in spaces, in the technical condition of the venues and even in their shortage or absence, as well as in the equipment, requiring artists to build sets and install them independently, and choosing other spaces and the streets. *Precairousness* as a procedure implies a relational, dynamic availability because its forms remain open and require interaction. However, I do not intend to celebrate Brazil's socio-economic precariousness or its 'creativity as compensation'; instead, I intend to demonstrate how it can constitute a way of being, not as a language to be followed but a methodology to be investigated.⁶

For example, through occupying a set of abandoned buildings in Vila Maria Zélia, Brazil – the first working-class neighbourhood in the country – for the creation of *Hy-*

4 The projects and workshops developed in this platform are organised at the website www.bolellireboucas.com, in which one can find images and videos from the productions.

5 The result of these reflections gave rise to the doctoral thesis *Residual Spaces and Materials in Performative Power: Expanded Scenography from the South* (REBOUÇAS 2021), presenting and discussing different projects, as well as the work of historical artists from Brazil, with a special interest in the city of São Paulo. The project was held at the Laboratory of Performative Practices of the University of São Paulo, in partnership with the department of Performance Studies of New York University (2016–2021).

6 It is fundamental to take attention of the risk of fetishising precariousness as a simple style or aesthetics.

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Fig. 1: *Hygiene*, XIX Theatre Company, São Paulo, 2004. Photo: © Caetano Gotardo.

giene⁷ (2005), by the XIX Theatre group (Fig. 1), I started exploring inhabiting ruins as an artistic practice, expanding the relations between residual spaces, objects, and materials, memory, and local community.⁸ In an experience directly lived by the audience, the place as an expanded character creates an immersive experience in the ‘poor ruins’⁹ (LOPES 2016: 81).

Through the notion of *performativity*, the second axis seeks to demonstrate the operations and dynamics of the scenographer expanded from the South through a set of practices shared in research *workshops*. In these, the participants developed situations in friction with bodies, spaces, materials, and time, dialoguing with different performativities. Initially carried out in abandoned places, extending to areas of transformation in cities and the natural environment, the investigation was of the relationship with objects and materials, forming a fundamental *repertoire* of elements.

The *body* becomes an instrument for traversing between environments and things, space and imagination, because it is during the making, dealing with not only the poetic but also the technical issues of the places, that the scenographer produces experience. When entering such places, the body is stimulated through the senses and memory, identifying and creating images associated with its stories and each person’s own.

When *acting as a performer*, he/she sets up an action tactic that involves cultural and existential repertoire, in partnership with the technical knowledge. This relational mode of action operates tactically, seeking ways to communicate with places, exploiting their potential based on experiences, not just visualities. Taking the Brazilian perspective, the artist Hélio Oiticica (1973: 20) argues that ‘more than an accident, this experimental character emerges as something positive and characteristically revolutionary in this context’.

The third axis deals with how discarded *materialities* manifest themselves, performing a particular imaginary that, on the one hand, is associated with fetishised consumption and, on the other, invisibilises the disposal of materials. In this way, I propose looking at the immense production of rubbish in contemporary society, and the socio-environmental consequences on the planet. It is in the countries of the South, such as Brazil, that impressive amounts of waste of all kinds are dumped.¹⁰

Using discarded materials collected from the streets is not the only option in the face of a total lack of resources but also proposes a reduction in consumption/dis-

7 The performance reports the expulsion of residents from a tenement in Rio de Janeiro during the urban transformation that occurred in Brazil at the end of the 19th century, inspired by Haussmann’s French model in Paris. See: <https://www.bolellireboucas.com/hygiene.html>.

8 This first investigation is organised in the Master’s thesis *The Construction of the Theatrical Spatiality: The Process of Art Direction by Grupo XIX de Teatro* (REBOUÇAS 2010).

9 Brazilian researcher Denilson Lopes (2016) defines the expression ‘poor ruins’ for buildings that are not monuments, ‘nor stately homes marked by grim decay’. It refers to the landscapes of the Center-South of the states of Minas Gerais and the Paraíba Valley, setting of several of the novels, ‘the focus of Baroque and, by extension, Neo-Baroque imagery’.

10 Including toxic material.



Fig. 2: Workshop 'Poetics of Destruction', São Paulo, 2010. Photo: © Renato Bolelli Rebouças.



Fig. 3: Research group 'How to Cross the Devastated Field', São Paulo, 2017.
Photo: © Renato Bolelli Rebouças.

posal, in more sustainable and ecological practices, as suggested by ecoscenography.¹¹ Natural elements are also used, such as branches, leaves, and others collected in squares, parks, and outdoor areas, associated with the indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants' ancestral practices. As a tactical endeavour, scenography from the South is configured as a political tool due to its modes of realisation, finding possible solutions in the face of ongoing adversity. Scenographic making mainly involves a large quantity of materials, and reviewing how they are created and executed is urgent.

In 2010, I moved to the rural area¹² to integrate a transdisciplinary creation platform in reinserting materials. There, the possibilities of research intensified, drawing my attention to their processes of ageing and decomposition in the natural environment. In this context, I deepened the investigation of the use of all types of waste, questioning the scenographic system.¹³ The expansion of artistic making through a *way of life* created a fundamental change of my axis of perception and action, in a continuous flow of dismantling of an until then urban imaginary.

We have researched possibilities of working from unused elements, interested in sustainable practices that could counter-propose creative actions, seeking to reduce the impacts caused by ephemeral dynamics. We have gathered elements of all kinds that could be used in other ways, functioning as an archive of sets, costumes, props, objects, and materials connected to memory, different ancestries and ritualistic dimensions. Thus emerged a poetics in which temporality makes other performativities over this supposed precariousness.

An example is the scenographic installation *Tree of Life* (2010), which used leftovers from other exhibitions and renovations in the cultural centre where the project was carried out (Fig. 4).¹⁴ Or the performance *Memories of the Rain*¹⁵ (2009), presented at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, which created a cloud of discarded plastic bags as an allegory about the process of industrialisation (Fig. 5). In all these works, we adopted 'precarious' modes of creation, bringing my south-located gaze, from my southern perception, where I was trained.

11 Ecoscenography is a term proposed by Tanja Beer that refers to ecological scenographic production, considering how it affects and relates to the broader ecosystem beyond the theatre. Its concepts are presented on the book *Ecoscenography: An Introduction to Ecological Design for Performance* (BEER 2021).

12 Cotia, a small city near São Paulo, Brazil.

13 The U.A.P. is a creation and research platform that, since 2010, has proposed artistic exchanges based on transdisciplinarity, experimentation with languages, and the reframing of materials, individuals, and their surroundings. Our proposal is based on a 'way of life' as a total artistic experience, integrating performative, pedagogical, and existence experiments. To see the projects, visit: <https://www.uap-residence.com/>.

14 The project was carried out by Sesc, in São Paulo, Brazil, at an event dedicated to teaching sustainable practices to families and children. To learn about the construction process, watch the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLijvdWcYfs>.

15 The performance brings together the Contact Young Company cast – including artists from the United Kingdom and immigrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Cape Verde – to narrate stories from Manchester and São Paulo, cities with a significant industrial past and whose climate rains constantly. Directed by Rodolfo Amorim, art direction by Renato Bolelli Rebouças, assistant director Lowri Evans and consultancy by Leo Kay. See: <https://www.bolellireboucas.com/memoacuteria-da-chuva.html>.

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Fig. 4: *Tree of Life*, São Paulo, 2010. Photo: © Cecília Kawall.



Fig. 5: *Memories of the Rain*, Manchester, 2009. Photo: © Renato Bolelli Rebouças.

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Finally, the *transmedialities* axis is dedicated to the use of different media in expanded creative processes, which leads to the construction of hybrid languages in which the scenographer assumes full authorship, leading to creations that move between different languages and formats such as collection, installation, video, and performance, organised and shared not only live but also on digital platforms. However, if technology has also been made available hierarchically, how can we imagine transmedia in the South? In this sense, Jerkins (2015) brings a perspective of interest to this research when he states that '[i]n the near future, convergence¹⁶ will be a kind of *gambiarra* – an improvised linkage between different media technologies – rather than a completely integrated system'.

The Brazilian expression *gambiarra* refers to 'an attitude of improvisation, creativity, alternative solution, improvised repair' (BOUFLEUR 2006: 35). It indicates a constructive mode applied to the making of artifacts and the resolution of everyday situations, configuring a mode of its own. Thus, if the term 'can reflect ideas such as ugly, sloppy, precarious, rustic, crude, [...] palliative, popular, parallel, imperfect, unfinished – ideas often related to the image of poverty and precariousness' (BOUFLEUR 2006: 39) – it is because it is evaluated concerning a Western cultural model. In this way, associating the notion of *gambiarra* with transmediality allows us to understand precariousness as an inventive dimension, which brings and rearranges materials and elements at hand, enhancing them to create new devices.

From scenography to artistic practice, I present a scenographer who works between archives and media, retelling history from his/her Southern repertoire. To exemplify, I present *The Cabinet of Disinterests and Mediocrities* (Fig. 6), a scenographic installation based on the Cabinets of Curiosities and Wonders¹⁷ of the Baroque period. It is made up of a collection of more than 1,000 discarded objects and fragments of materials in different states of deterioration, collected over 15 years in more than 30 cities around the world.¹⁸

The project questions the excessive process of consumption and disposal, constituting an archive that reveals our extractivist life, whose origins are colonial. Also called *Theatrum Mundi* [Theatres of the World], the cabinets intensified the collecting and cataloguing of species found outside the European continent, constituting an archive

16 The term 'transmedia', popularised by Jenkins in the book *Convergence Culture* (2006), refers to a new aesthetic that emerged in response to the convergence of media that dominates the narrative culture today. Despite referring to the communicational and interactive process of expanding a business model for audiovisual content productions – which involves the intertwining (convergence) between media, technologies, brands, and visually striking languages that enhance entertainment culture – the expression refers to the act of telling stories using complementary media, with content that connects and 'completes' each other, understanding narrative as a complex multimedia environment.

17 The Cabinets of Curiosities and Wonders were spaces created from the 17th century onwards in Europe that gave rise to natural history museums, art exhibitions, and scientific laboratories – constituting fundamental elements for thinking about Western culture, art, and science, becoming a model to this day, still questioned about their perverse colonial procedures for collecting species, many of which were transported alive and in unsanitary conditions.

18 For more information, photos, and videos of the project, visit: <https://www.bolellireboucas.com/exposiccedilatildeo-2023.html>.



Fig. 6: *The Cabinet of Disinterests and Mediocrities*, São Paulo, 2023.
Photo: © Michele Manoel.

of the world during the Age of Discovery. However, while, on the one hand, there was a sense of wonder at the richness, sumptuousness, and exuberance of exotic species and artifacts, this practice was built on the progressive destruction of colonised territories in the process of decimation of ecosystems. So, I propose turning curiosity into disinterest and marvels into mediocrity.

The collection makes up an archaeology of everyday life, among countless places I have visited and things I have collected – as well as the remains of performances, exhibitions, and events – making up a cartography of the discards. In addition to the installation, sound and lighting give these archives voice and life, in a ghostly atmosphere. The work also includes photographs and video performances created in partnership with various artists, and a website where all the pieces are catalogued.¹⁹ This cabinet proposes a reconfiguration based on a *decolonial* view, approaching destruction, consumerism, memory, and affectivity in a transdisciplinary practice between visual arts, performing arts, archaeology, and sustainability, using diverse media to narrate.

19 For more information, visit: <https://www.bolellireboucas.com/gabinete.html>.

Approaches from the South: ecologies and confluences

In these practices, with each new action and conditions, the results are diverse, responding differently to the questions and integrating possibilities that are added to the doing. It expands not only the concepts it mobilises, but also the disciplines, techniques, practices, needs, and artistic languages it undertakes. Scenography from the South thus becomes part of a complex discussion, including topics about race, gender, and identity.

According to Santos and Menezes, the Southern epistemologies are based on 3 orientations: 'Learning that the South exists; Learning to go South; Learning from the South and with the South' (SANTOS and MENESES 2009: 9). That is, it is necessary to immerse yourself to know. This understanding reveals an *ecology of knowledge*, assuming all knowledge is an inter-knowledge. For if in the world 'there are not only diverse forms of knowledge of matter, society, life, and spirit but also many and diverse concepts about what counts as knowledge and the criteria that can be used to validate it' (SANTOS 2008: 46), it is urgent to decolonise all sociocultural aspects to expand our perception.

In this sense, ecology becomes a path to *confluence*, a concept proposed by Brazilian thinker Antônio Bispo dos Santos, which refers to 'a force that yields, that increases, that expands' (SANTOS 2023: 4), a 'law that governs the relationship of coexistence between the elements of nature and teaches us that not everything that comes together mingles, that is, nothing is the same' (SANTOS 2015: 89). In his political and activist work on Afro-diasporic and land issues, he advocates counter-colonisation as a non-binary way of thinking, integrated by a variety of ecosystems, languages, species, and kingdoms, and in defence of their traditional territories, symbols, meanings, and technologies.

From an extended relationship towards places, the scenographer also shifts his/her paradigm, opening possibilities to understand 'a complete change in the worldview' (KILOMBA 2019: 198), which 'models of perception of reality change substantially' (KILOMBA 2019: 197). In this epistemological operation, the non-Eurocentric scene and expanded scenography become a mode of action based on the knowledge integrated with the environment, and the constructive practices of native and diasporic peoples.

Favoured by a climatic condition that invites us to go outside, this relation starts from understanding the human being as Nature, part of it, and not apart. For the Brazilian indigenous leader and thinker Ailton Krenak, 'the idea of us, the humans, detaching ourselves from the land, living in a civilization abstraction, is absurd' (KRENAK 2019: 22). It is then a matter of creating in communion with the landscape, beings, and diverse forms of life – contextualising them – as opposed to the idealised isolation of the scenic box. Such integration also refers to the perception of the body not exactly following the anthropocentric perspective, but as part of this great system.



Fig. 7: Frame of the film *Open Invitation*, 2022, directed by Shabari Rao and edited by Manush John. Photo: © Manush John, from Open Invitation Collective.

As a significant outcome and follow-up of this investigation, I have led international debates at World Stage Design²⁰ and the Prague Quadrennial²¹, bringing together artists, curators, and researchers from different countries and continents to share reflections, striving to identify aspects of this sociocultural diversity. This collective effort has offered a significant impact, providing a wealth of complementary perspectives.

To Shabari Rao,²² artist and educator from Bangalore, India, a teaching of the South is to contemplate, accept, and learn from other non-human temporalities. She questions: ‘Does a narrative ontology promote an anthropocentric position? Can embodied art practice provide an alternative to the hegemony of narrative ontology?’²³ In the film *Open Invitation – A Mediation on Human Engagement with the Landscape and Its Contemplative, Immersive, and Experiential Condition* (Fig. 7), she explores geological time and human presence through an engagement with a stone landscape of Ban-

20 In 2022, I presented the panel ‘Expanded Scenography in the Global South: Residual Spaces and Materials in Performative Power’ during the World Stage Design edition in Calgary, Canada, made up of Angola (Agnela Barros), Mexico (Andrea Pacheco and Aris Pretelin Esteves), Guatemala (Khristián Méndez Aguirre), and Brazil (Renato Bolelli Rebouças), also presenting projects by Julio Dojcsar and Frente Três de Fevereiro.

21 The debate was presented in the PQ Talks section of the Quadrennial Prague, June 2023, curated by Barbora Přihodová, and the roundtable, curated by myself (see PQ 2023a, b).

22 Shabari Rao is a transdisciplinary and independent artist and educator whose work is grounded in practice-based research, investigating how the body and embodied knowledge can disrupt systemic power structures. For more information, visit: <https://www.shabarirao.com/>.

23 These ideas were presented at PQ 2023.

galore's surroundings. If ancestral time shifts the anxious urban urgency to a direct connection with the temporality of life and its cycles, it is important to dialogue with it, practice it.

Another field of perception from the South refers to the conception that we are all equal, disregarding diversity. The research of Brazilian lighting designer Raquel Rosildete²⁴ addresses this situation to lighting for non-white bodies. Her project *Colours in Between*²⁵ presents a study with colour filters in theatre lighting over diverse dark-toned skins, exploring the characteristics of each individual, against the flattening of the 'universal' (white) being (Fig. 8). According to her, if we do not change how we light bodies in their pluralities, 'we ignore the differences between people and the stories their skin has to tell'.²⁶

Her work brings a *political light* that reveals the topography of the diasporic bodies, turning into an anti-racist ally on the technical side of the performing arts backstage; proposing a way of exploring the interaction between light and skin. These archive-bodies, which carry their unique identities, when lighted correctly, reveal peculiarities, ancestries and beauties, valuing their tones that were once condemned.

Another key aspect of the perspectives of the South are the traditional cultural narratives and poetics, and how these define their aesthetic fields of production, strongly resisting the epistemological dominance. In African countries, for example, as in many indigenous peoples in America, different cultures keep their rich traditions in ancestral formats, such as the oratures,²⁷ storytelling, musicality, spoken word, and rites of passage. According to Napo Masheane,²⁸ playwright, poet, stage director, and performer from South Africa, these languages continue to be connected and updated to this day, as in the activist theatres and performances of resistance and struggle, which also have a strong visual character, such as Afro face painting, makeup, fabrics, costumes, hairstyles, and masks.

This *cosmos-perception*²⁹ (OYĔWÙMÍ 2002) – a term of African origin that refers to an ancestral understanding of the world in the relationship between past and future and its enchantments, – privileges other senses than the visual or a combination of senses. Beyond the relation with landscapes and cultures, which involve specific colours, textures, smells, and materials, the body also emanates performativities connected to its

24 Raquel Rosildete is a Brazilian lighting designer for performance and architecture. She is a Berlin-based artist that works actively with decolonial and anti-racist dance productions. For more information, visit: <https://www.raquelrosildete.com/>.

25 To learn more about the project *Colours in Between*, visit: <https://www.colorsinbetween.com/>.

26 These ideas were presented at PQ 2023.

27 Oral literature.

28 Napo Masheane is a playwright, poet, stage director, and producer, teacher and researcher in South African theatre history and an acclaimed performer, founding member of Feela Sista! Spoken Word Collective. Statement presented by the artist during preparation of the round table 'Scenography Expanded from the South: Global Perspectives' presented at PQ 2023.

29 Cosmos-perception, of African origin, is from which part of traditional African philosophy originates. It is also used to describe the Yoruba people or cultures.



Fig. 8: *Colours in Between* by Raquel Rosildete. Photo: © Tuca Paoli.

contexts. As Napo argues, ‘we have to be the narrators of our own history/herstory’.³⁰ By disclosing images and procedures, I seek to highlight the identities to which the imaginary is associated, so that they are discussed, problematised, reinvented.

In this sense, the countries of America also have striking characteristics because, ‘if there is a place in the world where theatrical art and its practice have a relevant political, social, and cultural function in everyday life, that place is Latin America’, as the Mexican researcher Ileana Diéguez Caballero (2011: 21) states. According to her, Latin American making leads to the ‘configuration of a fabric of “transversal” relations between different aspects of the various arts’ (CABALLERO 2011: 22), having the common characteristic of coming from the fractures of colonisation processes, their identity and territorial oppositions and miscegenation.

For example, we identified a tradition of street theatrical production in Latin America because these are often the spaces available for creation. Among the countless manifestations, this tradition linked to places also happens in the Brazilian circus, a vivacious locus of the country’s multicultural production,³¹ which need for continuous shift developed a nomadic architecture aligned with the environmental and urban conditions of different parts of the country.³² Through this characteristic, which occupies places and creates new dynamics, such a Southern way of making is affirmed, immersed by territorial conflicts in the space dispute.

30 These ideas were presented at PQ 2023.

31 Between the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

32 The artist and businessman Benjamin de Oliveira became a milestone of this integrated artistic production between language and way of life in Brazil, inspiring many generations.

The perspectives from the South are similar, despite their endless differences, by a force that has gone through centuries of suppression, uniting the relations between aesthetics, politics, ethical positioning, and language production. However, it is also necessary to understand that the epistemologies of the South are not present only in the countries of the South, but in the South of each region. Reviewing the classical models used as universal means returning to Greece to question such ‘absolute truths’. How can we currently decolonise such narratives? To Maria Konomi,³³ Greek professor of modern and contemporary drama and scenography, decolonising Hellas became an active project, as a thread of sociocultural critique about our times.

Thus, it is about changing the dominant narratives by altering strategies, such as ‘demonumentalizing tragedy and classical reception, documenting and building upon experiences, practices and genealogies silenced and overlooked in dominant discourses and interpretive frameworks’,³⁴ as Konomi argues. Among countless paths, scenography expands into present-day life, ‘turning to dramaturgies of the real, the use of real spaces and performing in public open space’, exposing the colonial genealogies and its current conflicts. Through all these model borders, it is necessary to cross such limits and advance in amplifying these possibilities of existence and global artistic, theatrical and scenographic production.

I do not seek to allude to a supposed ‘origin’, essence, or unique identity mode of the Southern expanded scenography, but to point out an epistemology of the creation/construction of visual-space languages, practices, and aesthetics. This allows us to maintain our *inventive* way of creating, affirming a state of mind attentive to differences, and continually challenges us to its impossibility, turning it into a language.

This research – a practice intertwined with life – constitutes a polymorphous cartography that presents a comprehensive view encompassing diverse territories by crossing different situations. It, therefore, results in a journey that can be reorganised in many ways, according to other arrangements between concepts, practices, and contexts. If the entire global system tends to this precarious state, the practices expanded from the South become a fundamental repertoire that can be used to compose the crossing fields of present and future. This availability, intelligence, and vitality that inhabits us are the tools with which we can – and must – walk.

33 Greek scenographer and costume designer, professor on modern and contemporary drama and scenography at the Department of Theatre Studies, at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She is also co-curator for the Greek Countries and Regions Exhibition at PQ 2023.

34 These ideas were presented in PQ 2023.

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