

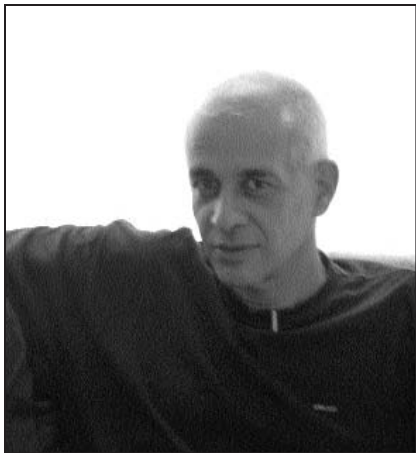
NEWORK

CILDO MEIRELES



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CILDO MEIRELES



For nearly forty years, the work of Cildo Meireles has challenged common perceptions about the world by dissecting and reformulating conceptual principles of art, politics, economics, and physics. Although he works in many media, Meireles is renowned for creating dramatic, multi-sensory installations that engage the viewer on all levels: physically, emotionally, and psychically. For these installations, he typically selects a few common materials and objects and combines them to create environments fraught with symbolism and emotional significance.

Strictu, a walk-through installation first exhibited in Bonn, Germany, in 1999, consists of rows of stainless steel poles around which a length of chain winds toward a wooden table and chairs. At the end of the chain, close to the table, there are handcuffs and iron prison balls. The room is shadowy, although an interrogation lamp shines brightly on the table, revealing a piece of paper with a typed statement. In its unyielding sparseness, the open space of the installation becomes a setting for the exercise of complete control, a vivid manifestation of the authoritarianism that has often been the subject of Meireles' work.

The typed statement on the table begins with a quote the artist came across by chance. He was in New York City in the fall of 1999 for a retrospective exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art. Late one night he was in his hotel room, paying scant attention to a television program that featured the Ku Klux Klan. Suddenly, a Klan leader appeared on the screen, and Meireles turned up the volume. He was struck by how frankly the "grand wizard" spoke about the Klan's enemies: "We want to steal their time. We want to steal their space. We want to steal their mind." It seemed like a perfect statement about the imposition of will, an expression of authoritarianism in undiluted form.

This quote is followed by Meireles' own words in Portuguese and English. His statement alludes to authoritarianism in the usual social sense, but Meireles also speaks of cultural, curatorial, and artistic authoritarianism. His last sentence reads, "Strictu takes a position against such a perverse and absurd illusion."

Authoritarianism can take many forms, from the violent practices of dictatorships to the public expressions of multimedia conglomerates, from a society that expects conformity to a parent who favors strictness. Even an individual's own moments of rigid thinking can be seen as "authoritarian." The social dialogue of the early twenty-first century in the United States is very caught up in the balances that tilt towards and away from authoritarianism: whether to limit personal freedoms for the safety of the larger society, whether standing against government action is being responsive to democracy or treasonous.

On several levels, *Strictu* continues a discussion about ideas that were circulating among artists in the 1960s, when Meireles began his career. Many artists in Rio de Janeiro, and all over the world, were reacting against anything that represented cultural, political, ethical, and social conformity. Artists especially objected to "official" culture and how organizations like museums and cultural centers defined the relationship between art and society. Artists critiqued the status of artworks as commodities, the adherence to styles and movements of the moment, and the institutions which controlled the presentation and interpretation of their work. These issues continue to be relevant to many artists to this

day, especially those who have remained activists throughout their careers, like Meireles. Two important factors helped to shape Meireles' work. The first had to do with the artistic milieu of the artist's youth, where a new movement called neoconcretism was changing the role of the spectator from a passive observer to an active participant. The second was the oppression and violence visited on Brazil by the military regime that took power in a coup in 1964 when Meireles was sixteen years old.

In 1959, the poet and theoretician Ferreira Gullar wrote *Manifesto neoconcreto* on the occasion of the first neoconcrete exhibition in Rio de Janeiro. Artists affiliated with neoconcretism, such as Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980), Lygia Clark (1920-1988), and Lygia Pape (b. 1929), reacted against the dry rationalism of concrete art, which was based on geometric abstraction. For the neoconcretists, the human body was central to artistic practice, and they pursued a sensual, organic relationship to their work, striving to break down barriers between art and everyday life. Oiticica and Clark in particular are famous for their multi-sensory, participatory works which involve the general public. They, along with other artists, argued against the preciousness of art as autonomous object, contending that it was the interaction between the viewer and the artwork that was most important. In the late 1960s, Meireles created spaces for the public to interact with, and he began to conceive of walk-through environments.

Meireles' response to Brazil's repressive government from 1964 to 1985 took many forms. A number of his works sought to challenge conventional ideas by manipulating fundamental concepts like Cartesian logic and Euclidean space. *Espaços virtuais: cantos* (Virtual Spaces: Corners) 1967-68, looks like the corner of a room where two walls meet, but in fact the juncture is illusionary – the result of strategic positioning and painting – and one can actually slip between the walls. Other works, such as his series *Inserções em Circuitos Ideológicos* (Insertions into Ideological Circuits), involved the modification of widely circulated objects. For example, Meireles printed messages on recycled Coca-Cola bottles and Brazilian currency, so that his subversive ideas went out to a mass audience using the very means of distribution of the institutions he was critiquing.

Meireles' work has consistently explored the coexistence of freedom and control. He made three versions of *Malhas da Liberdade* (Meshes of Freedom) in 1976 and 1977, based on a modular structural principle that allows the artist to reconfigure the work in infinite ways. These forms share the paradox of looking like traps or barriers which are, in fact, thoroughly permeable. For the first version, Meireles commissioned a fisherman – whose specialty was net making – to create the work out of cotton rope. Another version consists of a plane of glass enmeshed in a grid of thin metal rods. A later work, an installation titled *La Bruja* (The Witch) 1979-81, is as fantastic as any broom-riding witch. There is, indeed, a broomstick, but the straw "sweeper" consists of more than a thousand miles of string laid out in a chaotic web and various spools on the floor of the gallery. The work recalls the exhibition, "First Papers of Surrealism," organized by André Breton in New York in 1942, where Marcel Duchamp crisscrossed rooms full of paintings with several miles of string.

In Meireles' *Através* (Through), 1983-89, gallery visitors walk through a labyrinth made of venetian blinds, garden fencing, prison bars, tennis nets, barbed wire, and other

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1948, Meireles grew up in Brasília from 1958 to 1967 and watched the country's new capitol being built from the ground up. He moved back to Rio de Janeiro in 1967 during a time of landmark group exhibitions that set a new agenda for Brazilian art. Since 1970, he has occupied a prominent role in the Brazilian and international art scene. Meireles took part in the historic 1970 exhibition of conceptual art, *Information*, at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, and he lived in New York from 1971-1973. He has participated in biennials in Venice, (1976, 2003), São Paulo (1981, 1989, 1998), Sydney (1984), Johannesburg (1997), Kwangju (2000), and Documenta IX (1992) and XI (2002), Kassel. He has had one-person exhibitions at such institutions as The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; Capp Street Project, San Francisco; Institute for Contemporary Art, Boston; Instituto Valenciano Arte Moderno, Valencia; Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki; and Musée d'Art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg, France. The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, organized a retrospective of Meireles' work in 1999 which traveled to the Museu de Arte Moderna, São Paulo, and the Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro.



barriers, across a floor covered in broken sheets of glass. It is both airy and minutely confining – one has to watch every step – in the same way that *Strictu* is at once wide open and claustrophobic.

Meireles made *Strictu* with the idea that each viewer would decide the extent to which he or she will interact with the work, and this aspect of the installation in turn gives rise to further questions: Should you sit

down at the table? Will someone sit across from you? Should you wear the handcuffs? Is *Strictu* more powerful if you physically interact with the work, or less so? Even the written statement on the table presents a tension between liberty and control. How does the reader resolve the artist's avowed love of ambiguity and the unambiguous – one might say resolute – words that conclude his writing?

In all of Meireles' work, surprise and perplexity combine in equal measures with curiosity and wonder. Ultimately the viewer navigates a system that stands for thought, feeling, and actuality as ordinary and dangerous as everyday life.

Cheryl Hartup
Associate Curator

CHECKLIST

Strictu 1999

Stainless steel poles, chain, iron balls, handcuffs, keys, lamp, wooden table, two chairs, typed statement in English and Portuguese

edition of 3

Courtesy of Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo, Brazil

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deep appreciation goes to Luisa Strina for lending *Strictu* to *New Work: Cildo Meireles*, and to Cristina Candeloro and Galeria Luisa Strina for their crucial support and assistance with the exhibition. My gratitude also goes to Mary Sabbatino of Galerie Lelong for putting the museum in touch with the artist. Many thanks are also due to the professional and dedicated staff of Miami Art Museum. Finally, I am most grateful for the kindness and generosity of the artist, Cildo Meireles, and for the opportunity to work with one of his deeply honest and thought-provoking creations.

New Work: Cildo Meireles is organized by Miami Art Museum as part of *New Work*, a series that presents projects by leading contemporary artists.

Miami Art Museum

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101 West Flagler Street
Miami, Florida 33130
305.375.3000

www.miamiartmuseum.org

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COVER: Cildo Meireles, *Strictu* 1999, installation view, Courtesy of Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo, Brazil BACK COVER: Cildo Meireles, *Strictu* 1999, installation view (detail), Courtesy of Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo, Brazil