

ATLAS: MATRIX. DIARY OF A COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE¹

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ABSTRACT

This short, experimental piece represents one possible way to describe the site-specific installation ATLAS: MATRIX in the Tropical Garden of Belém in Lisbon, Portugal. The text is the narrative of a mindful collaboration, one in which the act of collaborating—intentional but not overly planned—resulted in an open-ended installation/dispositive that called for ulterior collaboration, enabling spectators to play with the elements while, at the same time, reflecting about the collaborative endeavour itself. An introductory story in the form of a diary is followed by DIY guidelines, indicating a replicable formula for co-laborating—[from Latin *cum* (together) + *laborare* (to practice)]—in transdisciplinary settings.

KEYWORDS

Collaboration; art;
anthropology; Lisbon;
colonialism.

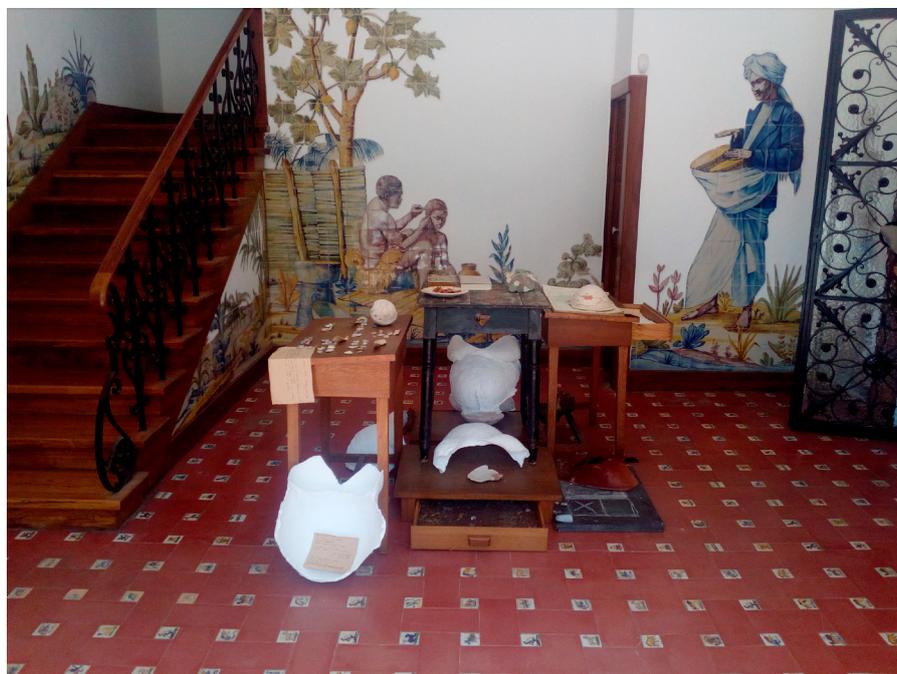
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Atlas: MATRIX emerged, at first, as a space of dialogue and confrontation where our individual research paths—a reflective practice originating from the creation of ceramic pieces (Elias 2016), and a genealogy of childbirth pain in Lisbon’s biomedical settings (De Luca 2018)—conjoined in an inquiry on the colonial legacy of the Tropical Botanical Garden and its surroundings.

The site-specific installation was elaborated during the first #Colleex international workshop (July 2017) in the Tropical Botanical Garden of Belém (the western area of Lisbon) on an invitation of EBANO Collective, host of the event. The #Colleex is an EASA (European Association of Social Anthropology) network for debate and intervention on an experimental form of ethnographic fieldwork.

The event constituted, for Heléna, an opportunity to merge a previous study written during her PhD regarding the public art and urban design of the Portuguese World Exhibition (1940) as the urban matrix of Belém riverside. It also propelled Francesca’s inquire into the colonial imprint on the epistemological and political configurations of childbirth pain and practices on the pregnant body in Portuguese obstetrics.



From these premises, we developed a set of correspondences to stage our work at #Colleex. The matrix, referring to an object or concept from where something originates, was our common ground: matrix was the name given to the uterus until the 19th century in midwifery. It is also the name of the fragments from which ceramic objects may take shape; matrix initially referred to a geological structure that frames the rocks, but also names an architectural model that served as a paradigm for replications (as the *ecclesia matrix*, the “mother church”); matrix could be the portion of soil that encases, by a dominant colour, the main characteristics of the area, but it may also indicate a group of symbols organized in a rectangle used to solve mathematical problems.

All these connotations implied an idea of (re)production, indicating a condition of generative possibilities withheld in specific circumstances. The matrix we were looking at and working on was a very material endeavour.

We adopted the concept of *Atlas* as an operative process, drawing from Georges Didi Huberman’s analysis of the visual work of Abi Warbourg (Didi-Huberman 2013), in which the art historian gathered the objects of his investigation into movable panels that were constantly assembled, dismounted, and reassembled. This organizational device, according to Didi-Huberman, allows the visual and semantic creation of connections between elements (and, we may add, temporalities) that are not in an immediate relationship of similarity.

In *ATLAS: MATRIX* the Atlas was at once an assembly panel, an operating space, a playing surface and a worktable. The configuration of the table depicted assertively the open field of our work, unlike the concept of framework, which designates a pre-instructed organization whose elements are organized according to a set of rules (the chessboard for example is, in this sense, a framework).

In our performative installation the Atlas, intended as a field of operations that took place over three days, positioned a set of materials through elective affinities, repositioning ourselves at the same time collaboratively before a specific space. Affinities were established through the objects interacting on the tables such as images, migrant and sensory materials, past experiences and the questioning of the present conditions of the territory.



AN ATLAS DIARY

Francesca. Day zero - We meet at the Tropical Botanical Garden a few weeks before the #Colleex event to explore the space together and decide where to set up our installation. In 1940, the Tropical Botanical Garden hosted the Colonial Section of the Exposition of the Portuguese World. “Persistence in time [...] may be coupled with debris” (Hunt 2016, 10). Debris of the Exposition are scattered all over the place—standing pavilions, abandoned structures, busts of anonymous colonial subjects, ceramic tiles with exotic flowers, exotic animals, exotics bodies and scenes. Little is said in the Garden’s leaflets about its colonial past.



Source: Vitor Barros (2017), EBANO Collective.

Helena's gaze is directed downwards while we walk: she explains that, as for the rest of Lisbon, the soil of this place is also rich in old ceramic pieces, remains of previous architectures or potteries used to create new compounds to cover the ground. She squats down sometimes when spotting what seems to be minuscule shining stones, she digs a bit and—to my amazement—she always picks up pieces of glazed pottery of different sizes and colours.



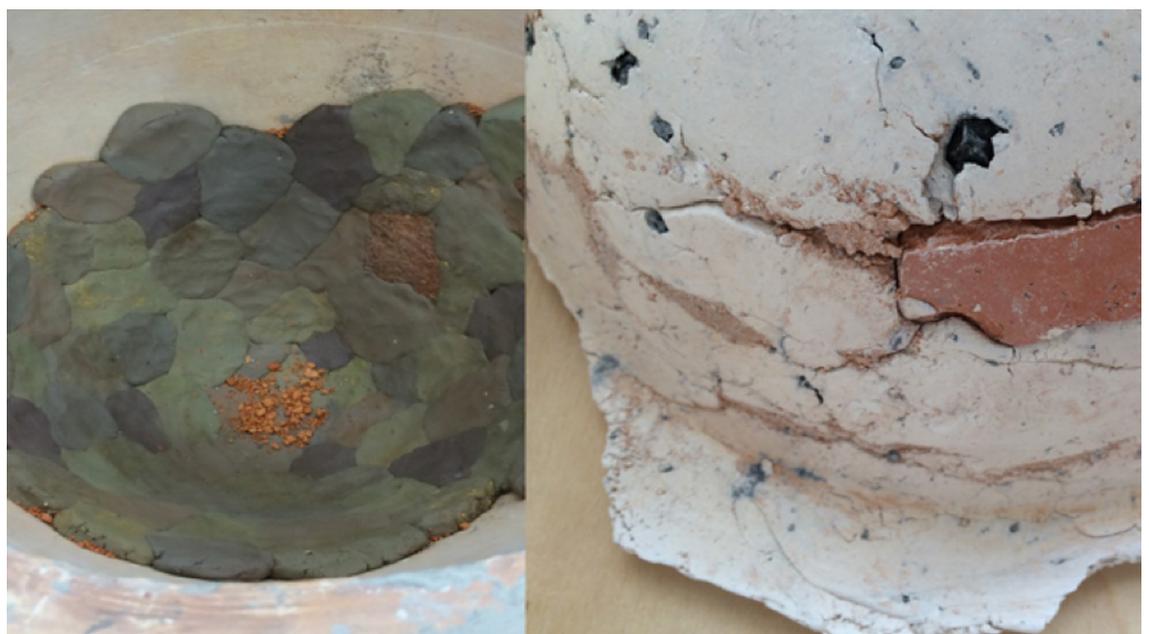
We consider the possibility of setting up the installation in the entrance hall of the Lion's House. It is a chancy prospect—the space is so imbued in upfront colonial narratives that we struggle at first to envision an intervention that may retain any form of independence and not be swallowed by its immediate surroundings. We decide to take on the challenge and see where the dialogue goes.

Helena. Day one - We set up the installation structure using colonial wood tables with a western modern design that we found abandoned in one of the buildings of the garden. On the structure, we display a set of ceramic sculptures and pregnant belly plaster casts, artefacts that comprise our previous research explorations, adding various objects and elements that are part of the Tropical Botanical Garden environment. They include ceramic fragments found in the soil and Portuguese colonial research books on Africa's geography and geology, borrowed from the Garden's library collection.

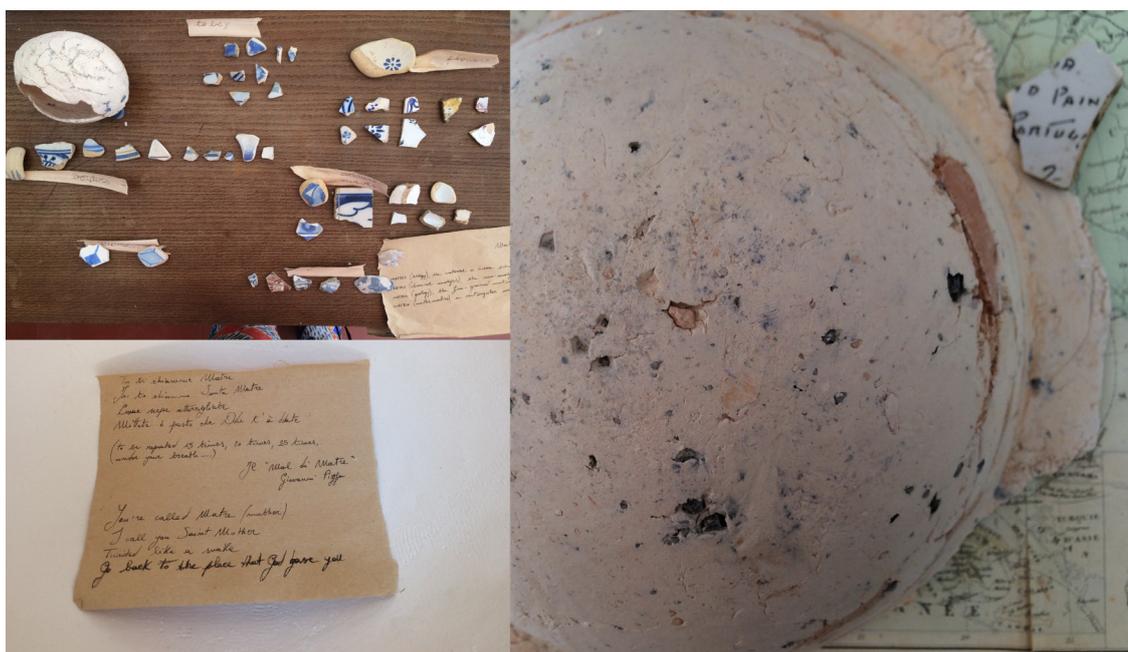




The ceramic sculptures constitute part of my ongoing artistic research, which embodies the concept of matrix as the sculpture-making procedures testify. A previous plaster mould has been the nest of a ceramic fragment found in the soil, from where a new ceramic form can grow. A metaphor for origins, the unknown ceramic fragment is an incipient from where I start to mould the sculpture. Ceramic objects are testimonies of west/east cross-culture references over the centuries, encompassing many histories of the European colonization.



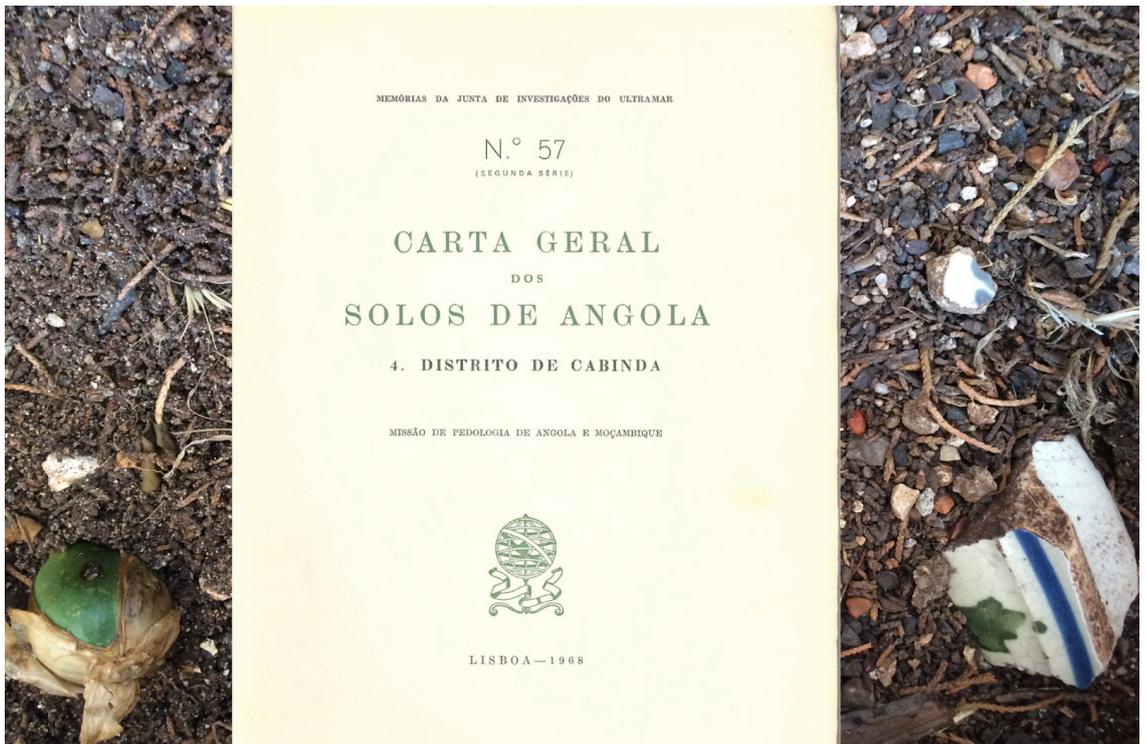
F. Day one - The installation is set as a dialogue. We agreed to develop it along the three days of the workshop and to encourage participants and casual passers-by to freely intervene with the pieces. I am reticent to move some of Helena's ceramic artefacts, as they seem fragile and the tables appear unstable. So, at first, when I find time to go back to the installation between the various events of the workshop, my dialogue with it consists of minor shifts and shy tentatives to reorganize the objects.



I'm less restrained with the pregnant belly casts. They are fieldwork devices (Andrade, Forero and Montezemolo 2017), testimonies of the intimate touch of an anthropological encounter, bearing layers of dried plaster on gauze stripes and hours spent with pregnant women in their private settings. I decided to do belly casts in my research on childbirth pain to overcome the short time that hospital fieldwork imposed on my engagement with pregnant women. It takes time to probe people to open up about their experience of pain, and "clinical time"; an obstetrician has once told me when asked for an interview: "(clinical time) is very different from anthropological time". Displaced from their original setting, the casts become versatile objects and bodies' archives.



H. Day Two - Below and above the drawers we overlap and place other personal research materials. We continue to add elements directly collected from the garden such as diverse types of soils, leaves and seeds. As each of us move to different buildings to participate in the #Colleex events, we keep collecting materials that resound and resemble the matrix concept we have agreed to explore further, strengthening the site-specific aspect of the installation. Later, I return to the Atlas room and add these elements, placing them in strategic areas of the installation.



Soil portions are shown inside the drawers of the colonial wood table. They were collected as specific features that stand for land possession, and as samples to investigate and nominate the unknown. Francesca has collected botanical samples such as seeds and leaves from tropical trees and plants. We move and open the Midwifery book and the Geological African soil stratus book in specific pages to match the collected elements.



F. Day Two - The longer we engage in our matrix manipulation, the more intricate and intertwined appear the various archives we're mobilizing. Heléna tells me that on the inaugural ceremony of the construction work of Belém riverside, which was commemorated twice during the Brazilian dictatorship (1940 and 1960), the Ministry of Ultramarine Lands (Ministério do Ultramar) ordered a small amount of soil from the Portuguese colonies to be dispersed in Belém (Elias 2008). The mobilization of soil was followed by the displacement of colonial subjects and materials—the Tropical Botanical Garden was in fact transformed during the 1940's Exposition by what a local newspaper defined as “an ethnographic documentary from three continents: Africa, Asia and Oceania” (Matos 2006, 211).



Source: Casimiro dos Santos Vinagre (1940), Coleção Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.

Temporary artificial colonial scenographies were populated by a “human zoo” of 138 natives plus an elephant—which walked in a secluded area of the garden on scheduled hours—and a caged lion. Two indigenous women gave birth during the six months of the exposition, and the three infants died before its end (Vargaftig 2016). Colonial soil, objects and bodies (from animals or humans) also filled medical imaginaries and obstetric books of the period, that circulated an old trope asserting how indigenous women, had easy, painless childbirths, similarly to animals (Rich 2016).



Source: Casimiro dos Santos Vinagre (1940), Coleção Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.

H. Day Three – As we dialogue through the placement of the objects, crafts and collected elements, we continue to display and coordinate verbal and visual elements. Paper notes from midwifery books mix with seeds and ceramics, cartographies of the continents and colonial maps play a background role for the sculptures. A ceramic fragment has the word “pain” printed on it, however, originally the full word might have been “painted”. I displayed the printed ceramic fragment over the map showing countries’ frontiers on the 19th century. Frontiers and pain. The division and share of African lands and their resources by the West came to my mind, as I was part of such a colonial matrix too.



In addition, the propaganda motto of the Portuguese regime during the dictatorship, saying that Portugal extended from Minho to Timor (namely the former country and the colonies) has been a consequence of an European agreement concerning Africa (Elias 2008). At some point of day III, I came back and placed sculpture ceramics over the maps. Francesca has also orientated the plaster bellies towards the map.



F. Day Three - One of Helena's round sculptures, shaped in the plaster mould and generated from a ceramic matrix is resting bottom up on a world map of an old atlas. I put a belly cast beside it and think of how it has also been moulded around a shape. I punctured this cast with little holes so that by getting closer one can see through it and read the definition of matrix taken from a geology dictionary. The Atlas: MATRIX is an installation that, like the research carried out in fragmented or forgotten archives, calls for active engagement. The pieces that we have put together may at first seem random and unrelated, but they share the logic of the matrix, of something that has a generative character. Moreover, they are debris of a past with no narrative in the stroll around the Tropical Botanical Garden. Our matrix exercise becomes a practice of visibility and a work of deliberate connections.



H. Postscript - According to Bishop (2006), the collaboration and interaction within creative practices in the art domain not always led to participatory art due to the imposition of a false social consensus among the relations settled on such art projects. Nevertheless, she acknowledges that some participatory projects have challenged social established perspectives and assumptions as some interventions have cast new light on alternative forms of participatory practice and the convergence of diverse modalities of knowledge production (Bishop 2012). While experiencing the “artistic turn” in academic research, artists have also started a critical debate on the specific contributions that artistic practice can offer (Cossens, Crispin and Douglas 2009). There are procedures that do not fit entirely into the conventions of scientific knowledge.



Artistic research encompasses heuristic methods, primal non-verbalised investigation, experimental collaboration strategies and embodied forms of knowledge. However, they may not be exclusive of the artistic practice. By initially exploring communication through non-primal verbalised investigation, namely the pieces of ceramic sculpture and the pregnant bellies plaster casts, we have started an experimental format that cuts with the unidirectional procedure of reflecting and showing the work in progress. By adopting the Atlas as a collaborative methodological and hermeneutical device we have evoked the heuristic potential of collaboration between art and anthropology suggested by Schneider, by “relinquishing” strict disciplinary boundaries and pursuing a hybridization of research techniques (Schneider 2015). Previously, we have both individually approached the subject of our study through craft making and making visible the tactile human experience (Ingold 2010). As part of embodied knowledge, this craft investigation has triggered a mutual exchange and reciprocal inquiry that from the matrix subject encompasses the colonial legacy of the garden and the broader territory, and bodies that inhabited it. Finally, as an operative device, the Atlas has been a transforming platform for the co-creation of an interactive installation and a communication device to open and include the dialogue with peers.



COLLABORATIVE INSTALLATION – A FORMULA

In this installation we composed sets of matrix proposals at different moments along the #Colleex workshop, as described above. Although the installation was bound to our experience of the place and previous research paths, we were able to design a set of procedures that might be used by other researchers. Here is the formula:

1) Setting a common ground:

Before a collaborative installation, define a concept that matches your investigation. Start to think of visual and material elements, crafts or other elements you have made in your study (whether data, material evidences, crafts, visual documents, field notes) that could generate dialogues between your research issues.

(NOTE: Concentrate on the side-works of fieldwork: those activities, materials, thoughts or occurrences that happen around but outside of fieldwork; then go beyond the possibility of existing – or discerning – the inside from the outside).

2) Creating a site-specific approach:

After having a common-ground to start, visit the place where the installation will be set. Observe the typology and usage of the space – a corridor, atrium, room, open space –, and correlate such specificities with your mindset.

3) Tuning the collaborative mindset:

Bear in mind that you will have at least three dimensions to be intertwined at the place of the installation: a) physical characteristics of the location where the installation is set; b) symbolic, institutional, agonistic discourses the space resonates, and the mindset you have previously agreed upon. You may find attached to the location diverse elements that might bridge, reset, highlight or enlarge your initial collaboration approach to the concept you want to explore and communicate to peers within the event. Furniture, books, materials, objects, etc. may be among the preferences.

(NOTE: adopt the vision of a collaborator in displacing your object from the niche you have created for them. Do not stick to feelings of embarrassment).

4) Planning and setting the installation:

Plan the days that you will be dialoguing with your installation during the event and a reasonable amount sources of the previous investigation

that you will be connecting to installation concept and place. Define the moments you will be available to talk to participants in the event and sort devices for documenting the performance.

5) *Continuous installation feeding:*

Bring elements from previous investigations each day and collect elements from the surroundings that could match the concept, emphasise aspects you find pertinent or even subjects the participants have suggested to you. Keep changing, re-arranging and composing different sets.

Documentation of the process is desirable in visual or audio-visual form by recording a reflexive practice of the installation. As you document the procedures you may find specific frames that constitute the next arrangement.

The compositions staged, the intuitions underlined in the matching groups of collected data, the ideas generated during the installation feeding, and shared knowledge with peers during the event are characteristics that will surely nurture individual and collaborative future investigation of participants from the Collaborative Installation.

(NOTE: Feel free to create the connections, spur dialogues and unite the dots deliberately).

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