

Rivers as divides and connection places

Dr. Hugo Fortes
University of São Paulo, Brazil ~ hugofortes@usp.br

Abstract

This paper proposes a reflection on my artistic praxis concerning rivers and their environment. My last piece, "Chattahoochee", was created together with Síssi Fonseca during an artist residency at the Columbus State University, in Georgia, USA. During one month we worked together with the students from the Columbus State University, gathering their impressions, stories and feelings about the Chattahoochee river. The Chattahoochee River has a long history of wars, including the American Civil War, the Frontiers Wars, the removal of Native Americans, etc. The river forms the border between Alabama and Georgia, dividing and connecting them at the same time.

My installation aimed to reconnect the Chattahoochee landscape with its history, mixing images, materials and forms seen at the Chattahoochee with texts about its history. Instead of telling the history in a didactic way, this work emphasizes the sensations of place and time, concerning the individual perceptions about the environment. Besides the installation, made with aquariums, water, wood, paraffin wax and other materials, we also created a video and some performances with the students. In the performance "Stream", developed together with the students of the CSU, the sense of collectiveness is represented by movements of the group interacting with the installation and reflecting the flow of the Chattahoochee.

The work includes also a video with images of the Chattahoochee River layered by texts about its history. These texts were founded in plaques that stay along the Riverwalk and describe several issues related to racial, environmental, and political conflicts that belong to this site. The main goal of this artwork was to instigate site-specific reflections, making people thinking on the place they live, its natural environment, history and politics.

Practice Reflection

This paper proposes a reflection on my artistic praxis concerning rivers and their environment. I want to give a short panorama of my artistic work related to rivers, but I would like specially to comment on my last large-scale installation created in Columbus, GA in the United States and presented at the Columbus State University in February 2014.

For a long time I have created art installations that look like artificial rivers, made with a large quantity of aquariums with clay and water in different levels. Some contemporary rivers in urban centers are represented as architecture. The water is divided into boxes and cannot flow in its natural way. Several of these installations dealt with river pollution problems, discussing the artificial relationships between man and landscape in contemporary cities.

These artworks are a kind of laboratory, where I can observe the phenomenological processes in the liquid environment. I create artificial landscapes, to promote the physicochemical processes that offer floatation, transparency, distortion and dissolution act as transformative forces.

The first piece of this series was built in the Brazilian city called Ribeirão Preto, and means Black Creek. This is a large city in Brazil and the river cannot be seen there anymore because the metropolis swallowed it. Each aquarium looked like a cold and artificial skyscraper, although the water and the mud remind us of an archetypical river.

In the work "Pirapora," the second installation of this series, for example, I referred to the pollution of Rio Tietê, in the town of Pirapora do Bom Jesus, close to São Paulo, Brazil. The strong industrial pollution in this river provoked the emergence of large blocks of foam floating on its surface, which started to invade the city. In my artwork, I represented this through the use of lime and white clay in aquariums full of water. The rectangular aquariums formed a continuous and rigid line, but fragment the water, making the flow impossible. The work then began to resemble a stagnated river that doesn't flow. Sometimes is possible to see scenes like this in the Rio Tietê in São Paulo, a dead river in which fish no longer thrive.

In another installation, called "Where", I was concerned about the issue of artificial diversion of the course of the river São Francisco, which was happening at this time in Brazil. This river was turned aside of its regular course in order to benefit the agricultural industry of some areas in Brazil. It was a very polemic project. To accomplish it, landscape was changed, provoking environmental damages and the native population from some regions had to be removed. Although the work "Where" was not only a direct response to these issues, I was impressed with this possibility of moving a landmark that defines a landscape from a place to another. It was the mankind interfering in the environment by means of science and technology. In my personal life, at that time, I was also moving from one place to another, coming back to Brazil after living two years in Berlin, Germany. So I decided to add some transportation boxes to the installation, symbolizing these ideas of transience and uncertainty. From this point on, my awareness of the relationships between man and landscape was increased and I could understand landscape not only as external appearance, but also as an environment inhabited by individuals with personal histories and social problems.

I would like to highlight my last Rivers-piece, called "Chattahoochee", created during an artist residency at the Columbus State University, in Georgia, USA. Although it looks similar to the others, I believe that this was one of the deepest experiences with the environment that I have ever had. It included not only

the creation of an artwork, but also the experience of living on-site, together with its inhabitants and stories. For this piece, my partner Síssi Fonseca and I worked during one month together with the students from the Columbus State University, gathering their impressions, stories and feelings about the Chattahoochee river. The work occurred within the artist residency Program of the University of Columbus.

The Chattahoochee River has a long history of wars, including the American Civil War, the Frontier Wars, the removal of Native Americans, etc. The river forms the border between Alabama and Georgia, dividing and connecting them at the same time. The Chattahoochee flows by Columbus, very close to the College of Arts of the Columbus State University, at the RiverPark Campus. Nowadays, one can stroll along the RiverWalk or make rafting at one of the most exciting whitewater rivers of the US. In the past, the Chattahoochee was very important for the native Indians, known as Creeks, which respected the river as a food source, a transportation artery, and an element of the spirit world. Later it turned into the main trade traffic and industrial power source for textile mills. In the twentieth century several dams were built and the river became a significant hydroelectric power provider. In the last few years, these dams were removed in order to provide an ecosystem restoration and offer recreational opportunities to the population, such as whitewater kayaking, river surfing and an enjoyable landscape.

Another interesting fact about the Chattahoochee is that it divides Columbus Georgia from its neighbor town Phenix City in Alabama. As a foreigner, I could notice that when you cross the bridge towards to Phenix City, you encounter a different atmosphere. Phenix City isn't so rich as Columbus, and there is a higher concentration of African-american population there than at the Columbus side. The racial segregation and the Civil War battles seem to have left their mark on this region.

During my residency in Columbus I felt that, despite the nice landscape and the seemingly pacific life of the town, I was living in a place full of war stories and social conflicts. War hadn't remain in the past, it wasn't restricted to racial problems against African-American or the Native Indians, but it is still present in Columbus specially because of its proximity to Fort Benning, a huge American Army post considered the Home of the Infantry of the United States. It is very common too see military members having lunch at Columbus Downtown. Also, one of the touristic attractions there is the impressive National Infantry Museum, that tells proudly the victories of the United States in wars all around the world.

Although my artistic interest concentrated mainly on the river and its environment, I couldn't ignore the history and the stories surrounding that site. My installation aimed to reconnect the Chattahoochee landscape with its history, mixing images, materials and forms seen at the Chattahoochee with texts about its history. Instead of telling the history in a didactic way, this work emphasizes the sensations of place and time, concerning the individual perceptions about the environment. As a foreigner, I know that my perception of the local history is partial and fragmented, but I believe that by means of art I can incite the locals to reflect on their own place.

The construction of the installation involved the collaboration of the students of the Columbus State University. During one month, my partner Síssi Fonseca and I have been teaching project-oriented art classes to them and discussing issues about the river and its stories. The students brought photos and reports about their memories of the Chattahoochee. We also gave them some sculpture and performance workshops in order to prepare them to work on the project. First we made some sculptures of wax that resemble aquatic landscapes and organic forms. Later we decided to include some branches from the place and some dowels structures that the students used to work with during

the classes. The contrast between man-made structures and the organic forms from the branches should provide an atmosphere of a constructed and artificial landscape.

During the process, we walked several times along the Chattahoochee RiverWalk, collecting impressions and images that could be used later. Along the RiverWalk, there are several plaques that tell the history of Columbus, evoking memories of the place. I decided to cast reliefs from these plaques in order to bring the history into the installation. Together with the students, we casted molds in clay that were used later in the installation even fired as ceramics plaques or casted in wax that could float on water or take part of some sculpture structures. The texts, that described racial, environmental, and political issues of the site, were fragmented and became partial readable, creating a nonlinear narrative that could be seen when people walked around the installation. The intention wasn't to be didactic or clear, but to instigate site-specific reflections, making people think on the place they live, its natural environment, history and politics

Besides the installation, made with aquariums, water, wood, paraffin wax and other materials, we also created a video and some performances with the students. In the performance "Stream", developed together with the students of the CSU, the sense of collectiveness is represented by movements of the group interacting with the installation and reflecting the flow of the Chattahoochee. During her performance lessons, Síssi Fonseca prepared the students to recognize their body postures and gestures when walking along the RiverWalk. Working with their breathe and the particular way that each individual moves, Síssi created a performance in that the students walked in a line carrying a piece of the structure used at the installation. Their movement resembled the river while also adding their own piece inside the installation. They then became a part of it, seeking an integration between environment and its inhabitants.

Síssi Fonseca also presented the solo performance called "Branches'Body", in that she slides on the floor as she was the river current. Working with branches and dowels she makes a rhythmic noise that resembles military marches or water murmurs. Besides the installation and the performances, the exhibition also included a video installation composed with two videos. The projected video was made with footages captured from the river course, that were mixed with layers of texts shot from the plaques along the RiverWalk. The on-site recorded soundtrack combined the quiet atmosphere of nature with the loud rumble from the local railroad. On a monitor on the right side of the installation also showed the video "Cover, Recover, Discover". This video depicts the process of making the clay molds of the plaques used in the installation. The text displayed on the plaque tells about black craftsmen that helped to build Columbus. During the video, a white student that casts the relief by pressing clay on it and pulling it off reveals the text again and again by repeating the process. This can symbolize the way racial issues have been covered along history and now must be revealed.

The creation of this series of artworks at the Columbus State University was developed together with the community, attempting to respond to their environmental and social issues. Environment protection today depends not only on technical development of strategies for conservation and a sustainable resource management, but it must include communication and education strategies to increase population awareness on ecology. I believe that art can be a very special way to communicate in a sensitive and effective way. By acting on individuals through emotional and sensitive ways, art can provide discussions on ecological issues, making people feel part of their own environment, and responsible for it. As a broad discussion field, art can contribute to develop new ways of thinking environment, making us aware of our role on the construction of the landscape in which we live.