

The End Begins: A dialogue between Renan Porto and Julia Sauma, on the dialogue between Antonio Tarsis and Anderson Borba in 'The End Begins at the Leaf'

'The End Begins at the Leaf', Antonio Tarsis in conversation with Anderson Borba, curated by Mara-Johanna Kölmel, 9 French Place, London, 9 December 2021 – 22 January 2022



Installation view, 'The End Begins at the Leaf', 9 French Place, London, 9 December 2021–22 January 2022, photo by Tom Carter

What does it mean to write about such a visceral exhibition as 'The End Begins at the Leaf', particularly for two researchers such as us? We were brought together, and are beginning to know each other because of this exhibition, and to know Antonio Tarsis and Anderson Borba also, as four very different diasporic Brazilians in London. And so for us it has been a beginning, full of tentative communication, embodied knowing and hope. But it is also a beginning that explores the end all of us are witnessing at home, an end that has been foretold, which affects not just people living close to the world's rainforests but all of us. So it seems like all we can do here is continue what we have been doing since we first came together to talk with Antonio and Anderson about their work and

collaboration – that is, to sustain the dialogue, to keep it going, to keep dialogue itself, rather than expertise, at the centre of how we face the beginning of an end. And so it is in dialogue that we attempt to describe here the impact of this important exhibition.¹

Renan A land covered in coal, and a burnt wood stands tall within the ruins. The tragedy was not here and the cost is an ocean’s rising levels. Where are the victims? Here. At the core of capitalism. Crowding underneath, overground, in and out of cages that let our bodies move freely while imprisoning our subjectivity, binding us to its reproductive gears through pre-coded desires and pre-established social places. The tragedy has a history and the past sits with us while the present distributes its surprises. Apparently, we see the tragedy from the outside. It has nothing to do with us here and does not stop our accelerated path in our cities as we rush to the abyss.

Julia The forest I first knew is called the *Mata Atlântica*, the Atlantic forest, which contours and fills the Brazilian coastline, from Rio Grande do Norte to Rio Grande do Sul. It is a forest that contains many different landscapes. One is my home city of Rio de Janeiro. The forest fills the windows of my childhood memories, envelops me with its smell of rain, leaves and rotten jackfruit. There are days when I can almost smell it here as I carry it within me, walking around London. The second forest I came to know well was the Amazon rainforest, which my father and his family carry within them, a family made up of so many different epic stories, always so shrouded in silence. Stories of Indigenous, Lebanese and Portuguese people; of immigration, migration, loss and gain; of a burning reach for respectability that resulted in so much pain.

I am still trying to track these stories down, but through that search I came to know the Amazon in a different way over the last sixteen years, with *quilombo* (maroon) families living near the border with Suriname. And as I try to think of what I know about that forest, all the facts and information, all the history, all the days spent drinking coffee, playing dominoes and eating fish, all the journeys by canoe and hanging in hammocks in wooden boats, what first comes to my mind are the colours of the moss, the vines and the wall of forest, and the smell of wet bark and trees that create columns around us – like the matchbox columns created by Antonio Tarsis at the very beginning of this exhibition. But also what comes to mind is the smell of burning wood.

And the smell of burning wood is what struck me as I walked around ‘The End Begins at the Leaf’. This smell, which was present as soon as you walked in to the first floor, is the first index of the effort that Tarsis and Borba have made to return themselves and us to the essence of the materials that are around us, and which we persistently take for granted. Materials whose extraction from places like the Amazon is so violent and so deep, a violence that as we glide around this cold city seems almost

¹ We would like to thank Mara-Johanna Kölmel for bringing us together and facilitating our dialogue

other-worldly, or that maybe we so easily make other-worldly as we try to point the finger and say: the violence is over there, not here.

Renan The first time I saw Anderson Borba's wooden works, I immediately thought of a burning forest. Borba uses pieces of wood found in London's streets, puts them together, carves them, and using a blowtorch melts magazine images onto their surface. Here, wood and image reach a point of fusion that makes it impossible to distinguish either, as the images provide the wood with ghostly layers of colours. Wood is, then, infused with ghosts, haunted by marketing images, linking raw materials to the heat of a spectacularised society. Images that codify social desire into signifiers of beauty, happiness, power, wealth, health and success. Images that dictate a way of living that relies on ruins, although the connections are not visible, or immediately visible. A multitude of murmurs surround Borba's works. Capitalist signifiers burnt onto the surface of a spectral material that invokes the burning of living habitats that feed these capitalist dreams. The first floor of works in 'The End Begins at the Leaf' pushed us to ask ourselves where the material for our food and our devices comes from, while allowing us to witness what is left behind. And the burnt wood stands tall over land covered with coal.



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The coal can come in a matchbox. Antonio Tarsis delivers it to you. But not without the cold fire haunting your mind with the spectres of those events that you cannot see. They happen far away. It is terrible that they happen. They happen once more. And we see them from the outside. It has nothing to do with us. Our awareness of these events seems to come at the same pace as the ocean's rise. The victims are everywhere. As Davi Kopenawa states,² you do not rip out the Earth's bowels without shaking the structures that sustain the sky. Tarsis puts pieces of coal inside dozens of little matchboxes to communicate the passage of these raw materials extracted from the entrails of the earth. Matchsticks are made for making fire. Antonio places coal in matchstick boxes. Something is about to blow up.



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Through the window of the gallery hosting this exhibition, the freight trains continue to pass by. The machinery of capitalism cannot stop, even when millions of lives are stopped by its disastrous means of production. The matchboxes are used to assemble a larger bag holding coal in front of this window. Raw materials travel and their travels shape borders, those demarcations historically created through geopolitical processes, dividing the globe with borders that nature ignores but which shape the visibility of the unequally distributed tragedies around the globe.

² See Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*, Harvard University Press, 2013

Tarsis also uses cardboard boxes of the kind used for exporting fruit, transforming them into a collage whose white spaces are covered by shreds of the pieces of black paper used to wrap and protect the fruit. Again, these materials were collected around London's streets, deeply connecting the two artists' work. Tarsis's parents also sell those same products in Salvador, Brazil's *Black Rome*. Salvador is the capital of Bahia, a state where 76.5 per cent of the population is black and where 98 per cent of people killed by the police are black.³ Bahia is also a big producer of commodities such as cocoa, soya, corn and cotton, among others. During the twentieth century, Brazil was one of the world's largest exporters of cocoa, and around 95 per cent of this production was concentrated in the southern region of Bahia. However, the local population do not consume cocoa and do not use it in their everyday life. A large part of the state of Bahia has been shaped by cocoa production and it is completely orientated towards exportation. England was once one of the main importers of cocoa in Western Europe.⁴ In 1847, the first chocolate bar to become popularised was created by Joseph Fry in Bristol.⁵



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³ Information available on: <http://observatorioseguranca.com.br/produtos/relatorios/>

⁴ See Hilton Ramalho and Ivan Targino, *A Evolução das Exportações Brasileiras de Cacau: Uma Análise do Período 1950–2000*, in *Recortes Setoriais Da Economia Nordestina*, CAEN, 2004

⁵ See Carol Off, *Bitter Chocolate: Investigating the Dark Side of the World's Most Seductive Sweet*, Vintage Canada, 2007

Julia Looking to the Amazon rainforest, we find a different but concomitant angle on all this happening today, as tankers the size of skyscrapers glide up the *Trombetas* river to ship thousands of tons of bauxite from the forest to be made into aluminium in different foreign plants. The Amazon's blackest and therefore its richest earth is removed to be transformed into our cutlery, bikes, bowls, and so on, and on, leaving raw red fields of scars behind. And the *quilombo* families that I work with also have a different sense of all this violence as they return to their communities with these same manufactured goods, made from the earth of their land, and attempt to embed them in a collective life again somehow.

Renan These commodities cross borders that the people who produce them, or who are laid waste by their production, cannot cross. Not just because of the legal restrictions, but because of all the economic, social, gender and racial restraints that condition people to a situation of economic immobility – a situation that parallels the intense mobility of the raw materials extracted from their territories; parallels the exploitation of those same racialised bodies working on plantations and crops; parallels the intense brutality of police violence against black people; parallels the enrichment of the chocolate and other industries, and cities in countries in the Global North; parallels the invisibility of this situation here at the heart of capitalism, where the market cannot stop.

Tarsis and Borba cross these borders and do not forget this history. Their works trigger discussions about all of these situations. They cannot stay at the gallery all the time to explain all the ideas around their creative process. There is only a burnt wood standing in a land covered in coal. And the tragedy is no longer so distant. It affects us all. This is an important role for the arts against this capitalist society. Social scientists, historians, economists could explain all these processes of natural extraction and the consequent social disgrace. We could have a better comprehension of how each situation is causally linked to all other situations. But maybe all this information would feed our sense of being outside it all, while these artworks implicate us affectively in what we see. It can shock our sensibilities and crack the hard crust formed by the comfortable bubbles of consumption in which we live.

Julia Transformation and movement seem constant here. Extraction and return. Extraction and return. And what we see in these rooms is also Tarsis's and Borba's deep analysis of some of the materials involved in the profound relationship between our own bodies and experiences, and the objects and materials and colours, the flesh and the fruit that make us and that we make and unmake and put together and take apart to keep living. Opening up the minute details and textures, looking at the softness and the possibility to transform in the hardest places, making anew and offering us this story.

In this painstaking effort, we are taken back to the moments of making, and of the painstaking protection that I have had the privilege to take part in on the *Erepecuru* river, which continues to refuse the unmaking and destruction that is always so close by, despite the enormity of life that surrounds the

communities. I wonder if it is in this effort, in the minute details, in the grains of earth and wood and crumbling coal, and in the purplest matchboxes of our homes, that we can find our next steps, and I thank both Antonio and Borba for bringing us along with them.



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Renan 'The End Begins at the Leaf' was an important exhibition for the discussions it promoted. Through its three rooms, its works whispered spectres of those worlds that have been burned for keeping up the heat of our capitalist ways of living in big cities such as London. Tarsis and Borba make the lands scream. We are not outside. The sky is the same for everyone, as Kopenawa says, and it is about to fall upon our heads. In this exhibition, we were surrounded by pieces of what the sky has already lost. Is there still time to open an umbrella against this unbearable rain? When the brown leaves fall sweetly in the autumn, they do not let us know which storm is about to arrive.

Renan Porto is a PhD candidate in law at the University of Westminster, researching about the emergence of spatial justice around the context of cacao production in northeast Brazil. He is author of the books *O Cólera A Febre* (Urutau, 2018) and *Políticas de Riobaldo* (Cepe, 2021).

Julia Sauma researches how collective life is maintained within and against violent political and relational structures in metropolitan and frontier contexts. She currently works with Amazonian *quilombolas* to document how they maintain joyful communities in the face of racial violence and environmental destruction in Brazil. Julia is based at Goldsmiths, University of London.