

oude kerk

antonio obá



Antonio Obá, *Path*
12 May – 13 Sept 2022

Brazilian artist Antonio Obá created a series of new works especially for the Oude Kerk. His installation enters into a dialogue with the history of the centuries-old site and explores the meaning of the building. With *Path*, Obá presents icons of our time and creates new rituals in which various cultural traditions converge. In this way he connects Afro-Brazilian art with Western Christian iconography. The works reflect on the fusion of cultures and stories and on the power relations that play a role in this. At the same time, *Path* celebrates the richness of this cultural exchange. The installation explores the history of black identity and offers a new perspective on the impact of colonial history in the present.

Read more about the artist and the background to his installation in this exhibition paper.

ENG

Prior to the opening of *Path* curator Marianna van der Zwaag and co-curator Diane Lima spoke about the installation with artist Antonio Obá.

Marianna van der Zwaag: You first visited the church about three years ago. Now we're at the point of installing the work. What can you remember about entering the Oude Kerk for the very first time?

Antonio Obá: What impressed me when I first set foot here, was the scale of the church and the historical layers that I found there. What I also found very interesting where these empty spaces.

Before, you had images or icons that were destroyed or that are not there anymore.

The church, somehow, preserved this void.

Before, you had images or icons that because of the passing of time and other circumstances, were destroyed or that are not there anymore. The church, somehow, preserved this void. This space, that is not there. This emptiness. This was something that marked my visit. In a way, it could be called something symbolic. The dead people that are there, or were there. They are identified. You see their names on the floor. That graves are low, and that the church is quite high. So, it made me think of this connection: the earth and the sky or the earth and heaven. What is alive or was alive and is now dead. Still, they are present there, through a name, through a gravestone. It is this idea of a memory. A memory that comes though absence. This is something very strong, that I felt when I was at the Oude Kerk for the first time.

Diane Lima: I find it interesting what you say about the memory. Being from Brazil, where there is a strong catholic influence as well as an African religious influence. A kind of ancestral relation that we have in our bodies.

AO: What happened to me the first time I was at the Oude Kerk has to do with this. With the body, I would say the body in pieces or this broken body. This body that was gone or is gone. This diaspora. This path that is taken. This has to do with slavery. People who were taken and ripped out of their land. They had to cross the ocean, went through shipwrecks, lost everything: their land, their name, their identity, their religion. All that, through this path. The first time that I left Brazil I also felt that. I had to leave, go to another continent, I also felt like this broken body.

At the Oude Kerk, I wanted to show how a body, through this historical path, though this trajectory, can find a new meaning. Find new significance, for you can reinvent yourself. Of course, I speak about slavery, but also about the process of an individual seeing themselves as a human being through the elements, through surviving, through, in a way, being more mature. Through this, you are reinventing yourself as a person, with the gains and the losses of it, with winning and losing within the process.

MvdZ: In this sense, we could say that central to your work is "the body" and exploring how it is shaped by many different identities, times and histories.



Image: Almicheal Fraay

AO: I am interested in how the body causes you to be exposed to the stories that have preceded your own existence. You inherit stories with your body that push you into specific situations. My own body is connected to many different histories. It is male, black, Brazilian and coming from a poorer and religious background, among other things. These things determine how you are treated as a human being and how you end up in certain situations. I go to places where people look at me as if to say, 'what are you doing here?', 'are you sure this is your place?', and if you literally can't handle the situation, this is the kind of conditioning that will degrade you without you even knowing why.

DL: It makes me think of something that I have been researching in the last years in my curatorial practice about how memory is often inevitably linked to violence and how we can find conceptual and plastic strategies to escape that condition.

AO: Yes, one thing that has become evident to me and that is related to this painful memory and this legacy that still exists, and which seems to me to be a possible answer, is a certain dose of irony as an escape strategy. So, it's not about not wanting to talk about this history, but about giving an ironic answer, looking at this context with a certain irreverence. Some paintings bring this concept that does not bend but faces her head on, provoking another history in a kind of reverence. The idea of fables also comes from this, and how this fabulation as a moral artifice creates concepts and postures of life.

MvdZ: In your work, you use a visual language that refers to all sorts of different cultures and traditions. How do you see the mixing of cultures? It

brings about a wealth of new connections and insights, but some people say that it causes specific traditions to be lost because they merge into larger movements. How do you see this?

AO: I think it is, somehow, unavoidable, this acculturation process. Of course, in countries with a history such as ours, in which the melting of different ethnicities or people took place. Let me just give you the example of the Portuguese language that we speak in Brazil. There is a mixture in our speech of the musicality of some African dialects, for example of Congo. African dialects are like music. Then you have a lot of indigenous words. When I say 'indigenous words', I am talking about the people that lived in Brazil before it was Brazil. Then, of course, the Portuguese language from Portugal. Today, what is the Brazilian-Portuguese language? It's this huge mix, but it's not one or the other. This process of acculturation or this changing of a culture. Yes, something will be lost, but you cannot control what will be lost and what will remain. And to be honest with you: what does it mean to lose something? Maybe to say, we will lose this culture because we're mixing this with that, is too drastic. Is it really lost or is it going to change throughout history? Is it going to change? Maybe the roles will change. We are talking about very complex cultural dynamics. For example, today we talk about colonialism and before we didn't. These things are changing. My work has to do with this dialogue, this conversation, this path.

DL: There is something musical and playful in your paintings and sculptures. Could you say that the fabulous aspect that you create through the pictorial element is embraced by the musical

My own body is connected to many different histories



Image: Almicheal Fraay



Antonio Obá, *Iron Garden*

© Gert Jan van Rooij



Antonio Obá, *Malungo*



© Gert Jan van Rooij



Antonio Obá, *Malungo*

© Gert Jan van Rooij



Image: Almicheal Fraay

environment, by an invitation to movement, by a rhythm that is present, from the playing children in *Suspended Children to the bells in Iron Garden*.

AO: I believe so and that, in fact, much more than creating a musical ambience, we create an installation with a liturgical and ritualistic character. We chose to show the 'Malungo' installation to create a dialogue between the space, the chandelier and the paintings. Although narratives and images were erased in the past, the remnants of different histories remain in this church as well as in my work. *Path* is a kind of procession in the church. The audience walks along that path. In *Iron Garden* they ring the bells. I like to think that this garden initiates a ritual. But which ritual that is, is personal for each person. Everyone has their own path.

MvdZ: In 2015 you came under fire for a performance in which you pulverised a statue of Mary and sprinkled white powder over your own body. It was seen as sacrilege and you became part of an aggressive political debate. In 2017 you temporarily fled Brazil for that reason. What is the situation like now? Is it still dangerous to raise these kinds of themes in your work?

There are other stories to tell, through other perspectives, through those who didn't win

AO: I see that nowadays people feel the need to change stories, to offer new perspectives. To stop telling history from the point of view of the winner. There are other stories to tell, from other perspectives, of those who did not win. That change is taking place little by little, by different people – artists, community leaders or religious leaders. It remains difficult to establish a dialogue, to feel empathy and to recognise, to see the other. To identify what is different and to recognise and acknowledge that. To look at yourself and get to know yourself better and enter into a dialogue with yourself. It is always easier to blame the other person, to blame what is different from what you know, than to check with yourself what you need to do to change something.

DL: I can add that we speak about others that are indeed we, a perspective that actually is ours and now has been performing from us, in a first collective person. The difference between to speak about and to speak with or from and which is present, for example, in a very forceful way in the discussion about 'Malungo'. In 2015 you came under fire for a performance in which you pulverised a statue of Mary and sprinkled white powder over your own body. It was seen as sacrilege and you became part of an aggressive political debate. In 2017 you temporarily fled Brazil for that reason. What is the situation like now? Is it still dangerous to raise these kinds of themes in your work?

AO: This is exactly the moment when syncretism appears in my work and with it, its contradictions. When one thinks about syncretism in Brazil. I am obviously talking about a Christian tradition that, not only as a religious force, but also as a political force, neutralized Afro-descendant traditions and that still persecutes or marginalizes them today. This has somehow become a nuisance for me and a point of reflection where I propose in a way to subvert these roles or at least put them in the same place. My work is a kind of black mass, a counterpart to the Christian ceremony. With the bottle of cachaça next to the golden wine chalice and the statuettes of saints among the cabbage, I want to depict the fusion of religious traditions, their enrichment and at the same time show the painful side. It is not about destruction, but about a transformation. In the biblical tradition things were burnt so that the smoke could rise upwards, to God. For me, this is a sacrifice.

MvdZ: What do you hope visitors will take from your work in the Oude Kerk?

AO: My wish is that people walk the path. It is a call for reflection and contemplation. I hope that people are open to enter into a dialogue between *Path* and the history of this place. In Portuguese we say: 'Feel the skin of the work.'

I want to invite people to follow my *Path* to feel the skin of the work



portrait Antonio Obá

Image: Arjen van Eijk

Biography

Antonio Obá (Ceilândia, 1983) lives and works in Brasília. He studied Fine Arts at the Faculdade de Artes Dulcina de Moraes in Brazil, where he graduated in 2010. His artistic practice, in addition to sculpture and painting, consists of performances, in which he often uses his own body as a starting point. His works focus on the relationship between religion, power and social identity. Solo exhibitions a.o.: X Museum in Pequim in 2022; the Mendes Wood DM gallery in São Paulo in 2017; and the Carnagem Galeria de Arte XXX in Brasília in 2016. Group exhibitions include: 'TUYMANS – CAHN – OBA Bourse de Commerce' at the Pinault Collection, Paris in 2021; '36° Panorama da Arte Brasileira' at the MAM, São Paulo in 2019; *Histórias Afro-Atlânticas*, at the MASP, São Paulo in 2018 and 'South-South: Let me Begin Again' at the Goodman Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa in 2017.

Background *Path*

Antônio Obá's installation touches on the history of Dutch-Brazil. The Oude Kerk has a direct relationship to this colonial rule. In the Binnenlandvaarderskapel you will find the grave of the Brabant sailor Hendrick Corneliszoon Lonck (1568-1634). His military action as captain general of the West India Company allowed the establishment of the Dutch colony in 1630 in northeastern Brazil. The Oude Kerk is also connected to the history of Brazil and the Transatlantic slave trade in other ways. Sailors and administrators of the WIC (and VOC) were frequent visitors to Oude Kerk. Some served as churchwardens, others were buried here. In the neighborhood around the Oude Kerk were the offices of the trading companies, as well as the sleeping quarters of the sailors. Through the WIC ships, slaves also arrived in the Netherlands and New Amsterdam (present-day New York), where they were at the foundation of new black communities in these cities. *Path* highlights and questions this shared history.

12 May – 13 Sep 2022
oudekerk.nl



colophon

Path was a collaborative effort: artist Antonio Obá — general and artistic director Mariette Dölle — curator Marianna van der Zwaag — co-curator Diane Lima — creative producer Chloë Sylvestre — installation *Anything is Possible* (Joep Munstermann, Robert Claris, Thomas Widner, Meinbert Gozewijn van Soest, Keran Hinde) and Brink & Van Keulen Restoration Architecture BBM Ben Massop and François van der Gouw.

business manager Emma van Oudheusden — curator music Jacob Lekkerkerker — curator come closer Radna Rumping — marketing and communication Sinja Bloeme — editor Brecht Russchen — office manager Khadija Bellahcen — production support Bram Kroon — organisator titular Matteo Imbruno — facility manager Gerk Kazemier — coordinator hospitality team Rafael Mulder — hospitality team Bram Kroon, Stan Litjens, Roua Jafar, Jonnah Bron, Astrid van Loon, Ingkie Tan, Bernard Antari Boakye, Alle Kok, Vera Scheerlink.

press Martine Willekens (Peper Office) — graphic design studio Hendriksen — video interview Kinx Films (Arjen van Eijk) — video making-of Sans Studio (Bobbie Wagenaar) — fotografie Gert Jan van Rooij — translations InOtherWords (D'Iaine Camp, Nasja de Vries) — transcription interview Carolina Mayda — gallery Mendes Wood DM.

Oude Kerk is supported by: Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst, Mondriaan Fonds.

amsterdams
fonds voor de
AK Kunst

mondriaan
fonds

Public programme 2022

- 3 June
Silence #37, Lucretia Dalt
 - 21 June
Red window talk, art and dialogue
 - 9 July
Monuments #8, Thomas Ospital
 - 13 August
Monuments #9, Vox Humana
 - 2 September
Silence #38
 - 10 september
National Organ day
- For more information and tickets, go to oudekerk.nl/en/program

about Oude Kerk
Oude Kerk (anno 1306) is a national monument and place for contemporary art in the oldest building in Amsterdam. In a program consisting of art projects, concerts, performances and other activities, art and music enter into a relationship with heritage. The works presented by artists in the Oude Kerk explore the acoustics of the building, play with the perception of space, or illuminate stories from the centuries-old history of the site in new ways.