

# EDUCATION BY STONE

This exhibition has its point of departure in *Education by Stone*, a poem by João Cabral de Melo Neto (1920—1999) that was originally published in 1966, in a book by the same title.

It is a short and sharp poem of only two stanzas:

*Education by stone* (translation: Richard Zenith).

An education by stone: lesson by lesson;  
learning from the stone by going to its school,  
grasping its impersonal, unstressed voice  
(it begins its classes with one in diction).

The lesson in morals — its cold resistance  
to what flows and to flowing, to being molded;  
a lesson in poetics — its concrete flesh;  
another in economics — its compact weight:  
lessons from the stone (from the outside in,  
a speechless primer) to learn how  
to spell it.

Another education by stone: in the backlands  
(from the inside out, and pre-didactic).

In the backlands the stone does not give lessons,  
and if it gave them, nothing would be taught;  
there the stone is not something you learn  
but is a stone from birth,  
penetrating the soul.

At the heart of the poem is the notion that there is no transparency in the meanings and lessons generated by human contact with the stone — a “speechless primer”. Rather, there is opacity. The stone is used as a metaphor, perhaps, of the power of the written or the visual arts to disconcert or ‘trouble’, since it is in open and inconclusive debate with words and images that we can — through the use of abilities, desires and memories — formulate our own meanings of the world, and in ways which are unattainable through other means or modes.

With no intention of offering, in any way, a visual translation of the poem, the present exhibit is organized around the feelings through which the poet seems to want to mobilize his readers. It takes its structure and its mediums particularly from the pedagogical will that can be found in *Education by Stone*, conveyed through the lessons that the poet João Cabral de Melo Neto enunciates there: lessons of diction (impersonality), morals (resistance), poetics (concreteness) and economy (conciseness). Education which, in the Brazilian hinterland, or Sertão — a territory that is not only land, but invention — is imbued with characteristics of its own. There, as it were, stone already inhabits the human, blending and merging with it.

In *Education by Stone* two different sets of works and documents can be identified — different in terms of when they were made, their origin and the medium that is used — which, arranged without a pre-defined order or hierarchy, suggest visual affinities and dissonance. One of the sets refers to the stone as something physical (the mineral) or as a figure of speech, while the other, through a less direct approach, evokes the lessons taught by the stone regarding the ways in which humans organize themselves in society. Works of Brazilian and foreign artists and documents of educational experiments that are contemporaneous to *Education by Stone* which, in several ways, share with the poem a common thrust.

In any of the given scenarios — whether referring directly or not to term “stone” —, the works presented here evoke a singular

and transforming experience which, according to the poet from Pernambuco, the mineral itself transmits. Works which show more than prove, suggesting that the art which really matters is one which dashes facile hopes and defies crystallized concepts. An art that matters, most importantly, because it establishes a pedagogy of unlearning — by, paradoxically, “un-educating”, teaching people to take a second look at surroundings which they take for granted. An art which disrupts certainties, which builds through destruction, which relies on the results of unlikely encounters between things and bodies. And which desires what is yet to come, that which is still little known.

*por* **Moacir dos Anjos**