Making a World from Scratch

An Interview with Maria Fernanda Cardoso

Introduction by Meeka Walsh

In the evening, in different sectors of the city, 15 people are dressing to go out. Each experiences a sense of excitement, anticipation. The men slick back their hair, pull jackets on over their clean shirts, straighten their ties or perhaps knot a silk jacquard scarf at their throat, pet the leather billfolds in their breast pockets, switch off the lights and lock the doors of their apartments behind them. Women lean in to their dressing table mirrors, adjusting powder, lipstick, shaping their brows, smoothing their hair in a tight chignon or pulling it behind one ear and fixing it with a tortoise shell comb. Misting scent lightly at their throats, at their elbows and the bend of their knees, then drawing their wraps around them, they click shut their small leather handbags and hurry into the street looking for taxis. All move eagerly, quickly to the address indicated on a small white ticket printed with black letters. They enter the indicated space, nod to each other, exchange brief greetings in lowered tones and all move toward the center of the room where a slender young woman with dark hair is waiting.
There will be blood, a little pain.

Much effort has gone into preparing for this night; years of study, contemplation, an examination of ritual. The young woman lifts her eyes from the small ringed space on which she has been concentrating. She looks around her at her audience of 15 people. She smiles and says, "Welcome to the Cardoso Flea Circus."

Maria Fernanda Cardoso graduated from Yale University with an MFA degree in Sculpture. Although only in her early 30s, she has already exhibited work in major galleries in the United States, Canada and South America, and the work, above all else, to be noted as an accomplished flea circus trainer and to make a significant film about fleas. It is also her heart's desire to be buried, after a full life, in a flea-shaped coffin.

Her conversation about the fleas (her collaborators) is spirited, that is, inhabited by a sense of the spiritual, and also lively, humorous and animated. These may seem problematic terms to use when what you're discussing are parasites bat, as with her other work, what interests Cardoso are not noble or valuable or even usual art materials. What she wants to do is bring us closer to the world around us, the world of nature from which we've become separated. It's been so long since we've even sought to retrieve the Golden Age of unity, that pre-lipsum Eden. If fleas can show us the way—lead on. If you can see them.

What you see when you watch fleas perform are the costumes, yes costumes, and the tiny circus devices which have been created for them. You see a very small, coloured piece of silk wave as the insect moves to escape light or you see a microscopic chariot dragged by the flea following the carbon dioxide in the breath of its trainer.

Flea circus anthropomorphise. Dressing insects and having them perform like tiny humans closes the distance and narrows the distinctions we've set between ourselves and the world around us. We're chary of the foreign; alternatively, we love what reflects us.

It's a good idea to go the distance, to step outside and mark the flea. Consider the dialectics of association fleas invoke. Beyond the physical limitation there's the vampiric and the religious—the metaphoric ingesting of blood; see it otherwise and it's a question of nourishment. An infestation of fleas is social—about politics and power or about disease and death or, with circuses, about pleasure and entertainment. Maria Fernanda Cardoso has us train our eye on insects, unloved subjects. She tells us it's a world and nothing is too small to consider.

Robert Enright conducted this interview by line in November 1994 with Maria Cardoso who was at her studios in San Francisco.

BORDER CROSSINGS: I know nothing about flea circuses and to tell you the truth, I didn't know that flea circuses actually existed.

MARCIA CARDOSO: Well, they are almost like a lost art, so nobody believes anymore that they exist.

BC: Have you done research on the history of the flea circus?

MC: There are some skills which are passed from trainer to trainer. The story goes that there was a prisoner in Siberia who was many, many years in prison. And he took to training fleas. Then he went to Paris and became a success.

BC: So the first flea circus came out of distress, imprisonment and boredom?

MC: That's part of the story but I don't believe it. I have some flea circus posters from around 1830 featuring Bertolotto. He was the most famous flea impresario and his performances were very elaborate.

BC: How elaborate could they get? First of all, how large an audience can you have for a flea circus? It's not like the big top.

MC: Maybe 10 or 15 people at a time. Because you don't use magnifying glasses, you see them with your plain eyes.

BC: So, what would constitute an elaborate flea circus?

MC: He would do flea ballrooms, in which two fleas are dressed as ladies and two as gentlemen and they dance a waltz. Here I'm reading from his circus poster: "Twelve fleas at the orchestra playing different instruments of proportionable size. The music is audible and the room, one inch square, is eloquently fitted up with a glass chandelier."

BC: This is even more peculiar than miniature paintings. A room that is one inch square is an amazing idea.

MC: I know. So too are costumed fleas. I have made some costumes. I have a Batman and Robin costume and I have a wedding.

BC: Batman and Robin?

MC: It's just two black capes that move. And I have a wedding costume for a flea—it has a big hat and a veil for the bride.

BC: What interested you in doing a flea circus in the first place?

MC: One of my uncles mentioned there was a flea circus in New York and I just had this picture in my mind. Since I hadn't seen any I just decided to make my own. It's my lifetime desire since I was a child. I did homework in my science class about the flea. I drew a giant, enlarged flea looking through a magnifying glass and I wrote a description about its hairy legs and stuff.
BC: What are you training them to do now?
MC: Right now I'm trying to train a flea to wave a flag. And I'm doing a flea golf game. I'm trying to make a flea wave the little flag that marks where the hole is.
BC: Do fleas have a memory track? I mean once you teach this flea how to wave a flag, will it wave a flag forever, or does it repeat?
MC: You can only train them for one trick. One flea, one trick. You have to go over and over and over. Once you've chosen them, you have to keep them separate.
BC: Have there been a strong sense of playfulness and humor in what you're doing with the flea circus?
MC: Yes, definitely.
BC: But it's also a thoroughly serious performance.
MC: Yeah, I want to be remembered as a flea trainer.
BC: It's galling!
MC: To me it is very gratifying. I have a great time even though, at the same time, it's very boring. It takes hours and hours and you need a lot of patience. So it doesn't seem fun sometimes. But every aspect is so bizarre and every conversation I have about it is hilarious. Still, it's very difficult because I don't have a master.
MC: There's no mentor system for you, then? No apprentice system?
MC: No, so far I have to figure things out just by observation, by trial and error and by calling people. I call scientists and I call people who have seen flea circuses. I have spoken with two flea trainers, including a retired flea trainer who was also self-taught. He did it just for fun. He asked them their secrets but they don't tell you because it's their livelihood.
BC: Have you ever killed one accidentally?
MC: Yes.
BC: Am I not supposed to ask.
MC: It's terrible. In one way they're very strong because they are made to survive a dog or cat scratching itself, but you also have to be really delicate about how you handle them.
BC: Do they really have fight?
MC: They do.
BC: What would compel them to fight? Why wouldn't they just move in opposite directions and stage a spontaneous retreat on both sides?
MC: Well, they're attached to the stage. So they cannot go away.
BC: So they're obliged to fight. Is it either that or just hang there, limply?
MC: Yeah. You attach the swords to their arms. They try to get rid of the swords and that's what makes their moves so desperate. It looks like they're fighting. You know, I want to make a movie where the stars are the fleas and they have flea voices and speak in different languages and they perform all the acts.
BC: Would you move in very close as if it were Ben Hur except that in your film it would be fleas pulling around this little chariot?
MC: Yeah, I want it to be a projection of these gigantic fleas. So the skull is not much about human skill, but about flea circus skill.
BC: There's a danger of it being like a t-movie. "The Invasion of the 50 Foot Flea." Has anyone ever made a film of a flea circus?
MC: There is a film in which there are three seconds of fleas performing. They're pulling a chariot and some are dancing—moving in little circles.
BC: I don't want to sound too politically incorrect, but do they have rhythm?
They do.

BC: What kind of dances do they do? Are they good Latino dancers?

MC: In Europe in the old times they made them dance. And in New York they made them dance early jazz.

BC: So these dances can really get down and get dirty?

MC: Yeah. I'm sure they can dance mambo.


MC: I need a music box with a tray that spins. The vibrations help them move and I want this to be a mechanical device, not a record or something like that. But the only problem with the music box is that it has such silly songs. So probably I have to have one made with my music. There is a flea music from the early circuses.

BC: What do you mean by flea music? Do they actually make musical sounds?

MC: No, I have to make it. It's music especially written for fleas. There's a book, The History of Fleas by Bertolotto and it is in art songs for fleas. I went to the theatre library at Harvard and they told me they would try and find scores for me. So the historical research is fascinating because it's such an obscure subject and there is so little documentation I have been researching for two years. Sometimes I think I'm not going to find anything else, then I do.

BC: So you're a flea scholar, or a flea archeologist. In making a world from scratch there is a sense in which you're playing god.

MC: But on the other hand, I'm their slave. I work with them, I feed them, I take care of them. They have control over me because I devote my life to them. This domination is very complete. I think there's some satisfaction for the trainer but I'm starting to think that they dominate you more. It's like a pet. You take care of them and they end up taking advantage of you. In North America people have 80 million dogs and cats—half of them even worn ones babies. I think that's pretty advantageous from the animal's point of view.

BC: You have a small dressing of two prisoner fleas with balls and chains on their legs. You've also got some ants, flea escaping from a kind of minimalist cube. What is that a reference to?

MC: Basically it's a struggle to escape and that's part of their instinctual behavior. If you put them in a white area, they need to go quickly to a dark place, so you take advantage of that. They pull chains because they're just trying to get away. I don't know if this is cruel or not.

BC: Is this a metaphor for something that goes beyond the relationship between you as the trainer and your fleas as performers?

MC: I think it changes in different stages; different acts are different. At times they are certainly anthropomorphic. But sometimes

not, I have some more abstract ones. I have these little threads of milk for my flea clowns. When they jump there is this pretty little colourful thread just moving up and down.

BC: Are they the cheerleader flea? Or is the cheerleader flea a variation on the clown?

MC: It's more a variation of the flag waving. You can make them sweep the floor too.

BC: That makes perfect sense to me. Somebody's got to clean up after the circus. How big will the flea be when you get it done?

MC: My circus is really big. Right now the largest stage is over one metre in diameter. I have another one that is more like an oval—maybe 150 by 70 cm—and it's for the tarpees and stuff. It's totally walled so they can be free but not escape. And I have a big cage for them. Right now I have three main sets, also a small area for the sign that says 'Carakao Flea Circus' and it's activated by fleas.

BC: How far along are you on the training? Have you got separate training programs for a number of fleas?

MC: Before I was trying different things at the same time. Right now I'm picking one at a time. I'm trying to make one jump a ball and to pull churros, which is a classic. I can already make them walk the tightrope. I have the prisoners. I have the cannon-balls. And I'm playing with different versions of the flea clowns. When you want to perform they have to work perfectly and smoothly.

BC: How would the audience know when it's not going perfectly and smoothly?

MC: Well, if you're trying to make them jump into a little pond of water and they jump elsewhere, that would not be perfect.

BC: I see. Well, you could just say that's the clown flea. There must be room for some degree of postmodern ridicule.

MC: I'm not a performance artist and I'm totally, totally nervous about this. I don't want to perform. That's why I want to make a move. I'm not comfortable with my own body and the attention that will be paid to it.

BC: You mean because of the difference in scale between you and the fleas?

MC: No, it's just because I am shy, I don't want to be in the spotlight. I'm looking at what the fleas do. But when the audience looks they take in me and the fleas. I'm not very comfortable with that. You also have to remember the different acts. So I have to train myself to be a Ringmaster which is even more difficult. But my boyfriend is really good at improving the narratives. So, for example, if the flea in the cannon-ball jumps in the opposite direction, he says it's inspecting to see that the security systems are in place so there is safety in the jump. You have to improve all these things.

BC: Are the fleas expensive?

MC: They are. They are seven cents a flea.

BC: So you've got $21.00 worth of fleas.

MC: They told me there were 500, but I think there were around 350. I think they cheated me.

BC: That's terrible. They cheated you out of 40 per cent of your order.

MC: I bought $50.00 worth of fleas and I got less than that. In the beginning I thought I would order 1000 fleas but I'm glad I didn't.

BC: I want to ask you about the names of your fleas. Why did you pick the name Carakao Rodriguez?

MC: Cochere was a famous cyclist when I was a kid. So I thought I would have my Colombian cyclist. I'm playing with different names. I like Pepita and Pepom.

BC: It's that a flea act?

MC: It's man and woman.

BC: I don't want to ask what they do.

MC: They're the jugglers.

BC: AA, perfect. By the way, do fleas mate?

MC: Of course.

BC: I guess they have to. But that's part of the act?

MC: No, but my research says that flea copulation is the most fascinating thing. Let me read you a description from an article in a magazine: "Flea copulation has been hailed as one of the wonders of the insect world. The male, normally much smaller than his mate, lies beneath her from behind, embraces her back-to-belly with his antennae and softly caresses her genitalia. Then his tail curves up like a scorpion, and he penetrates her with what Brenda Lebene calls the most elaborate genital armature yet known." I have an Asian drawing from 1749 of flea copulation. What they did was they made them copulate and then they froze them. Then they were able to study the genitalia.

BC: Obviously you can't ask if the earth moved or anything, but I gather this kind of event must be mutually satisfying?

MC: Also, for the flea researcher this is flea pornography.

BC: There's another film you could make. You could become known as the Bugs Mayer of flea films. But we can't talk like this any more, we have to get back to the art. So here's a change of pace. How far are you willing to push the idea that your construction and training of a flea circus is a metaphor for relationships of power. Is that irrelevant to your current project?

MC: I don't really think much about power because there is so much to this.

BC: This seems to be a project that a woman artist would take on more than a male artist, because it seems not to be about power. Am I falling into the trap of believing that feminine discourse has opened things up.

MC: Maybe it's a rebellion against these dichotomies because it's so humorous and so much about entertainment. We get pleasure out of other animals and I'm very intrigued by that kind of pleasure. So it is a
BC: There’s a line in Shakespeare that goes, “We are as flies to wanton boys, they see us as they sport.” We see the animal world as well, and certainly the insect world.

MC: But you know I’m not really sure that we are more than animals or that we have power over them. That’s why I said maybe they found me. Maybe they are using me. We forget that we have been here with animals for millions of years. We are animals and there is not much difference between them and us.

BC: So, implicit in what you do is your respect for the flies?

MC: Well, I’m fascinated with them. I sit and look and try to understand.

BC: Is it a fascination with something that you can comprehend all at once? Levin-Strauss argues there’s pleasure in that perception alone.

MC: Yeah, except that you can’t. That’s impossible. It really takes a lifetime. The most famous flea researcher in the world is named Marianne Rothchild. She lives in England and her father was a flea entomologist. He had the largest selection of fleas in the world, hundreds of thousands of them. So you can devote your life just to that and still not understand.

BC: I can see that. So they remain a source of fascination because they admirably remain mysterious?

MC: Definitely. They’re like creatures from another world. You just try to communicate. And every aspect is fascinating. I file every little piece of paper, every quote, every tiny question I get, every laugh somebody has.

BC: I want to ask a practical question here. How can you make a living from your flea circus?

MC: Well, I really want to make a living out of it and that’s part of the focus of this whole thing. But I don’t want to do anything boring to make money. Right now I’m just doing this on my own, but my goal is to make money. Right now I’m living from my set. It’s also involved with animals. I devote myself to working with animals. Most of the time I work with them dead.

BC: That’s what’s interesting. Your installations with starfish are remarkable but they aren’t living things. They’re remains of life and you transform those inanimate things into works of art that have an extraordinary beauty. Why have you made the shift to living things?

MC: I made a fly piece a couple of years ago and in order to get the flies I had to breed them myself.

BC: You did a house fly piece?

MC: It was like a Styrofoam ball and I had hundreds and hundreds of flies glued to it. I glued them with one wing sideways and up so I’d have a halo of these translucent wings. In this country you can buy anything. The starfish and seashores I bought from a supplier in Oakland who supplies the souvenir industries. And a whole selection of other animals I found in biological supply houses. I bought preserved snakes and frogs and lizards. I even bought the pupae for the house flies. You have to feed them with a mixture of milk and tissue paper and a little bit of liver so they lay their eggs. And it becomes this gooky thing. Then they lay their eggs and they grow so fast they start to make a constant chewing sound. The smells were intense, the sounds were intense and I had to take care of them there hours a day. They basically became babies. In a way that’s how I feel about the flies. They are my babies.

BC: Have any of the flies flown away?

MC: No, but he’s my flea mate.

BC: So what do you mean? Does he share your obsession with flies?

MC: He’s my flea valentine. He gets a kick out of it.

BC: Have any of the flies flown away?

MC: No, they’re not going to leave your boyfriend and run off with a fly or anything! There’s no danger of your having a relationship with a flea.

MC: I enjoy it.

BC: But you’re not going to have a boyfriend and run off with a fly or anything! There’s no danger of your having a relationship with a flea.

MC: No, but he’s my flea mate.

BC: What do you mean? Does he share your obsession with flies?

MC: He’s my flea valentine. He gets a kick out of it.

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