



Urtica Dioica, Jorge Menna Barreto, 2017.

MA TRANS - Art, education, engagement

DEHYDRATED LANDSCAPES

← [Back to summary](#)

20 November 2023 by [Jorge Menna Barreto](#)

TEXT

*Falo somente do que falo:
do seco e de suas paisagens,
Nordestes, debaixo de um sol
ali do mais quente vinagre:
que reduz tudo ao espinhaço,...
(João Cabral de Melo Neto)¹*

If you are reading this text on a computer screen, it is possible that your eyes are drying out. Prolonged exposure to bright electronic screens makes us blink less and thus reduces lubrication, which can result in a condition known as “dry eye”, causing discomfort and seriously affecting our vision. At the same time that our eye globes dehydrate in front of the screens, it is estimated that

about 33% of the terrestrial globe is presently undergoing processes of aridification. Adding to global warming, the most immediate cause of aridification around the world is the inappropriate use of land by conventional livestock and agriculture.

Thinking about this double diagnosis on the relationship between what we produce to eat and what we see, the topic of dehydration came to me as a current issue to be debated. However, perhaps even in a subversive way, alongside a negative sense of dryness, which denotes these contemporary states of exhaustion, another sense took over my reflections. By placing it in this other context, especially on the aesthetic and/or existential level, aridification has become a desired state, which consists of a subtractive mental process in order to arrive at what is vital. Quoting Deleuze, philosopher David Lapoujade states that “to reduce, for Deleuze, is to desertify, that is, to return matter and thought to a world before and after man, to explore its potencies”.² Among Brazilians, poet João Cabral spent his entire career residing in this paradoxical point between a dry and tragic social reality, of lack, subtraction and the need for care and provision, and a “poetry of the less”³, assumed and desired for the work itself.

The alignment with this second strand was located in my research in 2017, when I was invited to carry out a project at the Sandhills Institute artist residency, which is located in a small town called Rushville in the state of Nebraska, USA.⁴ This region is predominantly rural and largely monocultural. Using a technique called pivot irrigation, the areas are cultivated in huge circles that create graphic patterns in the landscape, which look remarkable from a plane.

Since 2014, when I dedicated myself to a postdoctoral research in Florianópolis, Brazil, on the relationship between agroecology and site-specific practices in art, I have been investigating land use and human interventions in the landscape that take place beyond the field of art, or land art. Among these uses, I have especially considered the environmental impact of modern agriculture and alternative ways of growing food that are aligned with ecology or agroecology. As with site-specific art practices, agroecological modes of production are usually exercised in dialogue with local specificities, which gain a decisive role and guide interventions in the landscape or, in this case, its cultivation.

Upon arriving at the residency in Rushville, I soon noticed that in the surroundings of the house where I was staying there was a plant that grew in abundance. When investigating it, I discovered that it was *Urtica dioica*, popularly known as stinging nettle. Until then, I was unaware of its nutritional properties. In Brazil, where I lived then, nettles are part of a group of plants that have been, as suggested by Valdely Kinupp, called PANC – *plantas alimentícias não convencionais*, which, translated into English, would be non-conventional edible plants.⁵ Feared for causing damage to human skin, nettles are often avoided and thus ignored as a rich source of food. Few know that its aggressive component is eliminated with cooking and also if dehydrated.

It seemed interesting to me to dedicate the period during my residency at the Sandhills Institute to create a relationship with this spontaneous plant, especially since it is a region where the entire relationship with plants is programmed and monocultural. However, more than isolating the nettle as an object of study, I was interested in thinking about it in a situated space and animated by its vital energy, as a witness of ecological processes, and, in this way, as a “mediator in the relationship society-environment”.⁶ Unlike cultivated plants, which often require the soil to be “corrected” for the chosen culture to thrive, spontaneous plants establish an intensive relationship with a particular location. In reality, it is the local conditions that favor their arrival, and their life develops as a response to the specificities of a place. Their seeds may often be carried by birds or the wind; their irrigation depends on rainfall cycles and local humidity.

The occurrence of a so-called spontaneous plant depends on a series of negotiations between species and environmental factors, which allows us to say that this life carries a dialogical ability, exercised with multiple beings and the complexity that constitutes them. It is in this way that a wild edible can sprout in places as diverse as the cracks in wood or between rocks. It could be said that such a mode of existence that occurs independent of human desire contrasts sharply with that of modern agriculture. By isolating a plant, correcting the soil so that a particular species thrives, making use of irrigation, pesticides and heavy machinery, we become dictators of what a particular locality should produce, often ignoring local specificities and reversing the

long-established dynamics of life: thus, all the species that used to thrive there are now considered invasive, or “weeds”. Such a colonizing mode of action, centered on the imposition of human desire on entire ecosystems, devastates and simplifies biodiversity in the name of monocultures that aim at overproduction and commodification and that only benefit a few humans. For anthropologist Anna Tsing, the monocultural mode of cultivation operates through coercion, removing the romance that usually connects “people, plants, and places”.⁷

The choice of nettle as a companion species for my work in the 2017 residency made use of modes of relationship that did not only concern the research of its visual or physiological characteristics. Since they are intended for consumption, the digestive system was also summoned, in what I imagined the intestinal microvilli as “tentacles”⁸ that investigate, touch and, in this way, connect with the surrounding landscape. Thus, we prepared infusions, vitamins and soups that included the herb, seeking to experience, recognize and listen to the stories of that place through the nettle. The digestive system, when breaking down the food that we take into our mouths, also unpacks information, the stories and relationships established by that plant with other beings, with the sun, with the humidity of the soil, with the stars, and with the different temperatures to which it was exposed. Our guts thus become a reading device, a way to experiment and navigate the surface of the earth through the food it produces. Spontaneous vegetation is a living document, a photosynthetic photograph of a particular locality that, when edible, can be seen not only by our eyes, but also by every cell in our bodies as they engage in its metabolism. Because they have not been cultivated, these foods come to us as gifts, products of relationships and local ecosystems that nourish our bodies with lessons of interdependence, belonging and complexity.

Experiments with the different modes of consumption of nettle and the understanding of this plant as a photosynthetic portrait of a certain location led me to experiment with dehydration processes. Taking advantage of Rushville’s hot, dry summer weather, we hung bundles of nettles in a shed to let them dry. Then, we separated the branches from the leaves and blended them until they turned into a fine dark green powder. We packaged this *farofa* in small jars, which received labels made by the art students and interns at the residency. The nettles, which were now transportable, constituted a kind of an *edible non-site* of that locality, which could now engage other palates in other localities, carrying forward a process of relationship between bodies and landscapes that I have called *cellular mediation*. Upon returning to Rio de Janeiro, the city where I lived at the time, I mixed the green powder into a bread dough. As I savored it, I recalled my time at the Sandhills Institute in a continued metabolization of that place and its stories; not only human, involving my stay and its reminiscences, but also non-human, which encompass other temporalities not experienced in person and through the senses, and which were now present: the dialogue of nettles with the air and winds, with the different rhythms of the seasons and the molecular vibration of the soil, the interaction with other species.



Urtica Dioica, Jorge Menna Barreto, 2017, mixed media, personal collection.



Urtica Dioica, Jorge Menna Barreto, 2017, mixed media, personal collection.



Urtica Dioica, Jorge Menna Barreto, 2017, mixed media, personal collection.



Urtica Dioica, Jorge Menna Barreto, 2017, mixed media, personal collection.



Urtica Dioica, Jorge Menna Barreto, 2017, mixed media, personal collection.

When reflecting and resuming the research with nettles a few years later, in 2021, dehydration insinuated itself this time not as part of the elaboration of a work, but as a reason for a broader collaborative research that I have been developing with artist and photographer Pedro Leal. Dehydrating as a way of reducing the landscape, delivering it in an abbreviated way to be rehydrated – this finally seemed to us a metaphor for various processes of aesthetic creation and communication. For example, the page of the book that contains in its physicality the ink of the

dehydrated printing that, when read by the reader, produces a form of rehydration of the content; or a painting that, when drying, gives stability to the created image and can be revived by those who contemplate it.

However, with time, aridification imposed itself on us not only as a method to reduce and create extensions of a specific place, but also as a condition of certain places, such as mentioned earlier. As we are interested in the relationship between what we eat and the landscape, taking arid places as a theme seemed to us to be an exciting research path. The most immediate evocation of this term is, without a doubt, that of the Sahara and the Atacama deserts. The reasons for their existence involve especially geological causes. In turn, there are regions that, not being deserts, are occasionally targets of drying processes, with harmful effects for local populations, such as seasonal droughts in the Northeast region of Brazil, which generate a high mortality of plants, animals and humans; and those that occur in the state of California, USA, whose alarming results are the fires that affect forests and houses.

Alongside dry regions in a definitive or temporary state, there are also the processes called aridification, which denote the advancement of drought over certain places, often in a definitive and irreparable way. More than simply depleting the soil, aridification creates a complex process of impoverishment of local populations, generating political conflicts, misery and exodus from the affected regions. Deriving largely from the predatory ways of growing food, aridification may lead to the precarity of our food systems. The prevalence of food production governed by large globalized brands annihilates or weakens local forms of food production, which impedes the consumption of a diversity of foods and nutritional sources while transforming entire landscapes, even before they are hit by resource depletion, into green deserts that impact all its sociobiodiversity. Ocular dryness, or dry eye, designates another form of precarity: that of the ingenious capture of our attention for an almost obsessive use of electronic devices such as cell phones and computer screens. This time, it is our ability to see and make sense of reality that is compromised, and the effect of our dry eyes imposes itself as a sign of this vertiginous immersion. As the terrestrial globe dries up, our perception of reality and our ability to respond to the urgencies and even pleasures of the world also dehydrates.

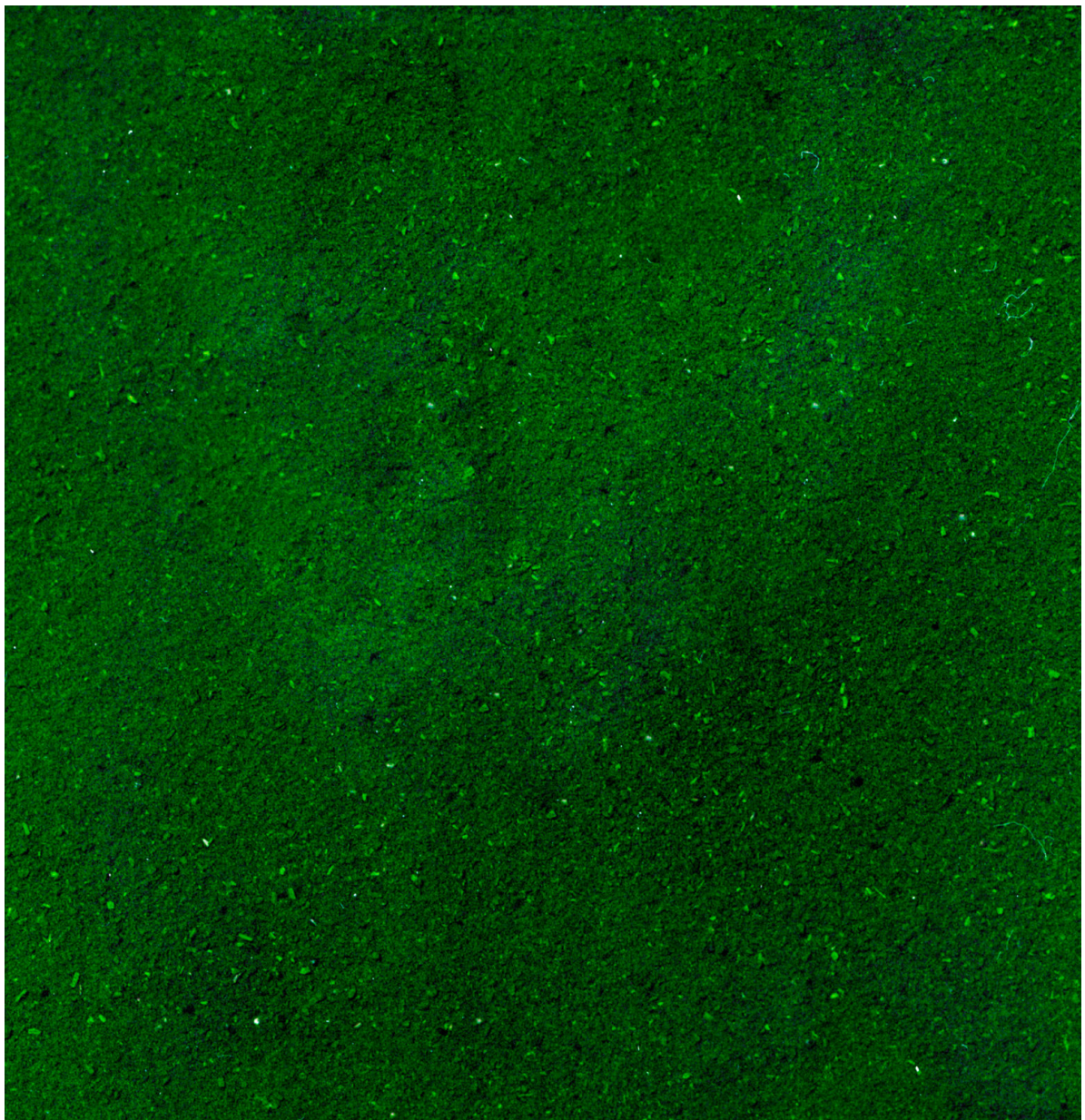
Dehydrated Landscapes seeks to inaugurate ways of addressing the processes of aridification to create possibilities for responding to the urgencies of the scenario in which the environmental crisis advances and threatens various ways of life on our planet. There are, however, multiple complexities in apprehending this topic. Aridification falls into the category of what author Timothy Morton calls hyperobject, referring to beings whose reality defies the most immediate habits of human apprehension.⁹ Hyperobjects have an impalpable materiality, they cannot be pointed out or located, but their effects, extended in a dilated and unpredictable time and space, are concrete. The theory of hyperobjects especially privileges global warming, but also summons other “entities” whose existence is connected to the depletion of the planet’s resources. As well as the parallel drawn between the drying out of nettles and an understanding of the artistic process in *Urtica Dioica*, it is also with a question of method that this new stage of research imposes itself. How are new forms of representation possible to apprehend the complexity of the environmental crisis? How can we address it, make it palpable and respond? What is the role of art and artists in this process? What are the effects of drought on language and other forms of materialization, such as photographic images? Would dehydrating thought and language also be a way to discuss the complexities inherent to aridification? And if so, what would that look, feel, or taste like?

Given their character of difficult apprehension, hyperobjects are often confronted with denialism, which tries to minimize and eliminate the need for them to be recognized. It is for this reason that facing the threat they represent essentially depends on an affirmation of reality, intensifying its existence through modes of representation that may require new images and language. “If a landscape isn’t described, it isn’t cared for,” says ecocritic David Farrier.¹⁰ Our ability to take care of life is linked to our ability to perceive it. The arts of noticing, such as discussed by Anna Tsing, are thus summoned in the environmental debate as a key piece. After all, according to Farrier, “the environmental crisis is also a crisis of meaning”.¹¹ By enabling the creation of images

and language that intertwine with the complex phenomenon of aridification, *Dehydrated Landscapes* aims at rehydrating our vision, at the same time that it irrigates our ability to respond.



Dehydrated Landscapes, Jorge Menna Barreto and Pedro Leal, 2021, mixed media, personal collection.



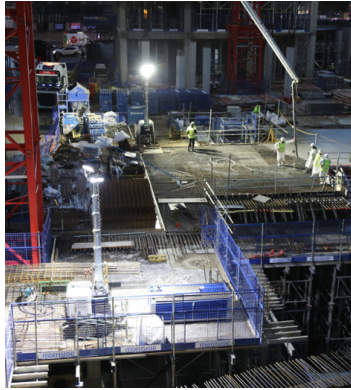
Dehydrated Landscapes, Jorgge Menna Barreto and Pedro Leal, 2021, mixed media, personal collection.

Notes

1. João Cabral de Melo Neto, *Obra completa: volume único*, Marly de Oliveira (ed.), Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1994, p. 311-312. English version, by Jorge Menna Barreto, 2023: "I only speak of what I speak of: the arid and its landscapes, Northeast, under a sun there in the hottest vinegar: that reduces everything to the spine." ↵
2. David Lapoujade, *As Existências Mínimas*, São Paulo: n-1 edições, 2017, p. 55. ↵
3. Antonio Carlos Secchin, *João Cabral: Poesia do Menos*, São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1985. ↵
4. Available at <https://www.sandhillsinstitute.com/blog/2017/6/19/interview-with-artist-jorge-menna-barreto> (last accessed on 29.01.2022). ↵
5. Valdely Kinupp, *PANC: Plantas Alimentícias Não-convencionais*, São Paulo: Ed. Plantarum, 2014. ↵
6. Regiane Fonini and José Edmilson de Souza Lima, "Agrofloresta e alimentação: o alimento como mediador da relação sociedade-ambiente", in Walter Steenbock (ed.), *Agrofloresta, Ecologia e Sociedade*, Paraná: Ed. Kairós, 2013, p. 197. ↵
7. Anna Tsing, "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species", *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 1, 2012, p. 148, available at https://www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/key_docs/eh_1.9_tsing.pdf (last accessed on 25 February 2022). ↵
8. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, p. 71. ↵
9. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. ↵
10. David Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2019, p. 4. ↵
11. Ibid. ↵

RELATED CONTENT

Fine arts, [MA TRANS - Art, education, engagement](#)



20.11.2023

THE UNDISCUSSSED UNIVERSITY

ART PRACTICE AND INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS ECOPEDAGOGY

As an artist working in collaboration, my art practice activated reciprocal actions and responses in public contexts, while working in universities has paid my wages and supported my art practice with research...

Fine arts, [MA TRANS - Art, education, engagement](#)



20.11.2023

MICROPOLITICAL AND HOLISTIC MAKINGS OF ECOPEDAGOGIES

Today's cognitive capitalism operates on the logic of separationism that demands self-commodification and self-representation: a logic of exteriority that, as we know, is also engraved e.g., by social media. Equally, omnipresent media...

Fine arts, [MA TRANS - Art, education, engagement](#)



20.11.2023

PLAY IN THAT VOID. ECO- PEDAGOGY

I am interested in writing about my performance-based pedagogy in relation to the text-based research that more directly signals its politics. This, in order to highlight important practice-based tensions and signal something...

METADATA

Text under license: [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

Categories

[Fine arts](#)

Tags

[ecology](#) [pedagogy](#)

Content type

[essay](#) [in pictures](#)

[Contact](#) [Newsletter](#)

ISSUE Journal of Art & Design

The online journal of practice-based and theoretical researches of the Geneva Academy of Art and Design (HEAD – Genève, HES-SO)

To access all publications of HEAD – Genève: head-publishing.ch

Follow us on [**Instagram**](#)