



David Smith Centennial



forum

The Blue Stone Project: Public Art as Discourse, Ritual, and Symbol of Unity

by Harriet E. Senie

When we speak of public art we think of an object, a site, or a form of public engagement. Rarely do these forms combine, let alone aim at becoming a symbol of international unity. Yet this is precisely what is happening with Denise Milan's *Blue Stone Egg* in Brazil. Milan, who lives in São Paulo, works primarily with stone quarried from the rich mines of her native country. When she began investigating the history of blue granite, she discovered that it first appeared at a time when the continents of South America and Africa were still joined, some 750 million years ago. That sparked her vision of the stone, called blue stone in Bahia (in northern Brazil) and royal blue in Zambia, not only as a material for sculpture but also as a subject for discourse, a focus

for ritual, and a symbol of international unity.

Today Milan's blue stone sculptures exist in four places. For her, each site represents a place of hope for a better and united world, another step in an expanding project that has taken on a life of its own. The *Blue Stone Project* began in Bahia with *Pelourinho Redeemed* (1999). It then moved to the U.S. with *Genetic Blue Stone*, placed in front of the Brazilian embassy in Washington, DC. The third blue stone sculpture, *América* (2003) is in Brasília, the geographic center of Brazil and the heart of its government. The fourth, *Entes* (*Beings*, 2005), is in São Paulo, at SESC, a government agency that supports a range of cultural and social programs and activities as well as providing dental care.

"Gems of the Earth: Aesthetic Imagination and Hospitality" brought together anthropologists, historians, linguists, mineralogists, and philosophers from universities in Rome, Paris, and São Paulo, the founding director of the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD) in San Francisco, and the leader of an Amazonian tribe.

Organized by Milan and Olgaria Matos, a professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of São Paulo (USP), and supported by São Paulo SESC and UNESCO, the four-day international seminar took place in São Paulo, March 15–17, and in Brasília on March 18, 2005.

It began with discussions of the metaphorical meanings of stone, stones in ancient Greece, and Dante and stones. Stones have always, it seems, resonated with symbolic meaning. As silent witnesses to history, yet sharing the ground we walk on, they are still seen by some as containing mythic powers. Two anthropologists and the chief of the Gavião-Ikolen Tribe (Catarino Sebirop Gavião) discussed the Cinta-Larga and Gavião-Ikolen myths of origin, which are linked directly to local stones. By contrast, a mineralogist considered the history of diamonds and their nearly universal symbolic power.

The conference's subtitle, "Aesthetic Imagination and Hospitality," was meant to suggest alternative modes for thinking about (inter)national relations, from ways in which friendship was represented by Muslim authors of the 8th and 11th centuries to the role of Africa as the cradle of humanity and the connections between Africa and Brazil, to the need for maintaining "multicultural awareness" in Brazil.

Many of the ideas generated in São Paulo were synthesized the following day in Brasília, manifesting the national focus of the project. Throughout the four days, the multi-faceted events seemed like nothing so much as the realization of a utopian vision, a screen juxtaposed with widely diverse images somehow managing to exist in the same time/space, sharing, if nothing else, a moment of hope.

The "Gems of the Earth" conference was enlivened at both sites by the performance of native myths of origin. In São Paulo, the Gavião-Ikolen Indians, who believe that we all come from a stone, played instruments called *totoans* (a kind of clarinet) as they danced around Milan's sculpture, *Entes*, a three-part ensemble of blue stone, geodes of agate, and quartz and basalt crystals permanently installed at the SESC Villa Mariana. A similar ritual celebration took place in Brasília around Milan's *América*, permanently sited at the Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil.

Since the blue stone originated in Bahia, the sub-secretary of culture, Sonia Bastos, invited eight groups of drummers to participate in a commemorative procession leading to Milan's

Below: Two views of the *Myth of Origin* celebration held by the Gavião-Ikolen Tribe at Denise Milan's *América*, 2003. Stone, work sited at the Centro Cultural Banco, Brasília, Brazil.



Pelourinho Redeemed. Dressed in colorful costumes, playing an assortment of drums, people of all ages marched through the streets of the town, ending at the blue stone fountain sculpture, where individuals participated in a ritual washing.

Native music also echoed in Belo Horizonte, in Minas Gerais. Through word of mouth and Milan's personal connections, about 50 drummers of the Group *Tambolele*, directed by the musician Santone, played in Liberty Plaza, the town's main civic space. Music here is thought to have spiritual power, considered a protection from drugs and violence and an appropriate medium for addressing themes of unification and separation.

In addition to the local performances announcing the opening of the seminar, Jesuit churches in São Paulo and most of the 24 states of Brazil rang their bells.

Their participation was prompted by Padre Cesar (introduced to Milan by Danilo Miranda, head of São Paulo SESC) and the artist's description of the blue stone movement. Thus the academic conference was inaugurated by music and dance by Africans (from Bahia) and Indians, as well as by church bells, representing all groups basic to the origins of Brazil as a nation.

While it is difficult to imagine a similar confluence of discourse and ritual in the U.S., the blue stone movement serves as a microcosm of contemporary Brazil, engaging widely diverse audiences, sometimes apparently living in different centuries. The stone, among Brazil's many natural riches, suggests an Edenic vision: an earlier time when continents were linked and people united. Milan considers blue "one of the most spiritualized colors." In Brazil's flag, it evokes

the country's skies, and it is the color of the planet Earth when seen from the cosmos. Milan reflects that "for certain Indian yogis, blue symbolizes divinity" and that historically "before the Renaissance it was the color of infinity and of the mysteries of the soul." She also cites Kandinsky, who considered blue a color that "takes man to infinity and awakens in him the desire of purification and the entrance into the supernatural."

At the time of this writing, SESC is considering a publication based on the "Gems of the Earth" seminar and the Blue Stone Project. The Brazilian states of Bahia and Minas Gerais are considering anniversary rituals for next year. Both the Museum of the African Diaspora and the Brazilian Embassy in Washington, DC, are promoting the project's Web site <www.veioazul.com.br>. Milan is exploring the pos-

sibility of expanding the project inside the Americas, where there are still indigenous Indian and Afro-American populations and artists who are interested in developing works with them. She also hopes to expand globally and to link the project with the theme of environmental and human rights, engaging a range of artists who address these issues. Enlarging the idea of public art to include sculpture, discourse, performance, and music, Milan continues to explore the amazing resonance of a seemingly unlikely symbol of unity. "The egg is just a poetic vision," she disclaimed, but it is one that has already stretched amazingly far and engaged many in its idealistic goal. At the start of this project she wrote: "What if... / The waters brought the lands back together. / First / Africa and The Americas, / would mingle in space. / Then, / all other nations, / would come close together, / in their awareness / of molding one / single, / great blue stone. / The Earth."

