

To all those who are very good at trying their best.

To those who are not bad, not good, but enough.

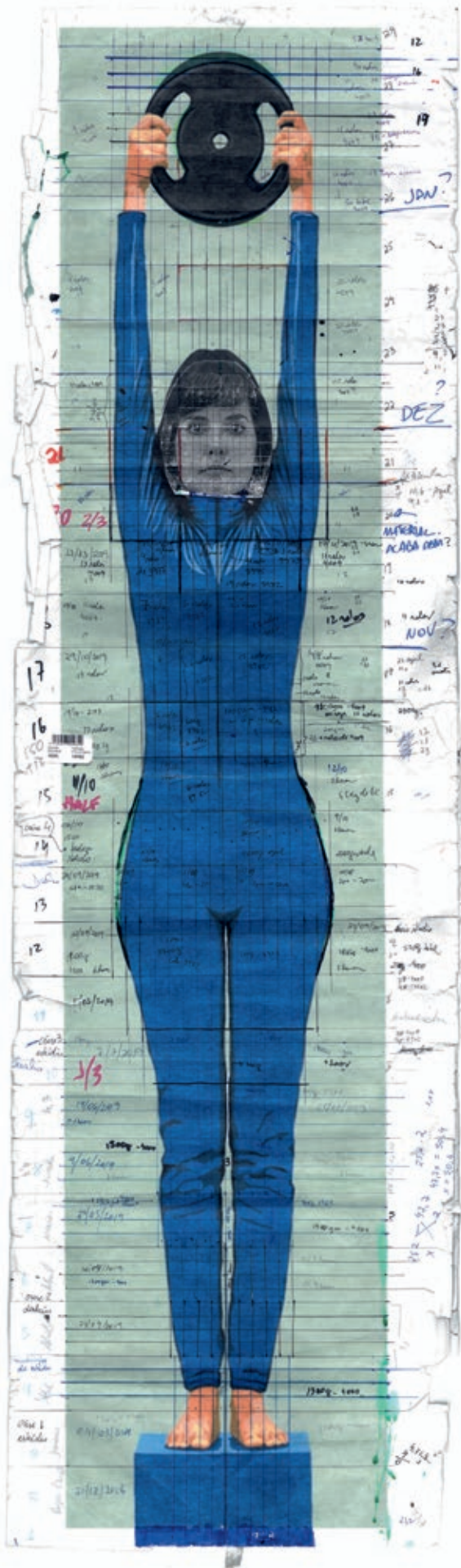
To my father and mother whose hands shaped my world.

To my sister, the best storyteller I have ever met.

To my love, who believes in me and who has stood by my side through it all.

To my friends, for the magic.

Thank you for making this project possible.



ELEN BRAGA

with contributions by

Elen Braga

Raphael Fonseca

Laila Melchior

Paulo Miyada

Ilse Roosens

Pieter Vermeulen

Joanna Zielińska

edited by

Pieter Vermeulen



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PROLOGUE

This is the story of Elen Braga. While this book centers on the artist herself, it also unfolds through the narratives she weaves. But how does one recount the story of a life? Aristotle famously—and perhaps predictably—declared in his *Poetics* that every story consists of three parts: a beginning, a middle, and an end. The plot, he argued, must offer a unified representation of the course of action, which he called “the arrangement of incidents”. This sense of completeness, in its tripartite structure, he deemed essential to any successful story. But in some cases, it’s not that simple. What if we begin in the middle, *in medias res*, in mid-life or mid-career? Would we be disappointing the philosopher, or would we be inspiring him? *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*, in the middle of our life’s journey... Admittedly, when we listen to stories or live our lives, we can rarely pinpoint the exact middle—although we can develop an intuition. Only with the art of foresight and the benefit of hindsight can we guess at the center, like finding the midpoint between the front and back covers of a book. Yet life is not a book. We don’t coincide with its characters, nor can we count the years before or behind us in pages. Stories, however, go beyond the recounting of past events. They are anchored in the locutory act of telling, emerging in the narrator’s present voice. This makes them inherently embodied, partial, and subjective—an intricate mix of memory and interpretation, shaped as much by the telling as by the living.

The middle is not just a point in time, it is also a place, a *milieu*. It is where I encountered Elen Braga. My story begins here, a couple of years ago, in a small studio in Brussels—in the St. Gilles district, to be precise. The space was modest, perhaps no larger than twelve square meters. It lacked natural light, and its proximity to an exotic tiki bar was but a small consolation. Inside, I found the artist at work, in her delightfully chaotic room filled with materials, trinkets, and yarn—so much yarn. She greeted me with a glass of Tönissteiner lemonade, which she later spilled clumsily on the floor. I handed her a bag of cookies I’d brought from Antwerp, my new home at the time. The cookies, shaped like severed hands in homage to local folklore, were slightly politically incorrect in the Belgian context, but they were outrageously delicious. Pinned to one wall of the studio, I noticed an old article torn from a Brazilian newspaper. The grainy, black-and-white photo showed a handsome,

dark-skinned man holding a blond-haired girl—she must have been five or six—as though she were a trophy. Painted palm trees swayed in the background. Interestingly, the girl, adorned with a satin ribbon, clutched an actual trophy in her tiny hands, gazing into the camera with quiet confidence. The artist explained that the photo of her father and her dated back to 1990, a snapshot from one of the many mini-baby beauty pageants that she entered—and won—during her childhood.

On another wall, I saw a portrait of a woman dressed in a blue suit, heroically lifting a disc above her head, much like one would do with a weight plate at the gym, echoing the statue of Nike holding a wreath. In the photo illustrating another newspaper article—this time dated March 8, 2020—the portrait, rendered in textile and monumental in scale, had replaced the Belgian flag atop the triumphal arch of the Cinquanteanaire in Brussels. Though larger than life, the image was unmistakably her—Elen Braga. As we were eating our severed-hand cookies, I listened patiently to her stories. I was stunned to witness an entire life—with its aspirations and doubts, fears and worries, triumphs and struggles—compressed into such a tiny studio and a mere two hours of conversation. Something just didn't fit, either the artist was too big for the space, or the space was too small to contain her. But somehow it worked, paradoxically and beautifully. In that moment, I understood: what we call “larger than life” is simply a question of perspective—or a matter of scale, in both space and time.

From there, our endless conversation wandered through numerous settings: bars, restaurants, hotel rooms, castles, trains, buses, galleries, and museums. Elen Braga told me about her upbringing in the Protestant church, her time as a celebrated gospel singer, her trauma of a tragic bus accident, her family's move from the north to the south of Brazil, and the many twists and turns that ultimately led her to art—a path that gave her life renewed meaning. There was something irresistible about the passionate way she told stories. She had likely recounted them a thousand times, yet each retelling felt as fresh and vivid as if it were the first. I was quickly drawn to her way of looking at the world—always curious, always uninhibited—her fascination with even the smallest details. Driven by mutual intrigue and curiosity, everything accelerated and intensified the fervor and impulsiveness with which we had lived our separate lives, merging them into one. This new life together suddenly became the center of our attention. Love swept us up, stealing time as it often does, and we tied the knots.

Editing a book dedicated to her life's work—a still evolving journey—seems like an extension, a crystallization of our ongoing dialogue. This time, however, there is an audience of readers involved, some of whom might not agree with the intimate intertwining of work, life and

love. They might invoke the deontological principle of distance, the professional boundary between observer and subject, life and work, passion and professionalism. Yet, in artistic matters, one could just as easily champion the value of proximity, intimacy, and nearness. Isn't there also strength in vulnerability, in writing oneself into the story? While the flame of passion may always run the risk of consuming the self, it can also yield extraordinary results.

A less personal reason why the middle is a good time to tell the story of Elen Braga lies in the “retro-proactive” nature of an artistic career—a perpetual interplay of looking back and forward, leaping between past and future. The development of an oeuvre rarely adheres to a (chrono-)logical or linear sequence; instead, it unfolds in fragments, layers, and loops, remaining necessarily incomplete as long as it is alive. Kierkegaard wrote in his journal that while life can only be understood backwards, it must be lived forwards. But since life doesn't allow us to stop and look back, we are destined to live our lives incompletely. This book, then, is both an attempt at consolidation, and an invitation to leave certain threads unresolved, encouraging the reader's narrative imagination to keep the work alive.

Nevertheless, several red threads run through Elen Braga's story, spun with the art of foresight and the benefit of hindsight, as we mentioned earlier, like pathways leading us through the labyrinth of an oeuvre. In this volume, her works from the past fifteen years are documented in reverse chronological order. Interspersed among them are pink pages featuring the artist's own writings, drawings, and memories. In addition, we've invited five guest authors, each of whom has collaborated with the artist at different points in her journey. Together, these elements form a non-linear yet substantive dynamic, offering the reader insights into a multifaceted perspective on Elen Braga's artistic practice.

In his contribution to this book, Paulo Miyada provides an insightful analysis of Braga's work, focusing on *Elen ou hubris* (2020) as a pivotal piece that embodies resistance, transformation, and the disruption of entrenched power structures. Miyada underscores the artist's unwavering dedication, her engagement with personal and historical narratives, and the subversive essence of her artistic practice.

Laila Melchior elaborates primarily on Braga's textile tapestries, particularly the use of self-imagery in her art and the relationship to themes of time, history, and power. Focusing primarily on *Prophecies* (2020), Melchior draws on art historical and religious motifs, as well as Brazilian culture and politics, to provide insight into several key works and the context of their creation.

Raphael Fonseca's text traces the evolution of Braga's artistic journey, examining her use of the body, her thematic and visual

development, and her transitions—from performance to tapestry, and from Brazil to Belgium. Describing her trajectory as a “walking metamorphosis,” Fonseca discusses the diverse roles, characters, and narrative layers that define her work, while also identifying her inspirations and influences.

Ilse Roosens pays attention to Braga’s exploration of moral codes and power dynamics, arguing that her art transcends simplistic dichotomies of right and wrong, success and failure. Roosens observes how the artist uses her personal experiences as a Brazilian immigrant in Belgium to engage with broader geopolitical issues, and the ways morality can both secure and constrain human freedom.

Lastly, Joanna Zielińska looks into the interplay between the artist’s performative and textile practices, particularly the use of her body to challenge physical and mental boundaries. Zielińska highlights Braga’s engagement with historical and personal narratives through the lens of craft, emphasizing the subversive qualities of her work. By incorporating textiles, Braga defies conventional hierarchies within the art world, merging craft and performance into a powerful critique of artistic norms.

This prologue would be incomplete without words of heartfelt gratitude. Without the invaluable support of our partners, we would not have been able to make this book project happen, and we wish to thank them all: CC Strombeek (Charlotte Crevits), Mu.ZEE (Mieke Mels and Ilse Roosens), KIOSK (Simon Delobel), VONK (Lies Serdons), and Wouters Gallery (Tim Wouters). We are especially grateful to the Flemish Government for their generous support in bringing this publication to life. Our sincere thanks also go to MER Books—particularly Luc Derycke, Viktor Van den Braembussche and Leo Lopez—for their belief in this project, their expertise and guidance through every step of this journey, from inception to completion.

1 Als een Leeuw in een Kooi

Like a Lion in a Cage, 2024
CC Strombeek, Grimbergen (BE)
Curated by Laila Melchior
Photography: We Document Art

In her first institutional solo exhibition in Belgium, Elen Braga reflected on themes and formats that have traversed her practice since its early stages. With new productions ranging from video and tapestry to ceramic experimentations, the exhibition echoed over a decade of work.

Als een Leeuw in een Kooi [Like a Lion in a Cage] borrows its title from a popular song by schlager singer Willy Sommers in which a speaker waits for their lover while turning “*round and round, like a*

lion in a cage.” Considering the figure of the lion, Braga confronts the lyrics from the schlager hit with the heraldic symbols of stateliness in the coats of arms of Belgium and Flanders. Often resorting to classical narratives as entry points to her work, Braga draws inspiration from local politics and the biblical tales associated with Nebuchadnezzar, the ancient Babylonian king who foreshadowed the apocalypse in a dream. She dwells on the narrative of the end of times beyond the transition between the worldly and the

divine. As an account of the dissolution of politics, the apocalypse could also be understood as a myth praising an idealized notion of tradition against diversity. Exploring the topic of power, Braga delves into the multiple forces that shape everyday life and history, informing our collective and individual ideals. She connects private and political contemporary realities and unveils junctures where community, myth, grand state affairs, desires and beliefs meet. (Excerpt from a text by Laila Melchior)



from left to right

Samson in the Lion's Cage, 2024. Hand-tufted tapestry, 97 × 280 cm

Als een Leeuw in een Kooi (Like a Lion in a Cage), 2024. Wood, rope, ceramics and grass, variable dimensions

Behold in Awe, 2024. Digital print on PVC, 290 × 1040 cm





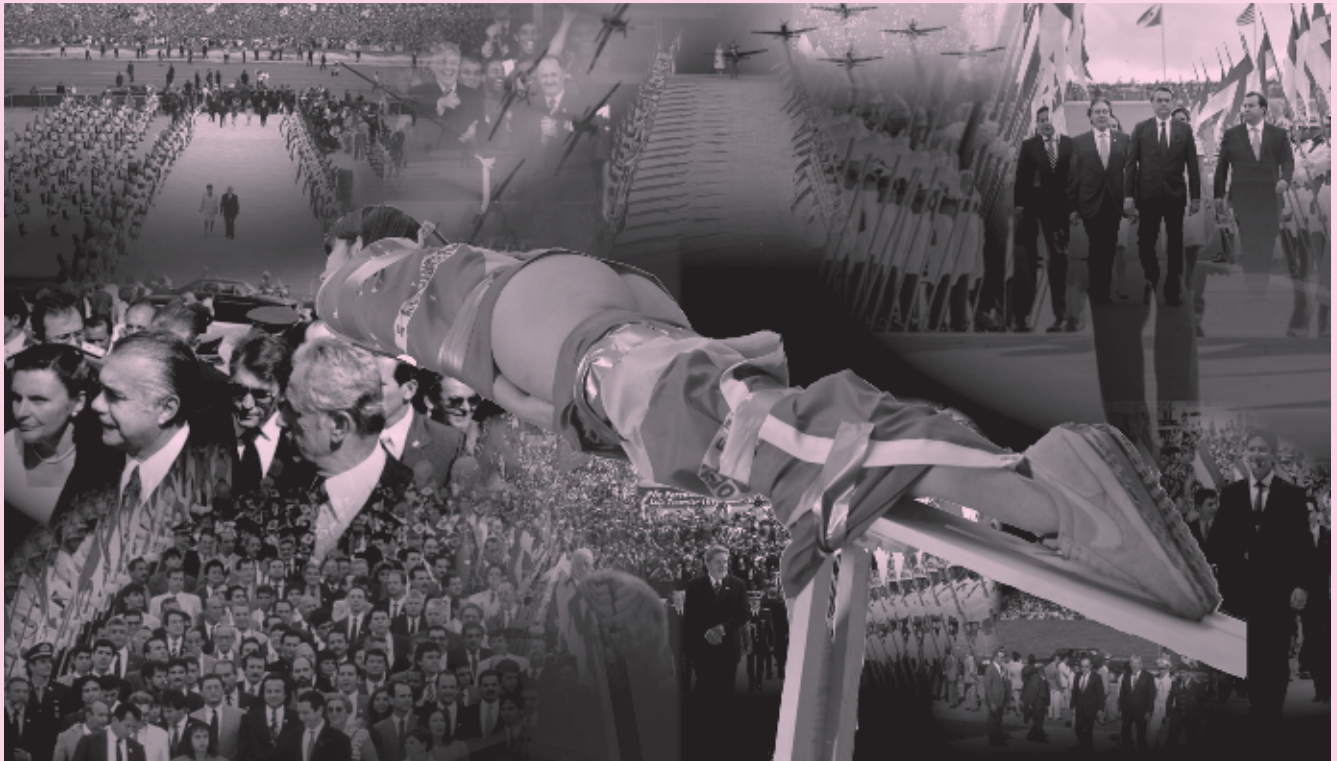
Samson in the Lion's Cage, 2024. Hand-tufted tapestry, 97 x 280 cm





Als een Leeuw in een Kooi (Like a Lion in a Cage), 2024. Wood, rope, ceramics and grass, variable dimensions

THE SEDUCED

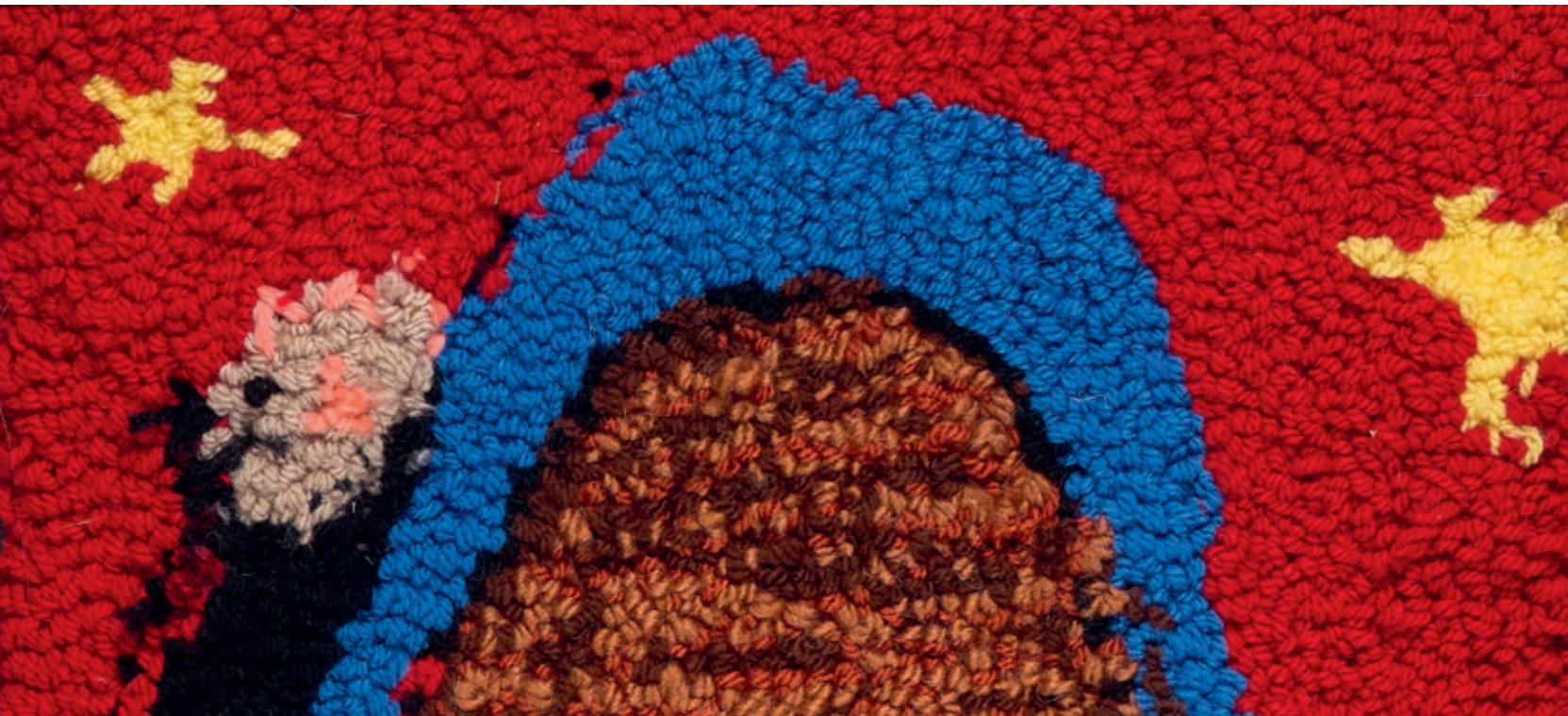


Before I became an artist, I was a gospel singer. I sang in evangelical churches with the musical group Prisma Brasil. In addition to singing, I also preached or, as it was said, I “delivered the word.” “The word” was as important as the music and had to be trained intensively. In the Adventist church I attended, it was believed that the “gift of tongues” wasn’t about knowing how to speak a foreign language, on the contrary: it was the ability of an individual to communicate coherently, clearly, and to make themselves understood. So I learned that if I wanted to speak well, I had to know how to tell stories, but not give everything away.

We connected the stories to ourselves, because we liked to hear about ourselves. Maybe not everything was true, but there was a truth to be told (here and everywhere). Every story told was a seduction strategy for the most important message, which was the promise of the Living God, of a heavenly palace with streets of gold and crowns of crystal. "The events and plans of this world we are in are not important, as this life is fleeting," I would say in a strong, vibrant voice with an air of bravery. "God's plan is greater!" And so it was in all the concerts I performed in. It was always a big hit and people cried with emotion. Until one day something very strange happened.

It was another night of worship and I was restless. Something kept bothering me. The audience was huge, but I couldn't look anyone in the eye. It was a special show, with a live orchestra, performing lights, image projection, smoke machines. Even our clothes were different. Everything felt like a dream. We sang every song with such fervor and it was an incredible feeling of power. But when it was my turn to tell the story, I stumbled and forgot the tone in the middle of the word.

This time I told about a terrible bus accident I was in when I was 14 years old. I knew everything by heart. After all, I had been practicing that speech for years. "That's when the bus lost control of its brakes!" I was saying, when, immediately, I was seized by a sudden panic, a frightening silence. It was as if I had entered a dark hole and was completely blinded by the exaggerated focus of light on my face. I was naked, alone and in the midst of a crowd that was looking at me, hoping to see something different in me, something that reminded them of Jesus. But I froze at the moment of the divine promises. How could I make people believe a speech that even I didn't know how to believe? How did I get there? Was I the one who had been seduced? In a split second, I remembered an escape strategy I had used before. When I didn't know what else to do, I pretended to cry. It was a form of commotion that worked very well. That night I pretended to cry and everyone cried with me. Later, I cried for real.



from left to right
When the Clouds Cry, 2024. Hand-tufted tapestry, 94 × 56 cm
Our Land, 2024. Hand-tufted tapestry, 74 × 36 cm



from left to right

Flesh, Stone, Iron, and Clay, Part 2, 2024. Three-channel HD video with sound, 00:06:44.

Performers: Elen Braga, Rachel Daniëls, Katrien van Remortel. Camera: Bert Warson. Produced by Kunstplaats Vonk

Flesh, Stone, Iron, and Clay, Part 3, 2024. HD video with sound, 00:07:38.

Performer: Michiel Vandeveld. Camera: Bert Warson. Produced by Kunstplaats Vonk



Flesh, Stone, Iron, and Clay, Part 1, 2024. Two-channel HD video with sound, 00:04:51.
Performers: Vladimir Babinchuk, Elen Braga, Kasper Claes, Eric Donckier, Casper Engels, Lars Franco, Staf Frans,
Lukas Gilissen, Daan Kwanten, Michael McManus, Preben Nilis, Thibaut Princen, Kimi Vanheuckelom, Jitse Wierdsma.
Camera: Bert Warson. Produced by Kunstplaats Vonk