

# Matter and Spirit: A Conversation with Luana Vitra

July 8, 2025 by Robert Preece



*Installation view of "Amulets," SculptureCenter, New York, 2025. Photo: Charles Benton, Courtesy the artist and SculptureCenter, New York*

Materials matter to Luana Vitra. She uses iron, copper, wood, feathers, and clay—materials embedded in the history, culture, and geology of her home region of Minas Gerais in Brazil—to explore our connections to the earth, how we are at one with its offerings and how we exploit them. “Amulets,” her current show at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, New York, features new works that draw us into the energies of the earth and materialize metamorphosis. Inspired by the philosophical and spiritual traditions of the Afro-Brazilian diaspora, Vitra understands her materials as mediators between secular and spiritual worlds and as mediums for “receiving, storing, transforming, and settling energies.” As always, iron serves as her touchstone, a conductor that directly connects the earth’s core to the human body.

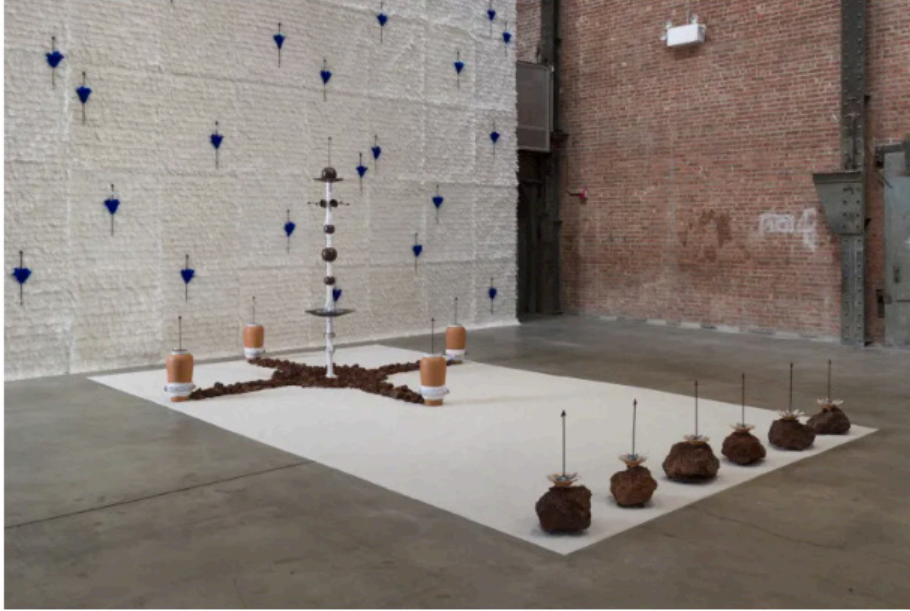
**Robert Preece: What inspired *Termômetro 1* (*Thermometer 1*, 2025) and its arrangement of forms?**

**Luana Vitra:** This exhibition includes a number of pendulums made of iron ore stone, sodalite, and tied fabrics. I think of this specific object as a thermometer that measures and balances the energy of the space. When I imagine a thermometer, I naturally also think of mercury, which splits into small spheres when a thermometer breaks. So, the composition starts from this image of the element’s movement. Many of my works are a close observation of the minutiae of matter—the way that matter moves is truly a source of inspiration for me.

The choice of stones used to make the pendulum also has to do with energy. For example, iron ore is an essential stone in my work—all of the pieces that I’ve made to date, or nearly all, include iron ore, because I see it as a kind of skin, a presence, a body that resembles my own. Sodalite is the tip of the pendulum itself, the point that measures this energy, this temperature. Sodalite is a stone associated with spiritual elevation, meditation, energetic protection, and the strengthening of the mind and intuition. That’s why it was chosen for the pendulum’s tip.

The circles on the ground are part of the imagining of mercury’s movement. The feathered mantle that envelops nearly the entire work creates a dimension of protection. At the same time, the fact that the exhibition is titled “Amulets” refers to a way of moving gesture within the works. Feathers and bindings are, respectively, the material and the gesture present in the making of amulets in different contexts. However, this work, beyond being a thermometer, is a way of affirming the existence of the amulet more through gesture than through the object itself. Amulets are usually understood as small items that people carry in their pockets, but I wanted to expand the perception of the amulet as something that can be totality, not just a detail.





Installation view of "Amulets," with *Terremoto*, 2025, feathers, sand, ceramics, iron ore, iron, fabric, sodalite, selenite, and kyanite, dimensions variable. Photo: Charles Benton, Courtesy the artist and SculptureCenter, New York

**RP: In your approach to materials, I understand that you “create a dialogue between their natural and industrial manifestations.” There is also a spiritual aspect to this. Could you explain this some more, particularly in relation to *Terremoto* (*Earthquake*, 2025)?**

**LV:** In Brazil, I was able to learn more about Bantu philosophy from Tiganá Santana. In a certain way, these ideas shape the way of being in my region, Minas Gerais, because many of the people who were enslaved there during colonial times were Bantu. Being able to approach this way of thinking about the world through Tiganá Santana’s research gave me the chance to perceive certain things differently.

In Bantu philosophy, the highest form of spirituality lies in the ground. *Capoeira*, for example, is a practice of listening to this spirituality. In European logic, spiritual ascension is always connected to the sky, but in Bantu logic, ascension is multidirectional. So, when I think about the spiritual movement of matter, it wouldn’t make sense to think that a mineral spirit ascends only upward—perhaps its primary ascension is to go deeper into the earth.

In *Terremoto*, I was inspired by this movement of the earth, and at the same time, I imagine this motion from within. The exhibition as a whole is based on observing the movement of the earth. The earthquake is one of those possibilities of movement that I understand as a way minerals express themselves. I analyze this expression by perceiving the physical, but also the spiritual.

**RP: Where do you source your various materials?**

**LV:** All the materials used in the works that make up “Amulets” came from Minas Gerais. This happens in most of my works, since this is a land abundant in mineral presence. In this exhibition, the only material not from Minas Gerais is the sand—it came from Canada. Everything else—stones, metals, feathers, and fabrics—came from Minas Gerais.

**RP: You combine strong horizontal and vertical emphases, along with juxtapositions of the natural and industrial, as in *Erupções* (*Eruption*, 2025).**

**What do these different coordinates and designations mean to you?**

**LV:** In *Erupções*, I was thinking about the birth of iron, since this element comes to the earth’s surface through volcanic eruptions. I was contemplating that moment when the earth ignites and pours this affection onto the world’s surface. Magma rises in an upward, vertical motion, but at the same time, it also flows horizontally. When a volcano erupts, what it spills becomes part of the landscape.

In this piece, I was reflecting on this gesture of the earth—the moment when magma cools and creates other structural possibilities. It’s precisely because this material was poured onto the earth’s surface that the existence of industry became possible, considering that iron is a structural material in industry. When the volcano erupts and spills this material onto the world, that’s when we gain the possibility of the structures we live in today.

But what else does the earth deliver through this gesture besides the potential for structure? What does the earth feel like as it erupts? Beyond the visible energy, what invisible energy does a volcano move? These are the kinds of questions I ask myself when creating a work of this nature.



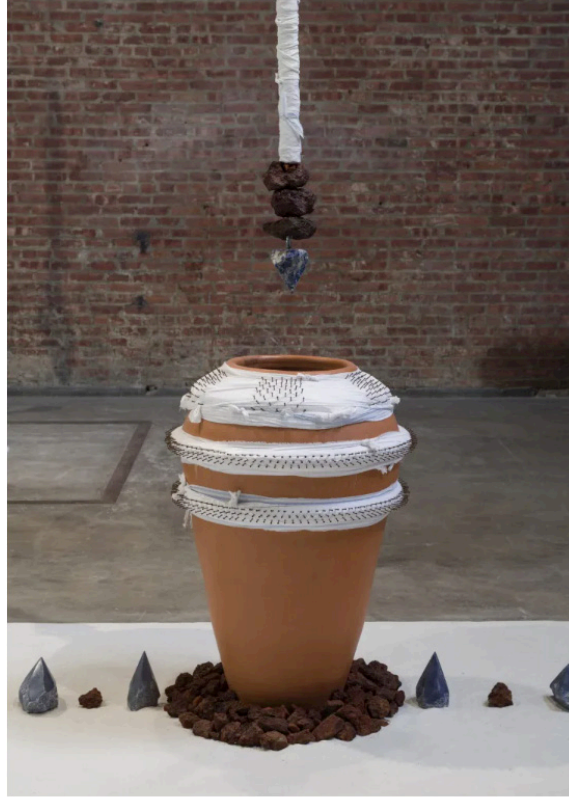
Installation view of "Amulets," with (foreground) *Dança*, 2025, sand, ceramics, iron ore, iron, fabric, sodalite, and selenite, dimensions variable. Photo: Charles Benton, Courtesy the artist and SculptureCenter, New York

**RP: Do your vertical elements ever refer to traditional religious forms? I'm thinking especially of the central element in *Dança* (*Dance*, 2025).**

**LV:** The central sculpture in *Dança* is part of a series that I started during my residency in South Africa. Being there allowed me to come into contact with many sculptures and ritual objects from various cultures—not only from South Africa, but from other countries as well. *Nkisi* sculptures from Congo were a key reference for me. This was a significant moment of connecting information since Minas Gerais is a region influenced by Bantu culture. The initial sculptures that inspired the formal patterns of the central piece in *Dança* came to me through dreams influenced by everything I was seeing. I only dreamed of the form—the way I chose to make the details was directly influenced by *Nkisi* sculptures.

I think what gives my work a spiritual or religious atmosphere is mainly how it's built, because I see repetition as a form of prayer. In my work, what interests me is thinking about how, in relation to form, it's possible to build a prayer not made of words, but of gestures. I truly believe in this rituality of gesture, and that's present in how these sculptures are constructed. The amulet is the approach, not the object.





*Dança* (detail), 2025. Sand, ceramics, iron ore, iron, fabric, sodalite, and selenite, dimensions variable. Photo: Charles Benton, Commissioned by SculptureCenter, New York, Courtesy the artist and Mitre Galeria, São Paulo and Belo Horizonte

**RP: Could you explain your treatment of the clay pots studded with nails and fabric in *Dança*? And are we “spiritually” dancing here?**

**LV:** In *Dança*, I imagine the earth’s core, which consists of a dance between two elements—iron and nickel—at a temperature of around 3,000°C. It’s a central piece in the show because it is the core of the planet’s movement.

In *Nkisi* sculptures, there are many nails driven into the body of the work, which is something I did in my early works and eventually stopped. After seeing those sculptures in South Africa, I gained a deeper understanding of the energy of that gesture. So, I returned to the practice of using nails in sculptures and ceramics. The knots in the fabric are a way to anchor the sculpture’s body—a way to solidify the intention of the work.

I believe this central installation can be seen as an invitation to perceive a dance in which we are all involved, and which is constantly happening. After all, it would be impossible not to be part of the earth’s dance. When we talk about minerals, we’re dealing with a kingdom that gives us the very ground on which we exist, and every dance begins from the ground. We are not separate from this dance, but realizing that we are part of it is a political awareness with real transformative potential. It gives us the opportunity to reflect on how we choose to live within that same rotation.

*“Amulets” is on view at SculptureCenter through July 28, 2025.*