

SIDE BY SIDE

Sandra Vieira Jürgens

«Because this vanguard coincides and presses the end of monument-art. The end of an art whose great symbol could be: an old fashioned museum bursting with prestige (the Louvre) (...)» – Ernesto de Sousa¹

Since one of the museums main functions is to preserve and maintain material evidence from the past, it has not been rare for them to be defined as having conservative contours that would oppose them to the vanguards, *par excellence* a symbol of modern times. Regular occurrences in the artistic practice are the moments when new tendencies express criticisms towards the artistic system for not finding in it the recognition that would allow the configuration of spaces suitable to the logics of performance of an experimental nature. According to this perspective, we could assume that the disdain of Ernesto de Sousa for museums would not be other than the expression of an anti-museum attitude often recurrent throughout the XXth century. Although this is not the place for a discussion of the relationships established between artistic practice and museums, there is reference to brief statements expressed in the *Colóquio Apom 76*, in a context defined by the reflection around *Panorama Museológico Português: carências and potencialidades* (Portuguese Museological Reality: needs and potentialities). First, it was questioned «Why the need for a museum that remains a static and elitist institution in a ever-changing world?» – later concluding – «It is therefore crucial that Museums become, in some way, a salutary Pro-Vocation in the *society-man-culture* system»². And this would come to be the effect of the tendencies opposed to the museological culture.

Not by chance, the title to the first exhibition from Movimento para a Arte Contemporânea em Évora, *The First Step*, evokes the idea of mobility, initiative and action. Taking part, amongst many of those who got together to make the first of many steps, was David Medalla. An artist of Philippine origin, but a long time resident of London, Medalla has, since the 60's, been confirming the experimental dynamics and

¹ Ernesto de Sousa, «Os 100 Dias da 5ª Documenta», in Isabel Alves, José Miranda Justo (Org.), *Ernesto de Sousa. Ser Moderno... Em Portugal*, Lisboa, Assírio e Alvim, 1998, p. 64.

² Maria Teresa Gomes Ferreira, «Museus para Quem?» in *Actas do Colóquio APOM 76: Panorama Museológico Português: carências e potencialidades*, Porto, APOM, 1979, p. 47.

the cosmopolitan reasoning that presides the genesis of his work. Something that takes him travelling around the world and, in a very casual manner, try to establish working relationships with colleagues and friends whom he meets along the way. It was based on the same principles of relationship that the artist himself addressed an invitation to the population of Évora, encouraging it to take part in the performance that would happen in Armazéns da Palmeira. The performance was entitled *Homage to Évora* and the intervention from the public was what allowed for the formation of a human bridge. This performance took place almost simultaneously with the one from Adam Nankervis, an Australian artist who has been collaborating with David Medalla since the creation of the *Mondrian Fan Club*, in 1993. Over a scenery of images from multiple fragments of the human body, laid out on the floor, Nankervis and Arturo Fuentes performatively treated, in *Boquets for a Dead End Street*, the imaginary associated to the act of death and, in an intimate way, the complexity of the human condition. A similar example of the artist's ingenuousness in portraying subjects which are taboo in our culture is *Photos – branding axel – A* (Arts Council of England), a sequential photographic work that exhibits a perspective untouched by the ghost of intimacy.

Fritz Stolberg, who has also developed works with Medalla, namely *A Trip to Margate* (2000), a sound project on the *Peep Radio* website [www.peep.dk], invokes in *The Eiland – Archive* (2001) the idea of a communitarian archive. Following a principle of participated intervention, the audience is invited to express thoughts and comments and to create some sort of map. By confronting the audience with the void of the surface, making felt pens available, prompting them to challenge the vacuum by fixing memories, it is likely that, during the period the exhibition is on, this piece will positively exert the charm of a collectively produced atlas.

The works by Rosa Almeida also constitute a discontinuous network, combining heterogeneous materials, which include cuttings, photographs and pictorial elements. Manifest is also the personal use that the author makes of the act of writing. In the light of *Improvisation on art and language* (2001), the space of her pieces is made out of sentences, interjections and statements that, without ever complying with an univocal directional arrangement or formal framing, lift in their own impulsive expression from the spontaneous meaning of daily language. Far from the rhetorical

logic and the compulsive desire for linguistic abstractisation and plastic geometrisation that regulates some visual poetry, it is through the processual, fragmental and organic character of the itineraries that the author establishes a systematic link with the geography of living experiences.

Impregnated with an intimate atmosphere, the photographs by Marta Wengorovius that make up the *Passeio* (Walk) (2001) sequence give out an impression of enigma. It is true that, on some of her images, she captures aspects of Nature, registers interiors, uses self-portraits and it is even possible to follow certain continuity lines amongst the different polaroids. Yet, what actually stands out from the whole series is the refusal to adopt the linear mechanism that exhibits an action with beginning, middle and end. Also missing is the practice of interference that defines Land Art's manifestations on the landscape, which shows that, in her work, she assumes the desire for an involvement with the visible world without leaving behind traces of her presence. The result is the establishment of a circuit of non-referential and largely allegoric characteristics.

It was through the use of polaroids that, for the first time, Eva Mota explored the realm of self-representation, using them to define the general features of her work. Later, she had herself represented through photography and video, enacted fictional scenes in different contexts and, in each of her pieces, underlined the qualities of bodily and performative expression as well as the thematic direction of her work – the treatment of the subject of identity. In the piece *S/Título (Untitled)* (2001), now presented, the author keeps that same line of research. Worthy of reference, however, are some of the changes exerted on the scope of her intervention. The exploration of well circumscribed atmospheres and more immediate interventions is followed by a deeper contention and straightforwardness of the register and, in the same way, there is evidence of a displacement in her aesthetic attention. Eva Mota starts covering every detail with the graphic and plastic effectiveness of her image and it is by facing the viewer with a pure composition and a sombre atmosphere that she strengthens the mysterious aura of her constant presence.

It was also in a universe of half-light that Pedro Cabral Santo situated *S/Título (Untitled/dedicated to little Vasco who will born soon, 2001)*, a piece where he explores the realm of writing through the use of a word – *Empty* -calligraphically drawn

on the wall. Even though in plastic terms it may look similar to a neon sign, it is actually made out of a segment from a plastic hosepipe. And this could be said to be simply the first level of ambiguity since, beyond the one suggested by the physical appearance of the piece, if we analyse the representational level we are immediately faced with another non-coincidence, the one that comes from the contradictory relationship established between the meaning of the word *Empty* and what is actually seen, the materiality of the liquid solution. This mixture of vodka with orange and “dry-glo acrylic” fills up and flows uninterruptedly throughout the narrow channel prompted by an air compressor and a draining pump. This is a logic explored by Cabral Santo in previous pieces and that, in *S/Título (dedicated...)* [*Untitled/dedicated...*], continues to reveal the inventive dimension his work is based on.

In the same way, to invent and experiment are attitudes associated with the work by Susana Guardado, an artist who has so far been developing an essentially constructive work and who, in order to take part in *The First Step*, produced a sculpture that consists of a machine prototype very similar to some sort of hotel equipment. The piece, entitled *Nata Artística (Artistic Cream)* could in fact be displayed in any industrial fair, since it differs very little from the usual stainless steel kitchen bench. However, it is through the accompanying instructions that we come to realise that this is an instrument for the democratisation of the artistic work. Entirely at the disposal of the audience, the bench is what will allow her to produce cream landscapes. In other words, of drawing instantaneous mountains and rivers, of building volatile structures and, with added satisfaction, perhaps consume them and quickly ask for new reloads.

In *Variacion de... esto no. Es exactamente asi...* (2001) Arturo Fuentes built a sculpture/installation with apparently real mechanical objects. Five is the number of targets continuously moving along the prop that holds them to the wall that with their poor and useless appearance play along with the game of absurdity. This is a work representative of the pieces the author has been developing and that, without ever exhausting themselves in an exercise of visual grammar, include in their entertaining appeal the goal of transcending the functional vision of high technology and questioning the purpose of the technological options in contemporary society. Also clear is the implicit reference to the legacy of Picasso and Duchamp's vanguards,

pioneering artists who, by freely using the appropriation and esthetical valuation of the mechanical object surpassed the dichotomy art-machine.

In his pieces, João Simões creates suggestive experiences through the use of non-conventional technological means. In the video *PAL* (2001) he produces an optical effect from the feedback produced between that system and the NTSC, achieving an image that is the product of the principle of indetermination and randomness. Similar and equivalent in its experimental meaning is *MD loop feedback* (2001), a piece where, by means of the closed circuit established by plugging a single cable to the microphone input and the audio output of a Mini Disc, Simões picks up the register produced. The results are disconcerting, in so far as they subvert the usual purpose of the technical sphere and indicate the transforming power of artistic practices, which aside from what is considered to be the scope of technological equipments tend to explore creatively devices based on communication discontinuities and incompatibilities.

In *SpaceJunk* (2001), by Miguel Soares, a piece originally presented as part of the project *Odisseia no Tempo (Time Odyssey)* from Galeria Luís Serpa (Sala do Veadó – Museu Nacional de História Natural, 2001), culture and technological resources, but also industry and spatial exploration are the subjects of observation and the theme, to be simulated with the help of tridimensional animation the waste ring that circulates around planet Earth. In order to digitally recreate the phenomenon, the artist also made use of the Internet, selecting and importing from that great archive different miniature pieces. Among them are multiple metal fragments and obsolete communication satellites, objects known to be part of type of waste, and others which are extremely unlikely to integrate that orbital movement, such as the great teddy bear that finishes by granting the whole set with an extraordinary sense of familiarity. Equally suspicious is the synthetic vision with which he represents the sphere of waste. The one that based on an illusive image ends up referring us to a level of consciousness disconnected from the physical features commonly associated to the chaotic, imperfect and rusty world of residual material.

Inês Carolina shows *Suave, suave fatalmente para quem elege o sol, o mar e o céu (remix)*, 2001 [*Soft, fatally soft for those who elect the sun, the sea and the sky (remix)*, 2001], a piece based on the play produced three years ago for the collective *Império Contra Ataca* (ZDB/Rua da Barroca). This is a video piece in which the author

represents the values of passiveness and existential harmony with the universal order through reference to the meditation ritual. However, more than celebrating and urging the spectators to find peace through one same philosophy and practice, in the presence of this referential horizon the work leads to a critical look at existential immobility, at the same time as it questions the transposition to the universe of oriental culture in a behavioural way that only apparently translates a characteristic or, on a broader sense, an identitarian specificity.

More chaotic is the atmosphere that Manuel João Vieira created in the studio taking over the largest interior room in Armazéns da Palmeira. The wall is covered in inscriptions and there is a fridge, a sofa-bed, set up for some inspired nights, and a table, taken up by catalogues, art books and a sign whose title – *O Artista Desenha (The Artist Draws)* – instantly notes the practice of portrait from live models. A similar provocative and ironic tone can be found in the series of installations and paintings that make out the place. The erotic images and the skulls overlap on some of his works and in his figurative compositions they are presented in the most exacerbated kitsch style, by imitating historical models, from Géricault to Courbet. Otherwise, it is also the aesthetics of bad taste and naïf register that here serve his treatment of current events, as in the case of the piece where the representation of Templo de Diana is used as scenographic background for the American flag and the portrait of a famous individual – Bin Laden – whose face is drawn in a kind of medallion resting close to the floor.

Beyond the interest of not having circumscribed this first exhibition to the list of national presences, it should further be highlighted the presentation of different artistic manifestations. By gathering various directions of artistic production, from performance to photography, video and installation, *The First Step* stresses, to the advantage of the experience of diversity, the different thematic interests and their ramifications congregated in the paradigm of the most recent creation. Therefore, it is also the figurative notion behind *Lado a Lado (Side by Side)* to express the intention and perspective that guided this *First Step*.

Sandra Vieira Jürgens, «Side by Side», *The First Step*, MACE – Movimento para a Arte Contemporânea em Évora, 2001, pp. 13-16 [Exposição comissariada por Pedro Cabral Santo e Pedro Portugal que decorreu entre 27 de Outubro e 16 de Dezembro de 2001 nos Armazéns da Palmeira, Évora].