

## To Weave / Unravel the Plot

Sandra Vieira Jürgens

André Alves works primarily with drawing, exploring the boundaries of the medium along with its more expanded concepts and modes. His creative processes involve multiple relationships between visual, graphic, and sculptural forms, as well as the physical and concrete dimension of writing and the sensitive dimension of poetic discourse. The reference to and the research on certain concepts and notions – such as orientation and stability – two actions present in his artistic practice since his early career, are essential elements in a work that is based on speculative processes and exercises that focus on the political, philosophic, cultural, psychological and existential dimensions of these experiences in order to translate them using metaphorical and visual devices.

In this brief introduction to the work of André Alves, we will try to contextualize the artworks presented in the exhibition *Arame Farpado / dinamite: o poder da circulação livre* [Barbed Wire / Dynamite: The Power of Free Circulation], at the Camões I.P., in Lisbon, in the context of the Fulbright / FCC scholarship (1999) bestowed to the artist in the context of his MFA studies in drawing (University of Cincinnati).

Key elements in the artist's body of work, the penchant for the essayistic and the notion of an artistic practice based on reflection and in an experimental mode of activating thoughts and communicating investigation processes. In each piece or project, the author bases his work in notions he uses to question himself and develop works of art that often imply the experience of writing and the production of textual drawings.

André Alves invests strongly in the power of words: he propagates them. This fact is as visible in his visual work as it is in his writing, be it considered as autonomous, *per si*, or as part of his visual and plastic discourse. In this context, the space writing has in his drawings is not limited to a formal expression, nor does it relate to the gestural and expressive practice of drawing words on a particular medium. Without implying a

search for truth or certainty, this written action is one that questions and problematizes.

The work of André Alves can often be placed in the zone of influence of concrete and visual poetry. He has developed several series of works focused on discursive form and on its uses, on the processes inherent to the formation, structure, and dynamics of discourse and the uses of words, playing with linguistic definitions, with the dual nature of words, and with the literal and metaphoric values of language. Many of the artist's pieces fall into this set of projects that use writing with poetic, philosophical, and political intention. Using processes of inversion, juxtaposition, false mirror images, crossovers, omitting words, replacing letters, André Alves suggests and creates situations that challenge linguistics: his use of puns, proverbs, lexical polysemy, and homonymity interferes, break and open interstices and new possibilities in the interpretation of discourse.

The written word is not only inscribed in his drawings, it also exists, written, printed and cut out, in his sculptural pieces. We can find the artistic fusion of poetic and sculptural elements in many of his pieces, such as *Impasse: Armar a tenda / A tenda a armar* (2012)<sup>1</sup>: using a tent and inscribing these sentences in its cover, the author refers to uncomfortable circumstances, situations of impasse, stagnation, existential and political angst, but also (using the verb *to arm*) to the necessity of taking a stand.

If many of the phrases Alves uses in his work can be read in multiple ways and include a wide range of meanings, in some cases they refer to specific events and concrete realities. In the show *Estado d'Época* [State of Epoch] (2012), and particularly in the piece *We All Must Go*, the artist's discourse has a particular contextual value, referring to the particular situation of Portuguese society in 2011, characterized by austerity and precariousness, high unemployment rates, and a social and generational divide, factors that lead the government to suggest to unemployed teachers that they should emigrate, an advice which was later extended to young people in general. The piece captures this call for emigration — followed by many Portuguese — and its symbolic value, amplifying the feeling of powerlessness before the political discourse and

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<sup>1</sup> (TN) Untranslatable word game. In the Portuguese language the phrase *armar a tenda* (to set up the tent) can also be read as *to arm the tent*.

options of a government that always came out as unaccountable for the Portuguese economic and social reality.

We can also highlight *Nada Anda Nada* [Nothing Moves Nothing] (2014), a piece that relies on an effect of inversion, changing the order of the letters in words. «*Nada*» and «*Anda*» (which roughly translate into «Nothing» and «Walk/Move»), result from changing the position of the first two letters, «N» and «A», but also create a superimposition and reveal a spatial relation, that of depth, between them.

A drawing, the piece *Leituras Interrompidas* [Paused Readings] (2013) is a play of horizontal and vertical lines, crossed words taken from by a selection of proverbs that include the word «word». The artist presents combinations and variations of the meanings usually conveyed by the phrases, conjugating associations such as «*As palavras são como as cerejas / As palavras vêm umas atrás das outras*» [Words are like cherries / One draws another} or «*Palavra que te escapa / Espada que te ameaça*» [A misspoken word / A threatening sword].

Already in *Problema ou Solução* [Problem or Solution] (2013), the phrase «*Ficar e guardar a esperança*» (in a rough translation, *to stay and keep the hope*) written on a wall drawing is a construction of visual interruptions, intervals and cuts that justify the paradoxical association between hope and resignation. *Tempos de decisões difíceis* [Times of Tough Decisions] (2015) produced at the Laboratório das Artes, in Guimarães, is also a mural piece that includes its own title. A subtle gradation in the color of the letters of the first syllable of the word «decisions» changes the meaning of the sentence: where once one read «Times of Tough Decisions» one can now read “Times of Tough Cisions» (2015), a reference to the dire economic and social reality of life in a run-down country.

Some of the titles of Alves’ pieces are part of a game that connects several projects, establishing a dialogue between the artist’s different exhibitions. This happens with the shows *Tornar* [To Become] (2013) and *Contornar* [To Skirt] (2013).

Another example of pieces which use textual materials is the series *Material escavado* [Dug Material], composed of works that rely on the occultation and covering of

segments of texts in pages from newspapers and book to produce abstract compositions, formed by patches of color that omit parts of the text while leaving, here and there, certain words visible that may or may not have narrative value.

The artist gives close attention to the lines along which History unfolds, triggering a dynamic relationship with the past, as well as an analytical / reflexive attitude towards the present, outlining some of the most characteristic tendencies of the contemporary world. In the show *Barbed Wire / Dynamite: The Power of Free Circulation*, giving continuity to his authorial perspective in the field of drawing, André Alves looks into the curious chronological coincidence that exists between one of the patents for barbed wire (Lucien B. Smith), for dynamite (Albert Nobel), and the first publication of *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx. In this project, Alves refers to several moments of contemporary and modern history in order to research aspects of our collective history and socioeconomic organization, namely the tension between the concepts and the experience of liberty and control, assuming the different expressive, individual, territorial, collective, ideological and identity expressions that result therefrom.

At a formal level, the association between the senses and their continued displacement, the referred possibilities and their metaphorical interpretations manifest themselves, especially in pieces that make use of subtle plays of material displacement, lines and collages of railings and bars, barbed wire and tampered fences, suggestions and optical illusions anchored in the paradoxical association between the practice of control and a practice of expanded/exploded drawing.

Based on these principles, André Alves objective is to observe and think about impermanence, the provisory, the uncertain and the unpredictable, establishing a productive and open relationship with these notions in order to produce new meanings. These are the conditions that characterize contemporary society. Far from being negative qualities, they carry a positivity – within the context of the values of a new paradigm, the result of the transition between modernity and the present times – in which the hegemonic ideological and moral values of materiality, rationality and certainty give way to the rise of immateriality, emotionality, and unpredictability. This happens in the characterization of the culture of the productive system and in the

process of deregulation of the late-capitalist society, as well as in the horizon of a subject-project that continuously reinvents and questions themselves, securing through this process the sensation of being free. Moreover, and especially in the pieces on the walls, the exhibition is rich with elements that point towards the paradoxical relation between freedom and control, inside / outside, emersion / immersion.

Opening the show, on room's the left wall, we find the series *O princípio da acção* [The Standards of Action] (2015), comprising three drawings (acrylic and color pencil on cotton paper) with the titles *Explosão* [Explosion], *O conhecimento é explosivo* [Knowledge Is Explosive] e *Implosão* [Implosion]. The triptych's central piece, a kind of poster, bears the inscription «*O poder das circulação livre*» (The Power of Free Circulation), and references to one of the key elements of this show – dynamite – including the drawing of Nobel's original patent. Clockwise, we can read «*O / Conhecimento / É / Explosivo*» [Knowledge Is Explosive]. Two additional illustrations frame the piece. On our left, the drawing of a pavement made of diagonal lines drawn from right to left, creating the optical illusion of depth, reveal the image of an explosion shaped like a cloud. On our right, the suggested effect is that of implosion, the opening of a fissure on a pavement of diagonal lines drawn from left to right. The lines of the two drawings contribute to emphasize the weight of the central piece, which refers to another of the themes of this show, barbed wire, with the inscription «*A Grande Evasão*» [The Great Escape].

On the opposite side of the room we can find another series that uses barbed wire as a pattern for the drawings. *Pular a cerca* [Over the Fence] (2015) comprises three drawings that depict negative-positive contrast relations and a gradient that goes from black and gray to white. These pieces are characterized by patterns and meshes of diagonal lines, interweaved, suggesting barbed wire, grates and fences, the apparatus one usually imagines on borders and territorial boundaries. Here, the symbols of the modern society of restriction and control, in its punitive, coercive, limiting and imprisoning dimension, in its restriction of circulation, reemerge after an interim period of porosity and aeration (due to globalization, with its promises of freedom of

movement, exchange and mobility), not only as a memory, but as an updated present reality.

*Onde é uma fronteira* [Where Is a Frontier] (2015), presents three sentences, written in different colors, on a canvas with a printed crumpled paper texture. The multiple possibilities of interpretation retain a relation between all possible meanings:

*O limite do visível é o limite do papel*

*Nada existe fora da imersão*

*Nenhum território apenas mapas<sup>2</sup>*

The way he processes words, which we have already mentioned, the plasticity of his use of images and the several experiences of reading we can find in André Alves's pieces correlate with his flexible use of drawing as he explores its limits in the design and presentation of the exhibition space.

His drawing reveals plastic torsional effects, rotations, displacements, incongruity of shapes, lines, patterns produced with graphite on paper or walls, or with collages using materials like stickers and gummed labels. There are displacements of perspective, optical illusions, and sometimes, a feeling of escaping shapes, the illusory suggestion of movement, the instability and destabilization of the elements and of the composition of the pieces that affects the process of reading. This practice of «cutting», «pulling», «folding», «rotating», reveals the author's desire to set drawing free, not only from its conventional disciplinary context, but also from its presentation devices. Even if he materializes and presents drawing on the wall space, he also uses platforms and wooden bases on the floor, and arranges them in space using Plexiglas frames that transform the drawings into installation pieces with a sculptural dimension. This practice has become quite visible since the show *Contornar* [To Skirt] (2013), as the artist started using devices that render the image and presence of drawing in space

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<sup>2</sup> (TN) The limit of the visible is the limit of the paper / Nothing escapes immersion / No territory only maps.

less autonomous and less inconspicuous, and emphasize the materiality of its new frames. As he installs his drawings, associating them with lightboxes and panels arranged horizontally, slanted, or on inclined planes, the artist creates a more expansive relation between drawing and space, one that goes beyond verticality and emphasizes horizontality and obliquity – adding an additional sensory disturbance.

The exhibition *Barbed Wire / Dynamite: The Power of Free Circulation* confirms these practices. *Pólvora* [Black Powder] (2015) is one of the graphite on paper pieces which are presented in an acrylic glass stand arranged vertically on the floor, and consist of an image that asks for the viewer's immersion using an optic illusion.

One of the central pieces – literally, because it also occupies the central space of the show – *À nora* [Dazed] (2015), a square drawing/collage with multiple gummed labels, installed horizontally on a seemingly floating platform. Forced to look down, we understand that this piece's position in space is in active dialogue with the patterns on the ceiling and on the floor, mirroring the attention and the relationship André Alves maintained with all that relates to the materiality of drawing and the devices and characteristics of the space where it is presented. *Remendo como remédio* [Patch as Path] (2015), is a small floor piece formed by thin and fragile lines, zigzagging, cogged, also made from cut outs of gummed labels.

This liveness in formal and installational composition is paralleled by the atmosphere suggested by the conceptual cartography and by the universe of references and topics present in the artist's body of work. As such, we can talk about the ever-present movement of thought, of reading and drawing, seeing them as exercises of freedom. As example, we can list the titles of other projects presented by André Alves in 2015: *Do provisório ao permanente* [From the Provisional to the Permanent], *Instabilidade Permanente* [Permanent Instability], *Inquietude* [Restlessness]. Titles that suggest a continued state of positioning and repositioning, a fluidity characterized by a permanent possibility of change and by the positive potential of the moments of spatial, territorial, and existential disorientation and orientation.

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