

João Tabarra: The endless path
Sandra Vieira Jürgens

Beginning

The movement is always centrifugal; at the beginning we are already half way through the action, this applies itself to each poem, canto and episode.

Italo Calvino¹

To affirm that we are in the middle of a path and not at the beginning, as would be expected at this point, certainly represents a form of distancing ourselves from the trajectory and structure that is linearly carried out from a beginning to an ending. But it also represents a withdrawal from the coordinates that we normally use to translate the meaning of progress within space and the progression made within narrative structure.

The middle stage of an itinerary can be less glorious as it is disassociated from the enthusiasm and initiative that marks an onset, and the euphoria that accompanies the final stage. This juncture has a value of its own, captured within the Portuguese proverb *no meio está a virtude*, which associates virtue to being in-between. This equidistant point between two extremities can function as an instance of articulation between a starting point and an ending, but it can also be a privileged location of observation.

With the aim of intensifying our instable situation, which has been controlled, let us assume a peculiar definition of the *middle*, which is not merely the equilibrium between two extremes, but a pole and field shaken by multiple tensions. Like in João Tabarra's installation *Protecção* (2003), [the stones interrupt and disturb the observer's gaze that covers a clearing near a forest. This is the place where unending obstacles with different forms become manifest (*Barricades Improvisées*, 2001 and *Bleu*, 2002). All of this happens without a deviation from normality, and without passivity establishing itself in the presence of the dynamics that cause threat and opposition (*Mute Control*, 2000 and *Defense, Trois mouvements I, II, III*, 2001). These elements are all circumstances which form a part of the process and are therefore exposed as challenges to be overcome (*This is not a drill (No pain no gain)*, 1999). The same thing applies to the doubts and interrogations that arise along any path, which underline the need to establish the meaning of the actions that have been taken (series *What type of contestation are we asking for?*, 1997-1998), of being on the edge of consecrated affirmations, and of living with the fear of not finding definite answers.

To carry on endlessly

La marche, au juste, est prévue d'activation du corps, refus de la polarité, sorte de la place conquise, désir d'accession à l'ailleurs. Le marcheur fait un pari: le monde n'est pas clos mas pénétrable.

Paul Ardenne²

While the act of walking already announces the body's impulsion towards mobility and the desire to advance from one place to another, the actual circumstance of remaining in the middle reinforces the expected availability to travel distances in a continuous manner.

The desire to renounce the apocalyptic sense on which discourse, stories and even World History is built, is implied by the need to remain in-between two opposite points. In works like *True Lies and Alibis – Marche Solitaire* (1999) and *Plus jamais la fin du monde – graffiti* (1999), João Tabarra had already submitted the kind of affirmations which announce the limits and the arrival of a conclusive and concluded time to criticism. Tabarra counterpoised this apocalyptic stance. His images express the need to trace the path further, to exceed the determinism and to tender to the construction of other

¹ Italo Calvino, *Porquê ler os Clássicos?*. Lisbon: Teorema, 1991, p. 63.

² Paul Ardenne, «Marcher, Manifester», *Parpaings*, n.º 18, 2000, p. 20.

horizons. This does not necessarily imply the ideal of building a new world, but the gesture of resistance and of remastering the borders, the forgotten places that have been marked by absence.

Along this same line, the series of photographs in which Tabarra appears with a fairy, and particularly one of his most recent works, *Confissão/Construção* (2003) can be evoked. These more recent works refer to a possible existence, total and absolute, in the world: a safeguard of a “life” in permanence, the values of belonging and of sharing that refuse relations of domination and the states of evasion they announce.

From here on

Building like inhabiting, or in other words, living on earth in the daily experience of the human being, has always been what language says so beautifully, the “habitual”.

Martin Heidegger³

Without disentailing reality, João Tabarra has summoned fiction and self-fiction as a resource to develop registers that are close to a collective counter-memory. In works like *João Ponte Diniz “Pilha Eléctrica”, campeão de mínimos amadores boxe 1943 e Sting* (1993) and *Portugueses na Europa* (1995), a satire of symbolic images and noteworthy events from ancient and modern Portuguese history is rehearsed with the presence of a man and hero off the street. In *What type of contestation are we looking for (Paraíso)* from 1997, Tabarra appeared integrated in an idyllic environment, marked by the pacific association between animal and man. He was affected by a sky crowded with happy animals and a sense of quietness and wellbeing. The scenario was a type of billboard: the message adapted to the media and the mechanisms of sentimental engagement proper to publicity put into play.

Lost at the immemorial beginning, the original paradise has transformed itself today into a meta-ideal for a happy ending and is at the centre stage of contemporary life, a marketing value that can hardly be undermined. The culture of happiness is omnipresent in publicity’s repertoire, the entertainment industry, Disneyworld, Hollywood, rivalling with its successor, the culture of well-being; the great promise of positive thinking which regards greater pleasure and guaranteed satisfaction as the therapeutic cure to human woe. This would be perfect if only this new paradise on earth wasn’t an image largely supported by the consumption of goods and dreams that exhaust themselves in their most immediate purpose, in other words, in consumption itself. The promotion of a state of urgency and the contribution to an accelerated living endure to absorb and project us consecutively into the future.

It seems hardly surprising that in defiance of this reality, the value of lengthiness, reflection and the search for minor details and unexpected pleasures should exert a fascination close to that of complete human realisation (*Maman*, 1998-1999, *Touch me*, 1999, *Assembler*, 2001 and *The Devil’s Brigade*, 2003) and the meaning of that which is truly essential (*Olhos nos olhos*, 2003).

New beginnings

(...) I know that interpretation impoverishes myth and suffocates it: we cannot rush myths; it is best to let them deposit themselves in memory, to detain ourselves with the meditation of all their details, to meditate without abandoning their language of images.

Italo Calvino⁴

Returning to Italo Calvino at this point certainly opens hypothetical means of return towards a path already traced, in accordance with the ritualistic dimension associated to the cyclical conception of mythological time. This is a means of opening way to the approach which is presented in *Olhos nos Olhos* (2003), a work that is centred on the occurrence of repetition and on the entire disposition to begin the perpetual chasing of Che Guevara’s image. The encounter with the direct gaze of the figure of

³ Martin Heidegger, *Construir, habitar, pensar*. Barcelona: Serbal, 1994.

⁴ Italo Calvino, *Seis propostas para o próximo milénio (Lições americanas)*. Lisbon.: Teorema, 1994, p.

the hero is always preformed in the pursuit of a sign. There is a travelling to be followed and a lengthy rhythm to be observed of a trajectory that completes itself across the hero's face, but without the expected happening. Guevara's gaze resists being involved or captured. His gaze does not reveal or dilute itself in our direction, but we persist like all who do not give up the chance of continuing the search and following the overpowering impulse towards revelation, hoping for a sign of change, and that something will alter. But that does not happen. The sequence leaves us to an unending search, involved in a full movement of endless return. It is irremediable, the infinite horizon he looks towards is far more powerful. The rebuttal is total and almost what we could call emblematic. This attitude is inherent to the hero's behaviour, a kind of invisible protective shield, both then and now. Especially today, when we witness the growing banality of the image of the "last of the romantics", the profanation of the myth's sacred character and progressive caricature of the hero's identity. Alberto Korda's photograph has become one of the world's most reproduced images, not only investing the most varied ideals and the revolutionary movement in this credible mass icon, but has also inspired the arts, the fashion world and an entire industry dedicated to the facile mass-production of merchandising. Guevara's face is widely printed and reproduced on posters, t-shirts, cups, hats, and even appears as an official label of alcoholic beverages. Nothing could be as illustrative of the success of this hybrid icon, representative of incompatibilities that were unthinkable before and fruit of a forced appropriation, doubtlessly haunted by its original, and yet irreparable.

We rest with the certainty that nothing remains the same forever.

J'aime le mot croire. En général, quand on dit "je sais", on ne sait pas, on croit.

Marcel Duchamp⁵

«Forever» has long been dropped from the logic of discourse. There is something so remote to this affirmation that the suggestion of this bond and alliance throughout time is more similar to a fallacious formula, empty of rigour, an illusion, which attracts us to considering its improbability and the contradiction and opposition that it faces. Its unfailing value has been questioned as a consequence of the horror with which contemporary thought faces the weight of certainty. It has now been integrated into what is commonplace and cliché, what Roberto Calasso affirms to be the "stones of language"⁶. In other words, it survives as an abstraction, lulled by a principle of closure that simply accentuates the impression of trust and credibility in an environment that has been overtly exposed to movement and relativity.

What shall we do? Yes, what shall we do with the truths that are no longer true, knowing that on one side of the path there are stones and on the other moving sand? Shall we choose one of the mentioned paths? Shall we try one of the paths that opens up to no-mans-land or stand still, refusing movement?

At once, refuse the obvious, the dangers and dead-ends inherent to each of the forking paths in which thought is organised, pledging oneself to the construction of an itinerary without escapes, integrating challenge. Like the challenge of attributing weightlessness to stones or of giving consistency to moving sand. Without ceding the undertaking of a project that gains form and is created at the margin of limits, of consensus, of given certainty and maxims, sure of the perspectives and personal certainties that have been built. Without disregarding the ethic responsibility of choice or neglecting the entire need to believe. At the basis of belief is the conscience that a long road without causes and values to defend is left behind, rather than the profession of dogmatic faith.

Sandra Vieira
Translated by Nancy Dantas

⁵ Marcel Duchamp, *Duchamp du Signe*. Paris : Flammarion, 1975, p. 185.

⁶ Roberto Calasso, *Os quarenta e nove degraus*. Lisboa: Cotovia, 1998, p. 47