

Leonor Nazaré, 2008

UNINHABITED HOUSE AND OTHERS SPECTRES

“Ana Vieira’s work from the installation *Casa Desabitada* (Uninhabited House), carried out at the Rua Ivens, n° 56, 3° esq. in 2004, with production by Artistas Unidos.

All of Ana Vieira’s work has prepared this installation, and this is about all of her work. Is it too much to state this? In the Rua Ivens, n° 56, 3°, we went into a real house, an enormous empty apartment that the artist appropriated and the work occupied.

It was only in 2004 that this *Uninhabited House* project achieved the right conditions to be carried out, but the idea came up six years earlier, during the preparation of the retrospective held at Serralves (Dec 98/Jan 99).

{...} It was here that Ana Vieira for the first time thought about slightly opened doors {...}.

In turn, these doors have genealogical ascendants in *Objecto* (Object), from 1975 (a slightly opened wooden door with curtain, mirror and painted clouds), in the blue door of her *Ambiente* (Environment), from 1971 (dining room staged in three dimensions in a quadrangular space defined by curtains and concentric to another one on which she printed household objects and a door), or in another *Environment* from 1972 (a space defined by curtains inside of which she placed soil and flowers).

These are direct references. But the idea and the place of the Door; its nature and function, and its symbolism are almost permanently in Ana Vieira’s work. It is not surprising that as one goes around the apartment in the Rua Ivens the doors are the neuralgic points at which seduction and rejection operate a simultaneously appeal - we are invited yet excluded, called close and then left at a distance. We are the conscience of the voyeur, without having wished to be: we accept the role. Let us see on what terms.

In the corridor we start by being received in a hostile manner: “Ladies and Gentlemen spectators, you may not remain in a private house. Please leave”, can occasionally be heard, stated in a manner that is as neutral and cold as an airport announcement. From then on we feel guilty, despite our curiosity, intromission, despite our invitation, despite theatrical action and the real house that we are about to go through. The farce is a contract the discomfort of which is accepted lightly at that moment, but which will become thickened when access to all the spaces means the barrier to a door that opens very little or doses completely.

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The “life” of the house is given to us in delayed action, on screens, in mirrors and in recordings; and these are provided to us side-on and parsimoniously, although this is in the real space of the house.

We are in an old apartment with an unusual structure, with a corridor going all the way round an enormous centre (lounge and two other rooms), forming a square. Being forced to go on walking, walking, always around the centre, seeing our return to our starting point take a long time, we feel that there is something phantasmagorical in the house which escapes us, and a dimension in which “hearing voices” is to be expected.

For a moment it seems as if we are in the crypt of a tomb, desecrating it and suffering the deserved curse. That is where the guilt of the voyeur begins, as well as his self-punishment: he shouldn’t be there. “Ladies and Gentlemen spectators”, note that we are no more than spectators, “you may not remain in a private house. Please leave”. We do not remain long, we are always going from one place to another, always

being extra, always intruders in that fiction (despite being guests in real life: invited by the artist to see her work).

In 2002, in the Galeria Giefarte, Ana Vieira exhibited *Antecâmara* (Antechamber) - a plain white curtain drew out a rectangular space, the "walls" of which softly oscillated as a reaction to a fan. In that totally empty space into which we could not enter; one could hear the footfalls of a woman walking around the inside of a house. {...}

In an Installation from 1997, in the Sala do Veado, *Ensaio para uma Paisagem* (Study for a Landscape), the alignment of several opaque or transparent containers corresponded to the material enumeration of several elements: the wind, smoke, steam, soil and light were evoked in the staging of microevents. Already here, sound was used as an Indication: for example of soil beating against doors when blown by the wind, of doors banging shut.

More remotely back in her career, the work *Corredor* (Corridor), shown at the Galeria Quadrum in 1982, introduced the principle of spatial circumscribing, of walls raised in the creating of a space that, although being empty, would become a proposal of a place. Imaginary, form, and possible and semanticisable course.

The work of art as the invention of a literal space was at the time the best way that Ana Vieira found in order to superimpose the metaphor of the work as a place over the concrete experience of its relationship with on the part of the visitor. The same thing happened with the project *Ocultação/Desocultação* (Hiding/Unhiding), (Galeria Quadrum, 1978), in which the rooms in a house are marked out through a line of bricks on the gallery floor, with it being possible to read in each room what one would like to do there: trivial actions like having, doing, entering, looking, reflecting, breathing, going out, planting, reaping... Going through the spaces would be like projecting everyone's daily life experience on them. {...}

In a slide show from the same year, which she called *Janelas* (Windows), we spied on those who spied on us and we saw the illuminated house from the outside, its occupants, its decoration, its light... With a similar degree of disturbance.

Her *Object* (1975), a slightly open wooden door on which there are mirrors, a curtain and painted clouds, showed the abstract idea of the threshold itself, giving a sculptural presence to what should be a passageway or simple closing and an inclusion of the outside on what should be neutrality.

Considering Ana Vieira's work as a whole, her *Environments* from 1971/72 and semi-closed spaces in general, how can we not now be intruders? We were left outside many times. Going inside is an enormous and unexpected concession. When the spaces were empty or only occupied by words, we could go in. When inhabited by representation, by objects, people and images, penetration into the space was forbidden to us. This time we have got in.

But the concession has limits and our naiveté is mocked: we are inside the house but we are always outside what really matters in it. Might the house have a soul? A spirit of the place? An atmosphere? A History? We can only know this through an abuse, an invasion of property; we are nothing more than curious onlookers. We will never know any more than the pure surface of things, more than a fleeting appearance, more than its screens and never completely. {...}

Pistoletto is also an important reference when we try to read the creation of doors and windows and the passage from windows to doors and vice-versa. Consider, for example, works by Ana Vieira such as *Figura à Janela* (Figure at the Window), *Toucador* (Dressing Table), *Vaso de Flores* (Flower Pot), *Gaiola* (Cage), *Aquário* (Aquarium), or the slideshow *Janelas* (Windows) from 1978, in which the model, the format, the size and the positioning of the window inform the mechanism of the work. {...}

The mirror allows one to see, but is also a physical obstacle. Glass does the same thing in a different manner. A small child starts out thinking that the mirror is glass, and goes behind it to see what is there. Later on he realizes that there is no way through it, nor any transparency, nor a world on the other side, that he is facing a surface that plays tricks and sends him back to the real, whilst the glass in the window would at least add to the real for him. In the meantime, the childish moment when he understands the nature of the mirror, with all of the disorientation that this implies, has an important narcissistic compensation for the child: it is the moment of his own specular identification. It is in relation to the obstacle that he sees himself.

Pistoletto's door/mirror is all of this: it convokes the fact that when facing a mirror we perhaps may never be able to get away from the memory of glass, or of an object taken as glass that inhabits it and inhabits our first experiences in front of it. {...}

The permanent to-and-fro between art and life, which these artistic metaphors always tend to bring up in the final instance, also convokes that which we might consider to be mnesic and possibly cathartic paths; namely, in the case of Pistoletto and, as we will see, of Ana Vieira, the experience of the voyeur and of the intruder who is projected into him. Taking refuge behind the door; the voyeur holds a residue of life for himself in which the images of life, of a discovered scene, become more important than our own life. When the door opens, or if it opens, the unmasked voyeur becomes guilty, an intruder a spectre petrified by the involuntary and sudden passing of a visual regime to an existential regime.

In Pistoletto's paintings/mirror; the observer sees himself in the mirror of the work and thus, despite being an intruder; participates, enters its space, is in it and is a part of it. In Ana Vieira's mirrors there are only the images that she determined to grant them. We are not there. That impossibility seems to be a closing in relation to Pistoletto's work, but it is perhaps a salvation: we give in less to the enchantment of the simulacrum and we keep the notion of the separation between the real and the virtual more clear.

But In the work of both of the artists we are urged to turn our backs on the door that attracted us and on which we have left our intrusion hanging: the assuming of oneself demands the price of solitude, firstly coming from a cutting of the fused or umbilical Illusion with the world, secondly from preferring life to images of other people's lives, and finally from preferring the world to its representations (flat images); which means leaving the threshold at which the spectator always remains and starting to act.

The constant tension that artists establish between a compulsive three-dimensionality and a recursive two-dimensionality is very useful in XX century art, as if within this oscillation all the economy of the truth and the fiction that the works contain were at stake.

Indeed, Ana Vieira's first works, in 1968, start by being the concrete and synthetic figuration of this oscillation: wooden plaques, which are laid out so as create three-dimensional space in what would in principle be flat surfaces, and in which the outline of human figures with gaps, uniform blacks and whites and the collage of real prolongings are brought together in the kinetic construction of profiles.

In her *Environments*, from 1971 and 1972, which are transparent but closed, in her *Mesa-Paisagem* (Table-Landscape) from 1973, accessible but in which the "landscape" exists on a (very small) scale that excludes us, in her *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, from 1977, an installation in which she superimposes objects on a projection and which we can only watch, or in *Santa Paz Doméstica, Domesticada* (Holy Domestic Peace, Domesticated)

(1977), the observer's condition of exteriority is maintained. But that condition perhaps becomes even more ostensive when she uses mirrors. The mirror, which in works like *Dressing Table* (1973) can include us, has gone more recently to only being able to be in the work if that does not happen. *Close Up*, (Galeria Graça Brandão and Promontório Arquitectos space, 2004) is an extreme example of that determination: confronted with white plaques at first, in that which would be the expected place for works on the walls of a gallery, it took an effort for us to realise that there was a world behind them, a world of mirrors that in turn reflected photographs, but that our margin of perception was very narrow, only a few centimetres between the plaque and the wall that we had to struggle to see very laterally and partially.

This is still the position we have in *Uninhabited House* despite the real scale on which everything takes place: we have access to the image of the mirror without seeing ourselves in it and facing physical barriers. {...}

In this house existence is inside the film. It has a well known beginning and end, and always restarts, repeating the same sequences *ad infinitum*. Suddenly we are placed in the position of demiurges. We are no one in those lives; Indeed we are intruders in them, but we know everything about them, we know their film and the imprisonment in their eternal return. We cannot enter, but we also cannot stop wanting to, because we have been informed about the success of that enclosure, about the total closing of its territory of freedom and drift. We thus know that life is not a film (we do not want it to be: it has no narrator, nor director; nor predetermined script exterior to us; it takes place inside the space of the houses and also in many other spaces but in extent and in time, in free will and participation.

Seeing is indiscreet and useless when we only see; seeing becomes a constitutive experience when other meanings and other "actions" accompany it. This is also true for the confrontation with art. This house mobilises our comprehension of that fact in successive referrals from one level of that demonstration to another. Only seeing always starts by excluding us from the territory of what is seen, into which we only enter due to committed and conscious will. That will, in turn, shows us that there was no reason to feel guilty, that there is no primitive scene other than in the naturalness of our exclusion, and that life is only ours through that exclusion.

Coming out of the house is a relief, despite, in relation to Ana Vieira's works, our having always wanted not to remain systematically excluded. Now we know she was right to leave us outside, and that she let us in this time for us to realise that the entrance to the work is not physical, that others' lives is a screen and at best a mirror facing ours, that seeing has to be a form of intelligence so as not to be just a form of survival."

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