

Liliana Coutinho, 2008
ON IN/VISIBILITY

“A woman has her back turned to us, facing a white space. She holds in her hand an oval mirror, which reflects images of streets, cars, bodies and faces of anonymous people walking along the bustling pavements. Her body is in a gap: between what is happening in the mirror - perhaps memory, perhaps guidance towards a journey - and the empty space in which she finds herself. Although filmed in Funchal, in one of the residences {Porta 33} intended for the preparation of the exhibition which opens with this film, the images in the oval mirror present characters recognisable from our daily lives. Plato’s critique of art as an imitation of the world’s phenomena (this already being a reflection of an ideal) comes to mind, as does this quotation taken from a book on the transfiguration of the commonplace by artistic experience {...} a mirror in your hand {...} and you will speedily produce a sun with the one that exists in the sky, and you will speedily create an earth, yourself, and everything else: animals, manufactured objects, and plants, and everything that we were talking about moments ago¹ “. This art of the reflection, which does not allow us to understand or produce anything which is not already produced or which transcends us, is deceptive! Perhaps for this reason it helps us to understand this place here, where we are now.

The idea that the world is created by reflection, “in the image of”, has been present in our cultural framework for as long we can remember. Mirrors, as tools with a formative function, are objects through which we become conscious of the image we use to structure both the physical and behavioural space around us, and the way in which our body is presented. Over and above reflecting ourselves, they also encourage an active behaviour through which we seek to understand and, simultaneously, construct that same image. As instruments of approximation, they help us to go beyond the physical limits of our eyes and see what we would otherwise not have access to: a scene taking place in a hidden corner of a room, the way in which a hairstyle gathers at the nape of our neck, or the celestial bodies which, through mirrors, remain within sight. This obsession with vision, which also marks a desire to find an all embracing representation, is a Western practice of representation which touches on the fields of art, politics and science. But there are moments when, by chance, or by being taken to the extreme, that same mirror, which we point far away and outward, spins around and turns so that, when it is closer, we cannot see without help: ourselves. This about-face of the mirror of the *psyche*² has mythological roots and laid the foundation for our fictional and psychic universe. It was Narcissus who fell in love with his own image, thinking he was seeing someone else, drowning in the waters of his own delusions; or the passenger on the Freudian train who at night is gripped with fear on seeing a stranger whom he glimpses from the other side of the glass and who accompanies him on his journey. In both cases, and although the principle of this is not consciously expressed, the observer becomes a stranger to himself and becomes an object of observation. In this dual situation, becoming aware of what he sees, he becomes aware of himself.

It is here that I situate Ana Vieira’s mirrors. They help us to see what we do not have access to (as in the “*Casa Desabitada*” installations) and evoke the construction of the image of the body and of the identity (as in 1973’s “*Toucador*”). By not allowing us to see everything, they also place the spectator in a playful and exploratory situation, involving the onlooker in the process of constructing the final image, which is created through experience. Beyond the interior and exterior boundaries, which are always called into question in Ana Vieira’s work, here, and in a manifest way in the “*Vigias*”

piece, the boundaries and clear separation between the spectator and the object experienced are thus diluted.

After vision has been taken to its extreme by technique, and amidst the profusion of images offered to us, what productive purpose can the eye of a spectator have over an image? Ana Vieira outlines a possible response: seeing even more, with magnifying glasses and lamps, searching, amplifying what is written in small letters and thus transforming how we view an image, transforming it into reading. Understanding vision as a literary exercise so as not to become merely dominated by the images. With a character which is simultaneously evocative and present, the words written in the halls of this exhibition impel us to “see through words” and images, to make the transition from objects and spaces in our everyday lives. In this way, the line which separates the invisible from the visible is not a line of separation but of transmission. As when the visible “*Chave da casa*” (key to the house), opens onto the invisible, private and historical memory of each of our houses.”

Text for the exhibition *Ana Vieira. Sobre In/visibilidade*. Funchal: Porta 33, 2008

Catalogue *Ana Vieira: Muros de Abrigo / Shelter Walls*; Ponta Delgada [Azores], Museu Carlos Machado, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2010, pp. 242 (org. Paulo Pires do Vale)

FOOTNOTES

1 Danto, Arthur, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace - A Philosophy of Art*, Poétique, Seuil, Paris, 1989, p. 40.

2 Term which can be used to describe psychic activity, the French name for a dressing table with mirror, and a mortal made goddess for whom Eros scratches himself with one of his own arrows.