

Margarida Medeiros, 2001

THE INAUDIBLE SOUNDS

“Space, figures

Writing about Ana Vieira’s most recent work is a challenge which comes with responsibilities. After a retrospective in Serralves (1998), it will be interesting to perceive the themes of identity and transformation that can now be glimpsed in *Sem Título*, 2001, which is on display at the Franco.Steggink gallery in Lagoa, the Azores.

Following an initial attempt at approaching her world, certain aspects that have been cited by critics since the 1970s become clear: her work on space, the subversion of the fixedness of places (those of the artist and those of her public), and the associated polemic of time and death¹. We begin with the desire to open (a) space, perhaps the desire to fly, floating above the existing shapes.

But when we talk of this “poetics of space”, of subverting its geometric and temporal boundaries, what do we mean? What does “working on space” mean? We may consider that an explosive tension exists in the artist’s work, and that it may therefore be “bleached” by its subsumption to abstractions, or even totally given over to certain patterns of reading. This tension lies in its ability to release, within the formal work of figuration, certain ghosts related to the body and identity, as well as its ability to want to show a vision of her desire, of her will in relation to that identity, for which a language needs to be rediscovered. Underlying all of these themes, it is impossible not to detect a feeling of physical, topical discomfort, which is transmitted relentlessly to the spectator and which could almost be synthesized with the idea of claustrophobia.

It was on the basis of a series of symbolic figures, culturally associated with femininity, that this vision of her desire as a living person began to be constructed: the silhouette profiles of women’s faces, the house, domestic objects, flowers, the ahistorical routines, food, and gestures heavy with meaning. It is not a feminist work. Ana Vieira’s language conveys no ideological strategy in this field; rather, it is an assertion of identity which originates from the house and its objects/spaces as metaphors for the body or as symbolic extensions of it. It therefore makes sense to talk about a theme of space in this work, but not in a strictly architectural sense. If the history of architecture throughout the ages can (and this is simply a speculative theory) be read as the history of men’s ghost-like discourse on the female body, since the 1970s, when Ana Vieira first started working, works by female artists have frequently featured spatial metaphors (the house, clothing, objects for the body to lie or sit on, such as beds and chairs) in order to express an identity crisis and to reflect, in this history of certainties, an image of uncertainty about their mental and physical identity.

It is in this sense, as emotional research rather than as invocable rationality, that it seems important to me to interpret the meaning of Ana Vieira’s installations and figures. Even before (1967-68) making use of the house as a metaphor for a body in crisis, Ana Vieira constructed a series of figures formed by outlines, in which, on occasion, the profile is associated with a frontal perspective, but without there ever being any specific identification. They are empty faces, hollow or dual figures, signs of an identity haunted by dissolution or destruction.

In this respect, the figures, like the installations which provide the theme for the house, relate not to a war of the sexes but to a need to redefine the meaning of the objects and the language which names them, that is, the meaning of the subject itself². For this reason, an installation created by Ana Vieira in 1978³ consisted only

of a geometric outline on the floor, on which various phrases conjugated in the future or the conditional tense were inscribed within the different partitions: “here I will learn to discover”, “here I would like to have”. In this work, which Filomena Molder refers to suggestively as an “experience of loss”, or a “work of convalescence”, a radical confrontation with herself is initiated, as if it were a question of a mandatory point of intermission/passage towards a (minimum) acceptance of the play of the symbolic.

The question of why her work frequently starts out from these object-symbols of “domestic/domesticated⁴ space” is an interesting one, which probably reflects the need for a dividing line between feminist art and art produced by women.

In response to an architecture that is based on spectres and secular idealisations of the female body, the last decades of the twentieth century offered a systematic disidealisation involving a questioning of the limits of being which, while not always specifically feminine, was unavoidably dependent on sexual identity, rather than “gender”. Examples of this disidealisation are Ana Mendieta, Francesca Woodman, Jo Spence, Cindy Sherman, Lourdes Castro, and Fran Cotell. Also taking shape here is a latent aggressiveness which lays claim to the body as the bearer of identity, but also, paradoxically, as the content of the chaos arising from the disidealised self-image.

transparencies

One of the recurring elements in Ana Vieira’s work, to which a glancing reference has already been made, is the use of transparent textiles, which are used to construct houses, rooms, real partitions, but which are almost intangible/invisible. These fragile structures, which are extremely light, are used to disrupt the opposition between outside and inside - of the house, of the rooms - at a basic level. But this contradiction, or contrast, seems to refer to another more important one, established in existence itself, between the skin and the body, between the self and the other, between appearance and reality. In this respect, the work that she has developed since the 1960S/70S has portrayed the intentional hesitation of the body which circulates, in a labyrinthine manner, back and forth across these lines or boundaries. Therefore, in addition to the need to construct a new material structure that is ideologically sustainable, Ana Vieira’s work talks about tactile necessity, of an impulse towards dissolution/fusion between herself in the world. This is about returning to the preverbal, agonistic dimension, imposed by the use of contours, of materialised shadows, of transparencies, which form like a new skin through which new sensations are experienced, but on which a changing individuality, or one which wishes for constant change, is also constructed.

It is after this journey, made up of an architecture rooted in ideas of openness and closure, of voluntary control of entries and exits, that this work can be understood as being essentially devoted to the assertion of instability as a profound stigma of the human being; as if it were impossible to accept the idea of unity and the definition of the subject in the face of a progressively more intense awareness of that subject’s wish for mortal dissolution. In this respect, the question of tactility in Ana Vieira’s work therefore seems important, since it is the specific point through which this destructive and self-destructive ghost insinuates itself, and it is this that gives energy and cohesion to her work; pre-verbal, fusing tactility, placing the subject, as F. Molder says, “following the origin of the symbol”. We are therefore not surprised by her preference for the installation.

dramaturgies

The installation *Sem Título, 2001* focuses and broadens Ana Vieira's creative process. It consists of ten hangers, suspended from the ceiling, each bearing a black robe made of thick woolly felt. Long garments, all different, for men or women, they include an Azorean cloak (*capote açoreano*), perhaps the most dramatic "figure". They are suspended around ten centimetres from the ground, spaced at intervals around the gallery, without bodies to fill them. They are filled only with their frame, i.e., nothing. In their hollow interior there is a tin-plate mirrored surface, which the half open robes allow us to glimpse. Visitors, when moving among these objects, will be surprised to see themselves reflected inside the robes.

Faceless, eyeless bodies. The dramaturgy of death inscribed in the juxtaposition of beings, or in the fusional arising from the spectator's absorption by the figures. And there is also a sound, consisting of a recording of voices alternately repeating the personal pronouns: "*eu, nós, tu, ele...*" (I, we, you, he...). The installation combines personal pronouns and bodies without a body which hover in space, in a state of social chaos: they do not talk to each other, they are together but they do not communicate, they are a whole but not an organic group. They remind us of some figures from Ana Vieira's first work: the shadow-women, the cut-out figures. But these figures are more bereft. They have left behind the desire for tactile fusion with the world, their almost ethereal and at the same time ardent, agonistic, form. Among the men's and women's robes there is a hybrid: the Azorean cloak, which confounds the boundaries between the sexes. Around us, we see figures staging the subject's face-to-face encounter with death, without a struggle, without agonism. The monotonous sequence of the voice surrounding these figures reiterates this separation, through the voices' repetition of "we, you, I", in succession, without overlapping or mixing. The robes sway as the visitor passes, recreating a world of ghost people, beings wound up in themselves, empty spectres. Nevertheless, the unseeing bodies show visitors their reflections; they absorb the other, fusing themselves with him, in an effort to resolve all contradictions.

Here the body has acquired the status of an image, like a photograph which prolongs being beyond its abyssal absence: here, there is no aura arising from the living presence of the face to make us forget this absence. In the Azorean cloak, we also find a reference to the voyeur, since it is a figure whose hypothetical gaze is hidden under the hood, preventing any possible identification. Such is the weight and power of the image. And this is also acutely reinforced for us by the mirroring of the spectator, who, in making contact with these beings, immediately loses his basic difference, his identity.

Here we see the influence of the image on our presence: abolishing interaction, placing the being in a definitive exteriority, in a non-relation, through absolute, anaesthetizing fusion. This self-absorption of the contemporary being, enclosed in images and virtual manipulations⁵ is the inexorable consequence of post-romantic identity, surrounded by finitude and impulsory contradictions. And it is in this world of solitary conviviality, of sounds emitted into the air without anyone hearing them, that the art which is possible in the contemporary world is debated. In Ana Vieira's work there is nevertheless a specific quality which sets it apart from other more narcissistic approaches; here, she is not simply closing in on herself, but projecting an existence which transcends herself as an individual, and makes us ponder a sort of tacit acceptance of the life-death dialectic. This installation defines this tacit acceptance on the basis of a sort of direct confrontation with the 'ghost', which can thereby be approached without fear."

Catalogue *Ana Vieira. Pronomes*. Lagoa [Azores]: Franco Steggink, 2001

Catalogue *Ana Vieira: Muros de Abrigo / Shelter Walls*; Ponta Delgada [Azores], Museu Carlos Machado, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2010, pp. 235-237 (org. Paulo Pires do Vale)

FOOTNOTES

23 Cf. Tavares, Salette, "Ambiente objecto de Ana Vieira", in *Colóquio Artes*, April 1975; Molder, Filomena, "A mulher escondida", in *Ana Vieira/catalogue of the Fundação de Serralves*, Porto, 1998.

24 Cf. "O Toucador", 1973, "Figura com chapéu", 1973, among other works.

25 "Ocultação/Desocultação", 1978.

26 Allusion to the title of one of her works, "Santa Paz Doméstica/Domesticada?", 1981.

27 Which fulfil the function of maintaining the childish illusion of omnipotence.
