

Óscar Faria, 1998

THE DISMANTLING OF THE ILLUSION

Interview with Ana Vieira

“BORN IN 1940 in Coimbra, Ana Vieira is one of the most significant names in Portuguese art of the last three decades. The deconstruction of the relationship between the viewer and the work is one of the favourite themes of a creator who, in the late 1960s, turned away from painting as a medium of expression. During those years, the work of Michelangelo Pistoletto, a Victor Garcia production in Paris, and “*sombras*” by Lourdes Castro confirmed the intuitions of an artist for whom “the sight of the body is much more encompassing than the sight of the retina”. A journey through emotions evoked in a labyrinthine conversation.

Público : You graduated in painting in 1964. However, since then you have almost always refused to use this medium. Why?

Ana Vieira : Because I felt that if I wasn't able to say anything through painting it did not fulfil me. I lost interest in the academism of the *Escola de Belas Artes*, I completely detested it. Although I am very fond of painting, I felt that it wasn't the right medium for me, it wasn't my path.

P. : How did you try to overcome this impasse?

A.V. : I left. Portugal was completely culturally closed. At that time the centre of culture was still Paris. I'm not sure whether it was in the late 1960s, but definitely in the early 1970s, that we made several trips to Paris, where we took the opportunity to watch as much cinema as possible - because most of the films were banned in our country - and visit as many museums as possible. It was complete cultural immersion: we could never stay more than a week; it was extremely expensive. I also took the opportunity to visit the theatre and watch plays with completely different staging from what I was used to. These are all factors that awaken you - experienced culture. I do not believe that a person becomes educated solely through books. In the meanwhile. Luis Noronha da Costa, who came from an architecture background - a discipline free from the constraints of painting -, came to work at the studio I shared with Eduardo Nery and began to create experimental art relating to scholastic concepts.

P. : Who did you travel to Paris with?

A.V. : I went with my husband at the time, Eduardo Nery. Sometimes we would meet up with a friend, like Helena Almeida and Artur Rosa. We went to the same places, which led to a very lively exchange of ideas. Around that time, the seventies more or less, we saw some “performances”, Helena and I were elated.

P. : Which of the artists left the greatest impression on your trips to the French capital?

A.V. : There were lots of people. I saw a fabulous Joan Jonas “performance”. Both Helena and I was thrilled: they were things that were greater than us. We also saw a very important Andy Warhol installation: a series of paintings of Mao Tse-Tung, which

varied in size depending on the size of the rooms of the building, I was ecstatic. It was something that resulted from very well informed habits thanks to certain magazines.

P. : Which magazines did you read at the time?

A.V. : I read “*Domus*” a lot, which was an architecture magazine with an immense amount of information about art. It was through “*Domus*” that I started to become aware of the work of {Michelangelo} Pistoletto.

P. : Why did the work of this Italian artist have such a great impact on you?

A.V. : Perhaps because I immediately grasped the process - I am an intuitive person ... The very dismantling of the relationship between the viewer and the work interested me greatly; the contingency of the act of passage. I am still fascinated by it - if I had money I would love to have one of Pistoletto’s mirrors. This aspect of contingency fascinated me greatly. I was definitely captivated for a reason I discovered why as my work evolved.

P. : Who was responsible for the initial critical reception of your work?

A.V. : Two people. One of whom, now passed away, was Salette Tavares, who gave me one of my best ever written reviews. The other was José Luís Porfírio. Fernando Pernes and Rui Mário {Gonçalves} as well, but less so. And José Augusto França. The outside people who made me stronger - in terms of analysis and criticism - were primarily Salette Tavares and José Luís Porfírio. And Ernesto de Sousa.

P. : Was it difficult to get your ideas across?

A.V. : It wasn’t very difficult You have to understand that I wasn’t reinventing the wheel. What I was doing was contextualised. This was happening all around. Not in exactly the same way: everybody grasps and assimilates things in their own way. I think this is the universal process of things: they are picked up by each person; undergo changes, re-adaptations, readings.

P. : You were just speaking about the theatre in Paris...

A.V. : I saw a fabulous production by Victor García, which left an impression on me for the rest of my life, the play was “*Tartuffe*” {by Molière}. It was there that I understood the dismantling of the illusion. The make-believe of the staging also impressed me: the actors came out from the audience, and on stage dressed in transparent suits which lowered from the roof.

P. : Much of your work can be analysed from the perspective of the theatrical notion of distance, in other words not allowing the audience to enter the work; they are only able to penetrate it with their gaze...

A.V. : Perhaps it comes from the theatre. The viewer does not physically enter, but rather enters by identification or, conversely, by surprise, because he is caught off guard. I do not much believe in physical participation. I never believed in it. At the same time I stick to the principle of painting itself: deep down, I got very stuck; challenging

it, but stuck... People observe but do not enter, they can travel though it with the body, but always externally. I have said many times that I do not believe a person can just see... You can only know the sea once you have entered the water. The sight of the body is much more encompassing than that of the retina.

P. : The “*silhuetas esvaziadas*” (emptied silhouettes) from 1968 are some of your first pieces of work. You began to talk about the body based on its absence...

A.V. : It is a reaction to any form of opacity: bringing the objects into the space. The fact that they can be traversed or altered - the contingency of the act of passage - makes them similar to those of Pistoletto (I wasn't thinking about this when I did them): the pieces are so receptive. They are so receptive to contingency...they are open, torn open.

P. : During these years you met with Lourdes Castro to make your “shadows’...

A.V. : This issue affected me a lot... possibly it was already the absence of a personal signature, of extremely open representation. A shadow leaves room for any interpretation. Or for the imagination of each individual: who is that shadow? What is that person like? Slim? What body does that shadow have?

P. : The concept of the house has been present throughout your work right up until now. The early work based on this theme suggests a kind of bourgeois environment with a certain feel of the past, of memory...

A.V. : The house has been an important element for a long time. I do not always allude to the house; I allude to rooms or moments within the house. The house is talked about a lot I am already pigeonholed. I tried to pursue this element as an archetype: the house is the great uniting element of thoughts, and emotions but don't know whether it was more of a resource rather than an end. The house is also an element that allowed me to tackle evocation, maybe it is more this.

P. : Is evocation autobiographical?

A.V. : I think that the house is one of the most universal elements. As to whether or not it is auto-biographical, I don't really know how to reply. For me, It had this evocative charge. I don't like memory very much; I think it is very direct. Evocation is an area that is more open than memory.

P. : In “*Santa Paz Doméstica, Domesticada*” (1977) you explicitly criticise female passivity....

A.V. : And not only that. Its a criticism of an entire society, where the woman assumes roles that I found to be very revolting at the time.

P. : Did the social context of the time influence the creation of this “environment”?

A.V. : Yes. And personal experiences as well. No one is immune to what they have lived through or experienced.

P. : Can it be said that the Carnation Revolution of the as April 1974 influenced the artistic context of the time?

A.V. : Of course it did. On the one hand, the 25April brought both great enthusiasm and great disruption. It was as if everything had collapsed and needed to be rebuilt again: which is a very good thing. The great advantage of a revolution is that it calls everything into question. At that time art was very much shaken as a social function. Everything to do with culture is very fragile. In Portugal, it shakes at the first jolt, And at that time this occurred in terms of the market. I fully comprehend that when the market crashes people turn to utopia, and when the market is booming, there generally is utopia, but when taken under close scrutiny everything falls apart with the smallest jolt. {The revolution} fundamentally shook the market, and the relationship between the artists. People closed elf and from that point onwards artists tried to go it alone - every man for himself the best they could. There was a lot of opportunism; and then everything was just shut away again at home - the great reaction to an excess of openness in which a lot was peeled away and revealed. It was an experience.

P. : When you talk about opportunism are you referring to the post-revolutionary period or to the 1980's?

A.V. : To the post-revolutionary period. Everyone wanted to be a forceful revolutionary in their own way. Some with structure, others without any.

P. : In two pieces you directly cite two paradigmatic works from art history: the "Venus de Milo" in "Ambiente (Vénus)", from 1972 and "Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe" by Édouard Manet, in "Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe 77", from 1977. Why do you make reference to these creations?

A.V. : In the case of Manet, I hate to say it but it is a matter of immediacy: I felt like creating the act implied by the painting - a picnic placed on the Image, and I gave it a final touch by introducing a palette and brushes. As regards the replica of the *Venus de Milo*, which is a very strong reference for everyone, I placed it on art altar - that is how the plinth functions - as an object of worship. Of course, once again, with irony. If you walk around the statue, as anyone would, you do not occupy the place of ecstasy of the worship: you see and you are seen.

P. : In the labyrinth of this conversation it is possible to sense that, deep down, these works, assert themselves against the passivity of the viewer...

A.V. : Yes... and formally, what I tried to do besides bringing the painting into the space was to reject the ideal of the Renaissance viewer; to shift the ideal observation point to an almost baroque place: the person surrounds, sees and is seen. It is multiplying the views of what would have been more or less static.

P. : "Projectos de Ocultação/Desocultação" (1978) and "Corredor" (1982) are installations in which you dematerialise the idea of the house. In the first piece you use bricks to outline the plan of a building., while in the second you invite the visitor to walk through a tunnel...

A.V. : The plan of the house has many phrases written in it. It functions, now more than

ever, as a body; a body under construction. The corridor, which you enter and walk through, is once again an appeal to the body. When I created it, it had an initiation value, now it functions as proof. The fact that it is all different heights implicates experimentation with the body, with the emotions; an appeal to all the senses.

P. : A corridor of emotions...

A.V. : Yes, for example.

P. : And in the case of "*Projectos de Ocultação/Desocultação*", a house of desires...

A.V. : A house of expectations. And other things are missing. It was funny to revisit this work. I think this field of desires is severe. Desires are missing. Anyway I leave hypotheses out there.

P. : Why did you delimit the space using a floor plan?

A.V. : Because the house is almost inseparable from the body. I think the house is inhabited and inhabits us.

P. : Have you created any works for the Serralves anthology?

A.V. : In the old dining room and a small room on the first floor I will create small interventions in which I try to integrate existing elements of the house such as mirrors and a sink. In these interventions, together with the one I created in the *Teatro Nacional de S. João* {"*A Dança*"} I synthesize the game between the "voyeur" and the image.

In the house I will leave the doors to the rooms ajar: therefore it is a very "voyeuristic" game. I think that the interventions have a sequence that can only be read from Serralves. They are levels of voyeurism and of the viewer/object relationship. I would like it to be the end of a cycle."

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