

ON THE LIGHT OF THE EARTH AND OTHER HORIZONTAL CATHEDRALS

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Quay walls are a kind of no man's land: disembarkation here neither means you have fully arrived, nor does embarking mean you have truly departed. The harbour quay is one of those places without a proper existence, anchorages outside the familiar world of habit. In a Portuguese proverb the *saudade*—that inexplicable emotional blend of *wanderlust* and homesickness, of melancholy and yearning—is said to be a quay built of stone.

Pedro Cabrita Reis was born in Lisbon; he grew up there and has a studio right by the banks of the Tejo river. For him, the *saudade* is more than just a word, it also stands for how his entire thinking is permeated by a radical mood of change and a deep desire for upheaval—the only way he has been able to see life since the revolution in 1974. Whoever sees his works purely in terms of the different architectural elements from which they are constructed—windows, doors, staircases, bricks, turrets, well forms and so on—is disregarding precisely the fact that they represent realms grounded not in some day-to-day, concrete notion of existence (*Da-Sein*), but, as he puts it, in being *per se* (*Sein*). In other words, Cabrita Reis a constructor of presentiment, mood and emotion rather than of dislocated architecture or ruins, and he is certainly not interested in what is commonly understood as concept art.

A small square and a man-high rectangle are cut into a crudely built wall of bricks and cement standing in the middle of an open field. What makes everyone automatically see these apertures as a window and a door, and why does the work's title, *A Room for a Poet* (2000), immediately seem so appropriate? Just how much is required to suggest a house? Is it the olive tree in front that strikes a lyrical chord? Indeed, there seems to be a certain rivalry between this leafy roof and the wall. As Cabrita Reis puts it, "It is hard to say what is more important: the shadow cast by the tree or the shelter offered by the wall. Shadow offers comfort, while shelter screens us from fear. Which is preferable? But does the poet perhaps need that existential condition of precarious salvation?"¹

Cabrita Reis builds a staircase and tops it with a doorframe and a closed door; alongside it he erects a second staircase with a second door, calling the whole composition *A casa e outra casa* (A house and another house, 1992). The doors hold a promise of something behind them, prompting the viewer to imagine people going up and down the stairs and in and out, taking leave or greeting one another in the doorways. However, like *A Room for a Poet*, the components of this edifice are nothing more than the means of constructing an emotional situation. Although eagerly typecast by many critics in terms of the materials he uses, the sculptor's oeuvre is concerned neither with deconstruction nor with an imagery shaped somewhere between art and architecture. Instead, his work gives visibility to places that are 'skinned' of all their familiar inhabitability—if one considers architecture as man's second skin. His works map territories of extreme fragility, in which all references to our existence that explore the question of how and where fall apart and instantaneously bring the viewer face to face with himself, confronting him with his very being.

Standing in the courtyard of a cloister is a well. Cabrita Reis has built three white arm-like structures radiating away from this central point. Ending in an open-topped cylinder, one of them is a long, raised duct reminiscent of the *levadas*, the ancient irrigation systems of Madeira; the second arm leads to a cube, also uncovered; the third conduit, a sort of sealed walkway, ends in another cube topped with an overlapping lid. This watery ensemble is called *Alexandria* (1990). The three tentacle structures appear to lend form and image to the sense of placid coolness, to the fragrance of fresh water and the solace of seclusion. At the same time, they extract the archetypal 'well courtyard' from its isolation, letting us imagine how it serves as the source and the hub of an entire network of movement. As though these radial structures were somehow depicting the routes that are taken when water is drawn up in buckets, conveyed to the various houses and poured into pitchers, this tentacular constellation paraphrases distribution and ramification in a wider sense. The 'well' is transformed into a place of waterways—spawning an analogy between the well courtyard and the library, from where books are carried out into the world. In this sense, *Alexandria* suggests a point of departure for knowledge that constantly continues to evolve, a fountainhead for words that travel. As Cabrita Reis remarks, "*Alexandria* could conceivably be just a house (the territory of man) where a mystery is revealed—not the mystery of something you do not know, but of something you will be given to know [...]"²

The construction of this well courtyard with its radiating branches is similar to another of Cabrita Reis's works: from an open cylinder a raised channel makes a rectangular path towards an open cube. This place is called *A casa da paixão e do pensamento* (The house of passion and of thought, 1990). And again it is astonishing to see how striking the contrast is between the elements used to build the piece—anyone who thinks in terms of aesthetic categories would call these minimalist—and the lyrically emotional language Cabrita Reis associates with them. As he writes in one of his texts, there is "a sense of lasting unity, a movement of permanent return. To love and to know. A circular continuum and, from this energy, to extract the 'drawing' from the concept of the unique. Passion and thought are both its point of reference and its vanishing point. We will make a portrait which progressively approaches perfection, using the spiral line generated by these two points."³ This statement clearly manifests how closely Cabrita Reis's emotionality is bound up with precision and knowledge. At this level, any disparity between feeling and geometry is suspended. But it is not only through his words that we grasp this emotionality: it also reverberates with urgency throughout his constructions. Cabrita Reis's cylinders and cubes, which he claims are a kind of self-portrait, call to mind those sites of silence and freedom concealed within each one of us and evoke lyrical moments such as the passage in Paul Celan's *In die Ferne* (To distant places):

Silence, anew, spacious a house —:
come, you should dwell.
Hours, profanely beautifully stepped: attainable
the haven.
Sharper than ever the remaining air: you should breathe, breathe and be you"⁴

The works Cabrita Reis produced on the threshold of the late 1980s and early 1990s were still narrative-based *mises-en-scène* infused with such emotionality: *A casa do silêncio branco* (The house of white silence, 1990) is the title of a construction in which a water pitcher can be seen standing on a raised staircase landing that the artist built against a museum wall. Rather like a balustrade, a white wooden board stretches from the landing into the corner of the wall, involuntarily evoking the image of a balcony. In the writings that frequently accompany his works, not unlike his quick sketches, Cabrita Reis describes the situation that inspired him to make this piece. "In a village by the sea I saw a woman on the lower terrace of a house in a village, at the time of day when the intensity of the light spreads a scented blindness over the walls. I watched the woman softly wiping off the dust that had settled on her potted plants."⁵ One of the few works from the eighties that Cabrita Reis still exhibits is designed precisely like a stage. Two crudely built chairs stand back to back, and placed beside each chair is a wicker basket, albeit cast in concrete. The viewer involuntarily completes this scene by imagining people sitting on the chairs, busy preparing something and filling the baskets. The title, *Horas de calor* (Hours of heat, 1989), directly relates to a childhood experience the artist describes in his notes: as a boy he used to listen to the old men as they were shelling almonds, never-ending piles of almonds, during afternoons bloated with the deadening heat that had come up from the *maquis*.⁶ Clearly, the viewer has no way of guessing such childhood memories without first consulting the artist's commentary. But maybe something else is conveyed instead: a place dislodged from the constraints of its everyday configuration, a place that focuses a certain state of consciousness which, like some reliably recallable memory, is plotted indelibly into our "inner geography", as Cabrita Reis phrases it. Such a place is

also defined in the work *Morituri* (1989)—a title that alludes to the salute made by Caesar's gladiators declaring their readiness to die. The artist's feet are planted on top of a sheet of black glass just like the solemn plaques one sees mounted outside the premises of lawyers and doctors that announce their names in gold letters. The artist is simply showing himself by marking his position, vouching for his art with his own person, with his life. The works he produced in 1989 formulate a threshold between human and geometrical proportions. In some of these works human figures still make an appearance, but they are gradually replaced by mere traces of their presence (as, for instance, the empty chair), until even such traces are also finally displaced by architectural forms derived from everyday life—like the house, the container of human life.

Born in 1956, Pedro Cabrita Reis is one of those Portuguese artists who are so stringently self-critical that they have never, or only rarely, shown certain sections of their work in their entirety, and have even gone as far as destroying it. In his own eyes, his life as an artist did not start until the late 1980s, even though he had already been working regularly and exhibiting long before then. After the revolution in 1974 Portuguese artists gradually began see and measure themselves in an international context, which for many meant a radical (and painful) shift in the criteria that defined artistic recognition. When the old dictatorship was toppled, Cabrita Reis was just 17 years old; for almost all Portuguese artists, the entire duration of the 1970s and much of the 1980s was marked by political activities and tasks. Many led double lives, working simultaneously as independent artists and at desks in the ministry, or as the early founders and directors of reorganized academies and museums. In Cabrita Reis's 'parallel life' he published the journal *Arte y opinión*, a forum for debate between art and politics. It was not until the late eighties, when he was already 33 years old, that he began to focus exclusively on his art. Once he did, the result was a frenetic burst of creativity⁷ that precipitated a flurry of exhibitions and publications. In 1992 he took part in the documenta and in 1995 he was selected for the group show that represented Portugal at the Venice Biennale.

On the meadow in front of the Fridericianum in Kassel the artist blocked the visitors' path with a large, white walk-through sculpture. *Rio* (1992) was built like a gangway, albeit skirted with high walls. It was a place that felt simultaneously like a bridge and an open tunnel. Reaching a height of 250 cm, the walls rose above the heads of passers-by, channelling their gaze along an axis, but at the same time intensifying their awareness of the sky above. In spite of offering various points of access from all sides of the meadow, this structure twenty-five metres long in fact acted more like a barrier, one which suggested the fundamental margin between the here and the beyond. Like the opposite banks of a river, this encounter with a divided locality evoked the supremely simple but unresolvable question: which side are we actually standing on, and where then is the 'other shore' once I have crossed over?⁸ But maybe other visitors venturing through this installation were struck by quite different associations—such as the momentous images offered by the Biblical account of the parting of the waters: "And the waters were a wall to them on their right hand and on their left" (Exodus, 14:22). Images describing the parting of the waters are not restricted to the Bible, they can also be found in the Koran, though obviously to a different end, namely in praise of Allah: "He has let loose the two oceans: they meet one another. Yet between them stands a barrier which they cannot overrun" (Surah 55:19, 20)⁹.

That such associations are not at all abstruse as might first seem is shown by other works that followed *Rio*. *Atlas Coelestis IV* (1994) is the title of one such large-scale sculpture. Cabrita Reis has knocked together a precarious set of stairs, four metres high, covering the steps with panes of glass. When, as he intended, this construction is installed next to a window, the glass panes become mirrors of the sky. As impossible as it is for the viewer to climb this *Posto do Observação* (Observation post, 1994), as an object it already fulfils its purpose of maintaining constant vigilance. What can one actually see from up there? Cabrita Reis replies with his usual propensity for poetic commentary: "People perhaps, or human failure, black holes or just simply silence, stars lighting up in the heavens and then vanishing again. It is not about what one actually sees but about the very act of observation itself. Climbing to the top and keeping one's eyes peeled. [...] Wearing blinkers is out of the question. We need to perceive everything, even what we cannot bear. Looking, watching, watching, watching—that is what is meant by evading death, by not being killed alive."

In another piece, titled *Olhar, olhar sempre* (Look, always look, 2000), the artist gives form to a narrow and perversely distorted mode of observation. He has built watchtowers shaped like the bartizans and sentry turrets typical of prison architecture, with small recesses let into the walls punctured with mock windows. Mounted against the wall of the museum, these burnished steel constructions have a threatening feel about them. Yet the work also embodies a crucial ambiguity: does the viewer identify more with the person posted up at the top watching and monitoring us, or with the object of surveillance down below? This does not ultimately bear on how we understand the work; what is significant, however, is that alongside the works in his *Atlas Coelestis* series, which formulate the act of seeing as a responsibility and a sign of mental alertness, *Olhar, olhar sempre* in fact visualizes a certain manner of seeing that is taken to absurd limits. Such contrived and exaggerated vigilance inevitably ends in blindness and the dulling of true creative perception.

But besides exploring the act of seeing, the works of the *Atlas Coelestis* cycle also touch on another phenomenon: his 'sky mirrors'. Alluded to elsewhere in numerous water and well motifs (such as when sunlight is beamed back from the depths of a well), these 'sky mirrors' turn the referential system of above and below on its head. We have already seen how the margins between inside and out undergo dissolution. Lined up across the floor are long rows of concrete furrows filled with glaring neon strips. Called *Semina* (Sowing, 2000), this work might certainly suggest the image of sowing seed. But it was something entirely different that prompted Cabrita Reis to make this piece: "If you're on a beach not far from the water's edge and simply rake lines your fingers through the sand that has been dried by the sun, water will seep up from below. The sun immediately begins to sparkle in the water-filled furrows and the sky is reflected. For me it is about opening up the earth in order to see light. I am opening up the surface to discover what lies beneath it."

The way Cabrita Reis uses the materials of reality to vault beyond reality is extremely simple. Transforming the floor of an exhibition space into a deep blue shiny sky, he builds a shack on it, with the door's threshold abutting onto the firmament and its floor nestling up against the ceiling, which has now become the ground. Simple though his approach might be, his works nonetheless constantly have a most disconcerting effect. The parameters that inform our sense of reality are so ingrained that it requires a shift in only one of these coordinates to destabilize the entire edifice. The effect of walking across the sky is very odd—it almost makes you wonder whether you are standing on your feet or on your hands. It is equally bewildering to look down from above into a mirror and observe the crown of a tree rustling in the wind, as can be seen in *True Gardens #1* (2000)—or to lose all sense of depth as you peer into milky or transparent sheets of glass raised 40 cm above the ground and framed by extremely bright white neon strips, as in *True Gardens #2* (2000). It is this manner of disorientation that provides the coordinates for Cabrita Reis's constructions, whose impact amounts to nothing less than a radical shift in the viewer's perspective. But given that a number of formalistically inclined commentaries pay little attention to the "essential being of an artwork" as constituted by the interaction of its "material, spirit and intrinsic composition"¹⁰, preferring instead to focus on a work's aesthetic form or even on merely inventorying its production methods, inquiry into how this work could be understood in terms of its intrinsic meaning has hitherto remained a largely unexplored terrain.

This same applies, for instance, to the work *Orfanato* (Orphanage, 1995), whose materiality again serves only as a starting point for its pictorial intensity. What do we see? Just a unit of ordinary industrial shelving with a tray on each shelf, each bearing a plate and a neon tube. But the trays are alternately placed at the front and at the back of every shelf with monotonous regularity. One could hardly think of a more vivid image of autism, of isolation and numbing regimentation. In the "spirit of intrinsic composition"¹¹, this piece can be compared with another work consisting of fourteen white doors suspended in a line along a wall: *Ala Norte* (North Wing, 2000) is the title Cabrita Reis gave to this eerie installation, but when asked about it, his answer is hardly that of a conceptual artist. "Sometimes I imagine an enormous hospice for healing all manner of afflictions—of the heart the liver kidneys whatever. Then I thought there

might be a small stretch of woods and beyond the trees there would be a strange house called 'North Wing' where the insane are kept, the pariahs among the pariahs, so to speak. I imagined these to be the doors that lead into this building." For himself, Cabrita Reis would certainly denounce 'la folie' as "the luxury of escaping reality", a temptation he feels the artist cannot afford to indulge in. But the doors here are glazed and present the viewer with his own reflection from within this ensemble of bewildering rectangles.

Sheets of glass, mirrors, reflected light—the visual riddles between opaque and transparent surfaces all belong to the vocabulary the artist recurrently uses in his work. In one piece we see a number of old steel door frames measuring 250 x 180 cm he found on a demolition site, and propped up against them are even larger, overlapping panes of glass. The altogether four upright frames are lined up against a wall, with an area the size of a door painted respectively in monochrome red, white, blue and black on each sheet of glass. The glass panes all have different sizes and jut out transparently beyond the edges of the door frames. The work is called *Lisbon Gates* (1997). Yet for Cabrita Reis, the frames themselves are less important than his approach to painting and the potentiality of glass: "Alberti saw painting as a window onto the world, and I have turned the window into a mirror. At the same time there is an inversion between fire and water—sand is heated until it turns fluid, from which glass is filtered and becomes solid. By impeding its transparency, I create a mirror fountain. In doing so, I am in quite a simple, rudimentary way also thematizing several crucial elements of painting such as colour, light, transparency, construction and density. This form of painting is not one that attempts to depict or represent, but instead establishes an abstract, sensual system. This is not a referential system rooted in observation of the outside world, but one which is generated from within the viewer—one with which he himself also becomes part of the picture as opposed to simply being positioned outside it."¹² This description might at first sound somewhat technical, but Cabrita Reis's exploration of painted and reflective surfaces, of transparency and obstructed vision is grounded in a profoundly universal outlook: "By creating an image of myself I am standing outside myself, and when I confront the skin of a representation of our world I am also standing outside what has been seen. I am not interested in the mask, I move beneath the skin of the world. My 'pictures' always involve both—the painted reflective surface here, the mirror there. Maybe one has to look beyond the object in order to grasp it."

The fragility of the panes of glass in these works is breathtaking. Indeed, exhibition visitors react to the aura of these pieces by instinctively trying to protect their fragility, and acts of vandalism are rare. Can this be explained precisely by the mirror image they provide, or is it because the works' materiality conveys a high degree of emotionality?

Great cracks zigzag across a window hastily patched up with rough adhesive tape. Much has been written about the craving adolescent boys seemingly share to power footballs through glass windows, even to the point of evoking Freudian analogies that suggest penetration or the rupturing of the hymen. But once again, the motives that inspired this work are both simpler and more dramatic. As Cabrita Reis recounts, the title *Estrada das Lágrimas* (Street of Tears, 1997) refers to a street of the same name in the *favelas* of São Paulo, where the adhesive tape used in this piece is common currency for mending cardboard shelters, cracked windows or the dilapidated doors of wooden shacks. In his commentary he again emphasizes that it is not the window itself which is important, but the spirit of life associated with it: "This is the most ordinary adhesive tape available, the ugliest and cheapest stuff to wrap parcels with. I wasn't using it to conceal something, but because it is an irritant, because it is loud like a scream. It is the same tape that is stuck over the eyes and mouths of people who are about to be tortured. It is utterly useless for architectural purposes. I have been to the *favelas* many a time. What I saw in this gesture of taping things together or mending things with strips of cable somehow amounted to a show of defiance in a chaotic, perilous world. It's a gesture like a scream that exclaims: I want to live, however near to collapsing my hut is, I will survive, I will get out at dawn and find a way of pulling through. This is not some kind of contemplative hope, it is militant hope; the issue here is sheer, pitiless survival, where the only thing that counts is to save your own skin."

On a broader scale, this is about the drama of the individual's unrelenting willingness, day in day out, to discard and relinquish everything, to start all over again and to heed nothing but his own inner voice. In other words, this echoes Beuys's notorious claim that "everyone is an artist", in the sense that everyone can shape his life with the same autonomy and self-determination as the artist does.

This attitude is evident throughout Cabrita Reis's work, but in certain works it also assumes starkly political dimensions. Among them are pieces that take issue with the role of the Catholic church, raising questions that even today still keenly preoccupy artists from Latin countries. In one series, Cabrita Reis addresses the phenomenon of the cathedral. Verticality and horizontality are interchanged. Jutting out from the wall of a museum room he erects a crude wall of masonry from floor to ceiling; some of the hastily cemented, broken bricks have letters and numbers chalked on them, similar to the way archaeological finds are marked. The topos of sublime verticality is subjected to irony.

In a further piece in the same series, Cabrita Reis builds short lines of waist-high walls across the floor of a large converted barn. The wall sections are set one behind the other in generously spaced rows rather like kneeling benches for praying; occupying altogether less than half the room's width, in their centre they create a broad, open central aisle. There are neon tubes lying on top of the walls. These have a strange effect: under normal circumstances, the viewer's gaze would automatically wander up towards the high vaulted ceiling, but here, the lighting on low walls prompt him to scan the room at eye-level, his eyes traversing the space along a horizontal axis. This is precisely what Cabrita Reis intended: rather than seeking a better, maybe utopian world elsewhere with the uplifted, cathedral-trained gaze of the believer who is willing to entrust responsibility to some external power on high, here the viewer is being encouraged to cast his gaze out before him at eye-level. His perspective tips over onto an axis which horizontally cuts through space, parallel to the ground where he is standing. As the artist himself explains: "Ecclesiastical theology requires us to seek God outside ourselves. It is within our power to see beyond ourselves and inside ourselves. This is our privilege. We have the power to redefine the landscape of the world and to constantly reconstitute our idea of God, above all by seeking Him within ourselves. The walls in my cathedral are low, the viewer's gaze opens up along a horizontal plane and the individual is large."

There is, however, something universal that culminates in this gaze towards the horizon. It is, as Cabrita Reis says, "our yearning to forge a unity between individuals. As the transcendence of language, the Tower of Babel should be sought from a perspective located at sea level. This is where our power lies, in the glance of infinity". The gaze towards the horizon is a state of consciousness. But in his work, Cabrita Reis shapes this gaze into physical places, into havens of silence and freedom.

NOTES

(1) Pedro Cabrita Reis in conversation with the author in Lisbon, November 2000. Unless otherwise mentioned, all further statements by the artist are from this conversation.

(2) Cabrita Reis, "Alexandria" (1990), in "Texts", in *Obras, 1989-1992*, catalogue, Lisbon, 1992 (without page no.)

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 146.

(4) Paul Celan, "In die Ferne", in: *Gedichte II*, Frankfurt am Main, 1975, p.178: "Stummheit, aufs neue, geräumig ein Haus -/ komm, du sollst wohnen, / Stunen, fluchschön gestuft: erreichbar / die Freistatt. / Schärfere als je die verbliebene Luft: du sollst atmen, atmen und du sein."

(5) Cabrita Reis, in: catalogue, Lisbon, op. cit., p. 32.

(6) Ibid., p. 10: Cabrita Reis also speaks of the *charneca*, a limestone region in southern Portugal, which he compares to the *maquis* region in southern France.

(7) Cf. Jorge Molder, *Pedro Cabrita Reis. Works from the nineties*, catalogue, Lisbon, 1994.

(8) Cf. Fernando Pessoa, *Le Livre de l'Intranquillité*, Paris, 1988, p. 23.

(9) *The Koran*, trans. N. J. Dawood, London, 1999, pp. 376-77.

(10) Cf. Max Raphael, *Wie will ein Kunstwerk gesehen sein? 'The Demands of Art'*, Frankfurt am Main, 1984, pp. 14-17: "Material, Geist und Werkgestalt".

(11) Ibid.: "der Geist der Werkgestalt".

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Originally published in "Vortex of Silence", by Charta, 2004
