

# SIGHTLESS CITIES

## PERIPHERY EXPERIENCES IN THE LABYRINTH OF DESERTED ROOMS

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Matter-of-fact in their clear, rational, quasi-architectural design, rich in poetic meaning through their shrouded narrative nature, enigmatic in regards to their imagined purpose—Pedro Cabrita Reis' most recent objects combine all these qualities in the compositions of simple, found materials, worn by use. These primitive structures recall the ramshackle of huts made of plywood, cardboard, and aluminum that, on the outskirts of large cities have grown to form cities in their own right, settlements of the displaced, of those who subsist below the subsistence level, and places that continue to demonstrate the indestructibility and near the inexhaustible, spontaneous creativity of the poor. Small rooms, hovels, or huts of afford a measure of privacy, through those who might benefit from the unidentified and perpetually unknown to the viewer. While the inhabitants have no physical presence, it is precisely their absence that evokes connotations, filling these sightless cities with emotion, poetic meaning, and an aura of the dread and apprehension. A mysterious and disquieting stillness governs this labyrinth of deserted rooms, resulting in a kind of covert theatricality, which is especially noticeable in the artist's earlier works. Theatricality also in the sense of a structured development of events, the course of a story, the dramaturgy of movement on a stage, such as the spatial setting provided by Reis' sightless cities. Events, dramaturgy, a story. All these are the responsibility of the viewer only through his associations does the empty stage become alive with *potential narratives*.

Pedro Cabrita Reis employs seemingly impoverished objects to create architectural, material ensembles with actual interiors. At the same time however, on an abstract level these are tied to archetypes, and their placements in a poetic, metaphorical, ambiguous sphere is clearly intentional. Bring to mind necropolis, a deserted city or a building that has stood empty for ages, the viewers wander through his assemblages until, confronted with the windows and doors that have been bricked up from the inside, they have come to a disconcerted and perplexed halt. Moveable aluminum windows, pans covered in dark paint, openings boarded up with cardboard or plywood make it impossible to determine if anybody or anything still inhabits these ill lit rooms. Does anything still *happen* here or is it only a trick of our imagination, while in fact emptiness and deathly silence reign?

In this manner, the actual, material, rational structures may be interpreted not only in formalist-phenomenological terms but also in the context of archetypal experiences. Their relationship with space contains subjective memories, sociological and anthropological elements, all of which draw on a variety of references. Cultural-historical connotations, mythological associations, art historical hints, and sociological observations are melded into complex layers of meaning.

Such complexity with regards to the ways and means of interpretation, invariably permitting the overall structure of the artwork to be read in a number of different ways, has always been a hallmark of Reis' work. Over the years, he formulated his own specific language, incorporating painterly, sculptural, and theatrical elements. This process was informed by the tension between the familiar, purist-reductivist, geometrically formal repertoire of various constructivist tendencies on the one hand, and the tradition of ready-made-like object art on the other with everything that term implies: critique of contemporary culture, the analysis of the socio-cultural context, sharpening systems of communication and, finally, eliminating classic artistic form as an autonomous entity. Reis' method embraces certain reminiscences of classic avantgardism, in particular such originating in the constructivist movements of the first two decades of this century, when the act of constructivist was intimately related to the act of creating a completely new world, ruthlessly introducing a new collective culture, and educating a new kind of man. At the same time, however, Reis operates with elements deriving from the late-Romantic, esthetic utopia of Joseph Beuys' "Soziale Plastik" in which the artist, in the guise of prophet, enchanter, shaman, seeks to heal and transmute the world by analogous means, through quasi-ritual acts and collectivist performance—similar to the "analogous magic" of certain animistic cultures. Some of his earlier installations incorporate such objects as horses, glass containers, pieces of equipment taken from chemical laboratories or machines; in a similar fashion, Reis operates with the phenomena of fluctuation, motion, and transformation, i.e. allegories of some form of alteration of pre-existing states.

This alchemy of transformation refers us to the avant-gardist strategies associated with radical utopias of a society in constant change. In Pedro Cabrita Reis' art, however, these elements are linked to a number of other connotations, and are thereby put into perspective. He introduces these potential interpretations, in the manner of alternatives, possible contexts, as propositions, in order to decipher sets of symbols and to create new combinations, so that the basic structure of the artwork ceases to be determined by the monolithic unambiguity. Reis deliberately combines different connotations, in themselves collections of formal fragments, successfully drawing our attention to the fact that no frame of reference is exempt from historical relativity. On the one hand, he perpetuates the illusion of the supremacy of non-representational, timeless, universalist-transcendental abstraction, which regards geometric abstraction, which regards geometric shapes as a manifestation of some global equilibrium. To this end, he employs objects that—in the light of the twentieth century's history of art—obviously echo certain "*prototypes*" found in geometric abstraction, when in fact they are no more than commonplace objects of everyday use. In the same breath, he shows a complete disregard for the formal rules, homogeneity, and conventions of geometric abstraction by reinventing quasi-abstract shapes (e.g. a glass disk) as magically mysterious objects.

It has already been mentioned that in some of his earlier works Pedro Cabrita Reis frequently made use of machine parts and pieces of laboratory equipment, as well as power cables or building materials. To the viewer, the unknown function to these new magic objects is locked in a provocative and irresolvable antagonism with the formal-phenomenological,

artistic-linguistic characteristics, which determine esthetic function. A potential unambiguous definition of the object's function is disrupted by the artist himself. In a smaller vein, the question as to what determines the structure of meaning, formal-phenomenological considerations—embedded in the context of art-historical awareness or the quest for alternative functions of the artwork—such as a magical remedy or the allegorical incitement to a general process of change—remains unanswered. In both cases, we are faced with a confusion of different connotations. On the one hand, the geometric-abstract shapes retain their material, physical-haptic corporeality despite the fact that the conventional compositional models provide a reference to geometric abstraction, permitting a “traditional interpretation” of the nonrepresentational formal construction. On the other hand, however, the elements of the objects' construction appear to have a “logical” relationship to one another within the context of magical-ritual function, even though we do not know the exact purpose of these objects nor how to employ them.

Substance and immateriality are projected onto the plane of art-historical connotation: the formal allusions to the classic geometric abstraction suggest a “constructivist *materiality*,” while magical-ritual associations convey an immaterial, *quasi-mystical aura*. As a consequence, the real, substantial, concrete objects become part of an immaterial, intelligible structure of meaning, in which the recollections of various periods of art history, with their paradigmatic vocabulary, clearly manifest the different underlying systems of values. Recollections and actual physical experiences permeate each other in much the same fashion as the reductivist, abstract formal repertoire is inseparable from the actual, concrete, physical objects themselves. Against the background of the quasi-architectural assemblages of later years, the material objects increasingly serve to evoke sociological and anthropological connotations. This setting of imaginary activities is imbued with life by the viewer himself, who finds himself faced with a wide range of possible interpretations, including many of a socio-cultural or anthropologic nature in view of the allusions to the impoverished architecture of the homeless. The sightless cities become the stage for quintessentially human activity, for a return to the principle of the narrative with its archetypal stories of ability and power, poverty and wealth, fear and happiness, belonging and displacement. Pedro Cabrita Reis' installations demonstrate this newfound awareness, intimately relating art-historical connotations and cultural-historical references to anthropological experience. The forms assumed by art become identified with the forms of human endeavor.

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Originally published in “The Courage to Be Alone”, by Charta, 2004