

THE CONSTRUCTOR OF PLACES

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The work of Pedro Cabrita Reis emerges in the context of the renewing of contemporary sculpture witnessed since the mid-eighties until today, finding its place in a period with no paradigm, in which subjects, concepts and forms arise more from unique and idiosyncratic formulations and resolutions than from ideological programmes as to the status of art and of the art object relative to whatever life, society or the world may be. This is a period in which it is common to make a reassessment of great historical, social, political and aesthetic narratives in order to give rise to new paths in which the freedom inherent to artistic reflection and creation is increasingly an original and solitary programme.

Independently of the accumulative revisionism post-modern discussion has become during this period, Pedro Cabrita Reis's work re-centres upon problems that then appeared to have become extinct, such as the issue of the author and that of structure. The author is reconfigured as a constructor who appropriates what he finds in the world, in order to confront it with the enigmas and share them through the vestiges, perennial or perishable, that make up his life and his work; they can be unified through the unique energy that reveals him. The structure originates a combining grammar of the materials and of the processes, which does not fear a rhetoric that becomes a confrontation of senses and of memory in the experience of the spaces and places.

As an author, Pedro Cabrita Reis sees himself as a producer of ambiguity, of double, multiple meanings. His work clearly fits into the field of strangeness, mystery and subjectivity: it is presented to our understanding through a precise objective and conceptual dimension that suggests a possibility of order, comprehension and rigour to us. As structure, Pedro Cabrita Reis's work revisits some of the classic themes of traditional sculpture, such as light and space, which take on new meaning in his works and are redefined as the proposal for a new relationship between architecture and the work of art.

Pedro Cabrita Reis's sculpture is characterised by the use of simple materials, recycled from existing materials and reminiscent of the experience and knowledge of daily life. A large part of these materials are construction materials: wood, bricks, plaster, glass, electric cables, copper and rubber tubing and fluorescent strip-lights. However, the artist transfers the issue of the assembly of materials to the process of construction and to a discourse in which melancholy is proposed as an unstable and creative balance between the absence of referents and the omnipresence of signs that find some of their main references in an intimate, personal history, as well as within the affective context of their Portuguese cultural origins.

The House and the City emerge as evidences of this process of transference, of the work of the construction of places in which Art provides the possibility for a permanent celebration of life and of human presence in the world. The House starts out appearing as an echo of that World, the protective and matric shelter that condenses the energy of the celestial atlas of which it reconfigures the cosmogony. A well of cool water, doors, windows, walls and corridors are turned into interior labyrinths of memory, like the memories of a summer or the details of the childhood home that each person may carry with them. The City results from the inevitability of the cartographic proliferation of the House, of the evidence of its generating and constructive potential. The City belongs to the dislocated territory of the energy of the suburb, of human persistence in survival, in the use of the remains of constructions that always produce other constructions, in the modest and hidden epopee of the builders. Pedro Cabrita Reis's cities are blind. As blind as are anonymous the hands of the builders, of whose results the artist makes concealed monumentality stand out.

In Pedro Cabrita Reis's sculpture, confrontation with the space forms its re-ordering originating in the transforming energy that subverts its pre-existing conditions, independently of temporality or of the architectural characteristics that might define it. In his work, architecture always becomes the choice territory for the intromission of sculpture that alters its coordinates and redefines its possibilities. For this reason, Pedro Cabrita Reis's sculpture does not fear the monument. Quite the reverse; it exploits the monumental effect, inscribing the place on the territory, rediscovering centralities where they would be least expected and suspected. In his work, the monument devours the cathedral, architecture grants its dominance to the arts and crafts.

In a piece that began the paths that Cabrita Reis's work has taken since the beginning of the nineties, in Alexandria (1990), a well in the cloisters of an old monastery is re-centred by the sculpture that rediscovers it in the blocks of plaster that flow out from it and make other well-memories flow into it, as the metaphorical evidence of the former well in the new place that the artist raises up from it. The sculptor's constructed drawing becomes the unexpected cartography of that new place. A new topology is inscribed on the sculptural transformation of the world, mysterious and blind in its perfect blocks of white plaster that confront the spectator with the necessary overcoming of any expectation of function or justification. From this project on, up to projects like River (1992) and Of the Hands of the Builders I (1993), Pedro Cabrita Reis's work inscribes its unique maps that re-appropriate pre-existing spaces. Any work by Cabrita Reis is radically taken as an in situ construction, because it makes the place where it is installed, independently of its possible site-specific circumstances. If, in River, the spectator was challenged to a path that, however, hid the space outside that path from him, through the limestone walls that isolated him from the Kassel garden opposite the Fridericianum, in Of the Hands of the Builders I the spectator is irredeemably condemned to a physical exteriority that deepens the mystery of the sinuous drawing of the cement blocks supported by fragile wooden structures "flowing into" three small hermetic brick and zinc towers, against which rough wooden steps stress the impossibility of any access. The sculpture can never be integrated within the space: it appropriates the latter in an implacable transforming logic that rhetorically underlines its necessary condition.

The increasing "deafness" of Pedro Cabrita Reis's projects will progress from a symphonic dimension that can be detected in the above-quoted works to a series of "chamber" pieces like those we find in the series H Suite (1992–1994) or in sculptures like Battery (1994) or Machina per verificare / Identità e Luogo (1994), where the artist shows the autonomy of the object in the space through the structural and compositional relations that unexpectedly associate the materials that make it up. The syntax of the materials is associated to an intimate and idiosyncratic semantics of each piece, polarising a set of metaphors of creative energy. The sculptor wisely explores formal

oppositions that he transforms into conceptual dichotomies. Rigidity and malleability, weight and lightness, transparency and opaqueness, light and shade establish unusual relations between hiding and revealing, discovery and construction, potency and the act, made and found. Each sculpture stands as a device of a utopia announced in each topos it constructs. The myth of creation is reconstructed from an archaeology of daily life that leads to a tension of conflicts between an alchemic process of emotions and the materiality of the asserting of life in the registers of its residues and questionings.

This intimate and secret laboratory will give off a new cosmogony, detectable in series like *Atlas Coelestis* and *Echo der Welt*, both from between 1993 and 1994. Large spatial constructions emerge from the places they transform into map rooms, observation posts, altars with no worship and radars with a concentration of energy that drives away any metaphysics, apart from the material nature of their creative propositions. Each of these constructions is the place of an alchemy of the gaze and of the thought that challenges the spectator to a confrontation with his own ignorance of its motifs and meanings. Large round panes suggest glasses through which one can see nothing but their transparency in *Map Room / Atlas Coelestis III*; a stairway to an imaginary tower is shown to be inaccessible through the large glass panes that cover its steps in *Observation Post / Atlas Coelestis IV*; a strange device generating unknown energy is discovered in *Echo der Welt I*. From the combination of simple and unexpected elements there arises the lost monumentality of a sense of construction, which converts it into a device for the asserting of the place of art in the world, a filter of the absence suspected in the lack of coincidence between the artist and the spectator. Later, from this auscultation of the firmament, the bright lights of the cities will emerge in the iridescence of their suburbia, taken as laboratories for constructive materials and processes.

Indeed, from 1997 on, we may see in Pedro Cabrita Reis's work a progressive transference of the metaphor of the House to the metaphor of the City, the two great isotopies of the whole of his work. The way that Pedro Cabrita Reis uses metaphor is removed from any possible understanding of it as a mere symbolic or semantic result. The artist is aware that the process of transformation is precisely what is most radical in the metaphor. Metaphor has its origin in an anthropological reflection that transforms the confronting emotions, the memories, the silences and the questions, as opposed to the lyrical exaltation of allegory and simile, or to the reductionism of sociological discourse. If the House covers a period of work in which sculpture confronts its object nature, where the syntax of its materials originates the definition of a semantic paradigm of the intimacy of absence and remembering, the City will extend, as the metaphor of a set of works and of a sculpture project, the formal and conceptual possibilities of confrontation with space. The latter is used to show a work programme in which the intimate register becomes less and less dissociable from a social memory, which will be transferred to the exploration of the transforming possibilities of sculpture in relation to an anthropology of the present. Architecture emerges as an inevitable consequence of sculpture, although it never asserts itself as its target or aim.

In this transition from the House to the City, Pedro Cabrita Reis presents a set of sculptures, among which one may highlight the series *Lisbon Gates*, as well as the site-specific installation *New York Red and Black Window*, which deal precisely with the frontier territories between the two, in the evidence of the limits that might define the passing from the public to the private, from the street to intimacy. In *New York Red and Black Window* (1997), the artist installs a window in a museum building. Its panes are painted red and black. In *Lisbon Gates* (1997), we find gates made from frames found from other gates, against which glass panes with smooth coloured rectangles painted on them are leaning, as if supremacist echoes were allied to the constructive nature of each sculpture. This is not the first time he has used a door as a "found object". One should recall *D(oor)/D(am)* (1990), in which a door-frame set off a group of plasterboard structures on which it was placed horizontally parallel to the ground. It is, however, one of the first times that he reintroduces colour into his work, in a return to the painting that he had been working on in his work on canvas from the previous decade.

The irruption of colour in Pedro Cabrita Reis's work goes along with a reconsideration of the role of painting in the compositional structure of his works. Painting occurs as a constructive perception of the gaze. The memories of a place are constructed through a particular association of the interior and exterior communication that becomes the space of the painting, setting contrasts of form and colour in opposition. Cabrita Reis usually uses enamel on glass or wood, industrial paints that contribute to structural games of opaqueness and transparency. Colour becomes a constructive material, a covering that hides and reveals, allowing dynamic oppositions according to its specificity, its smooth or textured application and the interior or exterior of the surface painted. In *Cabinet d'Amateur #1* (1999), the transformation of matter, glass or wood, by colour takes on the dimension of an industrial catalogue transposed into an exhibition room. The chromatic problems of pictorial representation gain unexpected relief in the spatial proliferation of these numerous diptychs painted on glass, supported by parallel lines of aluminium profiles that structure the space in which they are presented.

The formal and conceptual use of construction materials and processes takes on progressive autonomy in series such as *Dans les villes* and *Blind Cities*, carried out from 1998 on. The compositional principles of collage are applied on walls, houses and towers, constructions in which stand out combinations of materials like plywood, cardboard, brick, plasterboard, asphalted canvas, aluminium and adhesive tape. The works from these series transform the spaces in which they are installed into territories marked by the possibilities of observation they represent. Many of these constructions are blind and mysterious, impenetrable. The spectator is confronted with constructed places that hide from him like bunkers, or that spy on him, like watchtowers. The windows are there, but they are closed by the painting, which has made them opaque, or they have been made inaccessible due to being walled over. Gaps or boundary lines are omnipresent. Besides the territory drawn out by these volumes, there is also the territory charted on each flat surface by the joins in the adhesive tape or in the lumps of plaster that unite the walls. The construction shows off its processes, its scars, beyond all and any functionality of its marks. The adhesive tape not only joins, but also blocks out, it "paints" and covers, taking on the autonomy of drawing or of monochrome painting. The installation produces a permanent re-invention of the space in the coming together of colour and object, as takes place in *Blind Cities #1*. The volumes arouse the movement of the gaze on the walls; the height stresses their impenetrability, their self-absorption, as can be discovered in *Blind Cities #2* and *#4*. The walls take on a mysterious monumentality, as can be seen in *Blind Cities #5 / The Echo* and *#6 / Büro*. The sculpture constructs the place without the intention of architecture. Light breaks out in a precise and non-functional pattern: fluorescent lights appear in *Büro* as a way of marking out territory. Indeed, the whole space becomes a strategy of territorialisation, throughout the series, as the result of the hidden rules of the growth of cities, in the use of its built remains.

An elegiac dimension accompanies this progression of Pedro Cabrita Reis's work. Each construction results in a suspected absence, in the dull echo of the unknown addresses, in the attraction of the monument as the expression of solitude and of melancholy. The sculpture asserts itself as a permanent recycling of the ruin, as clearly becomes visible in the series Cathedral (1999): brick walls rise up from the floor, between the perfect and the imperfect, between the finished and the unfinished, between the ruin and its permanent reconstruction. Pedro Cabrita Reis's cathedrals prove how "everything that is solid dissolves in the air". The bulwarks of memory give rise to the nostalgia of foresight, in the cyclical and implacable certainty of their nostalgia. Silence and Vertigo loom in these constructions, as in the forewarning title of a previous work by the artist.

In some projects carried out between 2000 and 2001, the exploration of the interior/exterior dichotomy is deepened, as well as the use of lighting as a structuring element of the place. This is the case of Semina (2000), in which cement beams are installed on the ground, literally covered by uneven-sized parallel lines of fluorescent strip lights that are roughly painted with white acrylic. In turn, in True Gardens #1 (2000), the natural light allows the convergence of transparency and reflection on the horizontal plane, in an outer patio, with the ground taking on the dimension of a screen for the surrounding sky and garden; while in True Gardens #2 (2001), it is once again electric light that structures the spatial reality of this interior garden, with the space from the ground to the ceiling being illuminated through the composition defined by several MDF panels, the perimeter of which is bordered by rows of fluorescent lights.

In his projects for the 50th Venice Biennial, in the Giardini and the Giudecca, Pedro Cabrita Reis extends and intensifies some of the fundamental principles of his recent work, with special note for his original reconstruction of the concepts of the interiority and exteriority of a space. Invited both by the curator of the Biennial and by the Portuguese representation, he adds an ephemeral "artist's pavilion" to the Giardini, a place for his uniqueness, independent from the geopolitical map that charts them; at the same time, he simultaneously transforms another place, the space of some old industrial warehouses in the Giudecca, the Antichi Granai.

In the Giardini, a rectangular pavilion rises up, blind, mysterious, windowless, with only one door. Everything foreshadows darkness: the almost military architecture of the building, the absence of openings to the outside, the cubic volumes that stand out on each wall, its setting up in the site. Inside, the visitor is surprised by hundreds of fluorescent strip-lights, supported by a structure that draws out a strange grating, an oneiric reticle in the chaotic undoing of its original rigour and geometrical precision. A dull rumbling becomes perceptible and insistent throughout the whole space: the noise of enormous air conditioning convectors that lower the heat from the strip-lights down to an unexpected and human coolness. The revisiting of some modernist paradigms seems possible in this massive and industrial proliferation of strip-lights. One enters an inferno cool and blind from so much light, as if that final "more light" of Goethe's found a cruel response here, as if all the utopias of an industrial society were shown to be obsolete beneath that shadowless, all-dissolving light. The construction seems to assimilate everything and everyone, under an implacable principle of inclusion. Pedro Cabrita Reis's sculpture here irredeemably moves away from the minimal projection of form on space. Light, sound, space and spectator are fused within this coincidence of sensations, in which the reinvention of the space results from its fluidity, the irreducible antithesis of the rigidity of its architecture. In the Antichi Granai, in the Giudecca, it is, contrarily, semi-darkness that reigns. The spectator discovers, above his head, a house supported by a beam structure that he may glimpse from down upwards. The plane of the projection of the architectural plan is thus subverted by the spectator's being shifted, literally transferred into the bases of the construction that rises up above him. In a city built on stakes in the lagoon, now a new building rises up, also resting on a support structure. Inside and above, a labyrinth of varying shapes arouses the curiosity of the visitor, who is always in a cordoned-off area outside and beneath the structure taking shape above his head. The whole trajectory becomes a challenge to the spectator's limits of visibility and perceptibility. Monumental, at times; intimate at others. Projected onto a vertical axis, the spectator is placed at the base of the recognition of what the artist considers to be a primordial human action: the art of construction. Here he can seek his roots, certainties and ambiguities, through this exemplary work of the way Pedro Cabrita Reis reconciles individual subjective awareness and daily life, thus establishing a reconstruction of individual and collective memory, creating an expansion of meaning and proposing a reconstruction of the world.

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