

Pedro Cabrita Reis

In conversation with Doris von Drathen

In preparation for the interview in Lisbon we first go down to the harbour. In Pedro Cabrita Reis' opinion I will not be able to properly understand his work if I have not first been on the pier and felt the 'saudade', that inexplicable emotional melange of wanderlust and homesickness that can beset you as your gaze sweeps the broad vista of the Tagus river. He also insists on showing me the tramlines running down in a wide arc from the old bridge where, in the curve opposite the little church, Pedro Cabrita Reis has his studio. As we are talking he constantly switches between French, English, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese; language spills out from his flood of words, yet all around him is a great bank of silence. He thinks in constructed emotions, builds edifices from passionate intuition – but only because this brings him closer to reality.

Doris von Drathen: You built those watchtowers out of steel – it is easy to imagine them manned by state officials with glassy eyes monitoring everything that happens within their scope. Olhar, olhar, sempre (2000) – 'Watching, always watching' – is the title of this work. Is there a danger of going blind when one is forced to look at it? Can one maintain an open gaze only once one is free?

Pedro Cabrita Reis: Being blind can signify an extremely rich capacity to see. This particular work is about desensitization. It is not the eye that goes blind, but the living capacity to see, a certain generosity and open-heartedness that are lacking. The eye continues to look, but it sees nothing. Presence of mind expires and the awareness of perceiving reality closes in on itself.

DVD: Why do you refer to generosity in this context?

PCR: Because perception, or really seeing, in fact means welcoming something that is alien. Only someone who is open-minded and capable of perceiving actually manages to see anything. This is about a form of being that manages to forget its 'being-there'. 'Ser sem estar', as we would say in Portuguese, in other words a form of being that is not rooted in a 'there-ness' and capable of forgetting the place where one momentarily happens to be. Being-there, 'estar' (a specific, time-and place-related sense of being) means recognizing the territory where one is. Being, or 'ser' (a more general existential

state of being), means becoming aware of oneself, in oneself and with oneself, means being at peace with oneself. These are two quite different existential states. I believe that it is only in this fundamental state of being ('ser') that one properly opens up; only then does one become accessible for the new that one's gaze apprehends. It is only here that one experiences not just the ability, but also the desire, to register and absorb, as if one had become a kind of sanctuary for the alien 'other' that I am now able to perceive.

DVD: Does one first have to forget in order to see something new?

PCR: Forgetting is in fact an aptitude. Every person has within him his own territory composed of experiences, knowledge, dreams, desires, of how he would like to see himself, a kind of intimate and extremely personal geography. This is what lends form to a possible world. But if such an approach to constructing the world is to evolve without inhibiting constraint, one has to be prepared to relinquish one's own security and simply make room for the wish to be open to something new. In order to gain a new view of the world you actually have to become 'blind'; you need to abandon your intellectually ascertained knowledge and learn the precision of a different register. After all, this is not a precision you can learn. It can only be intimated because it evolves out of intuition.

DVD: Might this perhaps correspond to that very brief and highly elusive moment of unity between oneself and the universe, a moment of absolute presence of mind?

PCR: I would prefer to call it 'clarté'. In fact I have even called some of my works inner clarity. It is all about a certain blindness towards the exterior world. In any attempt to seek insight it is necessary – if you have the courage – to sustain the chaos, the crossed lines, the intimation, the ignorance and the unintelligible which represents the very source of your existence, as long as you are able to disregard the measuredness and the geometry of the outside world and instead pursue smells, associations, fragmented ideas and unorganized flashes of inspiration. This will allow you to step beyond all that is familiar and to achieve new insights. This can bring forth entirely fresh perspectives and correspondences. Our conventional understanding is to a large extent determined by ideology. But our cognition attempts to penetrate those areas of our existence that prefigure intellectually acquired knowledge and assumed cultural norms.

DVD: So rather than depicting reality in relation to reality, you are...

PCR: ... creating a reality in its own right, instead of reproducing it mimetically. I do construct, establish a system of referential coordinates for a reality. For me, an artwork

is a produced reality that focuses the experience of reality as insight. Whoever is contemplating a work of art will sense a new wish to open himself up to reality. And once you have embraced the alien reality of a work of art, you can correspondingly also embrace reality as something alien, which for the first time allows you to perceive it. A work of art offers orientation for experiencing reality as truly new terrain.

DVD : In your work one is confronted with a strange phenomenon. You appear to create but are in fact destroying, while conversely, you seem to construct by means of deconstruction.

PCR: I see it rather as working with ruins. I work with what is left over, with what others have simply abandoned and discarded. As an artist I am at the rear of a caravan collecting the remnants deposited by all those who have gone before me. It is with these remains that I construct an image, something akin to a shadow, an ephemeral image, but one of the highest circumspection.

DVD: Is this comparable to the situation experienced by a castaway confronted with the crucial moment of having to reassemble the world from fragments of former and future reality?

PCR: I still prefer the image of the caravan. My world consists of the undramatic debris deposited by a caravan following its star. Someone in the desert at night who moves away from the caravan and loses his way is neither a hero nor a victim. He simply isolates himself, leaves the caravan and his footsteps trace their own path soon to be erased by the wind.

DVD: Does this person who breaks away from the beaten path of the others also possess his own knowledge of the stars, is he following his own star or taking his own route?

PCR: Certainly, otherwise he would not be able to collect things as he goes. He has the capacity not only to put astronomical orientation to a different use, not only to see, but he can also record and establish his own geography. He knows what he has to do.

DVD: In other words someone who understands the signs?

PCR: Of course, for he has not severed the link with history, but does all he can to continue history. He has not proclaimed the death of art but sits by his fire in front of his tent, having disregarded nothing. As someone who traverses the desert, he knows

exactly when the right moment has come for him to move on, taking with him everything he possesses. He is able to cross the desert because his baggage contains Velázquez, Dante, Shakespeare and he manages to continue without any water because poetry will enable him to survive. He will find water by applying his intelligence. What he needs is a purpose.

DVD: So for such a desert traveller the covenant between word and object remains unbroken?

PCR: People like this have covenants of their own or none at all.

DVD: Would such a desert traveller end up in the madhouse?

PCR: No, because he is blessed with a privilege and a mission that remind him that he has no right to go mad. No, he would certainly not go insane simply because he lacks the potential to do so. He lacks the kind of self-pity which would allow him to abscond from reality and seek cover behind 'folie'. Living his life on such a slender tightrope, the reckless balancing act he undertakes calls for such a high degree of alertness that he can hardly afford to go crazy. Madness represents a kind of optimistic garden, a form of evasion.

DVD: Do you regard madness as a luxury?

PCR: Yes, it is a luxury, like suicide is too. We simply cannot afford it.

DVD: You previously referred to a purpose. Does this purpose consist of examining reality?

PCR: We artists create something that is not altogether necessary. And yet we all imagine our lives in terms of this template of unnecessary things. As artists people expect certain things from us, expect us to think the world in a different way, expect us to be guardians, as well as the ones who can show everyone how to reinvent themselves or how one might evade death. We may not be magicians, but people certainly do expect us to deploy and transform the space or distance between now and death like a playing card. We are indeed strange architects – after all, we construct not only the future but also the past. We are Janus-faced, seeing and understanding ourselves both through the past and through our visions of the future. Maybe we are less betrayers of our own

visions than, to a certain extent, fallen angels. We once knew something different but somehow that was just not enough, so we had to leave.

DVD : Is this what you had in mind when you built your sculpture Atlas Coelestis (1994), the wooden stairs with steps made of glass sheets?

PCR: Indeed. In order to keep a lookout from up there – quite what of, I really don't know... Whatever, they are observation posts. And what can be seen from up there? People perhaps, or human failure, black holes or just simply silence, stars glowing in the heavens and dimming 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.

DVD: Is seeing a purpose in itself?

PCR: Whatever pain meets your eyes, however horrific or devastating the sight, you must never stop looking, you should never look away. Blinkers are out of the question. We must not exclude pain, drama, misery or terror from our lives, but have to face up to these images and take them into account. We need open minds and open hearts to admit all the horror, abomination and revulsion into our gaze, also to find 'hospitality' for everything we cannot bear. Watching, always watching – that is what is meant by evading death, by not being killed alive.

DVD: Is this why you stuck tape over the broken window-like sections of your sculpture Estrada das Lágrimas (Road of tears), (1997)? Is this an appeal, as it were, to dry one's tears, because tears blur one's vision?

PCR: It's worse than that. The tape I use in the sculpture is the most ordinary, ugly adhesive tape you can get, the stuff you package parcels with. I do not use it as a means of healing or concealing something, but because the tape is an irritant, because it is loud like a scream. It is the same tape that is stuck over people's eyes and mouths before they are tortured. This kind of tape does not last long for architectural purposes. 'Estrada das Lágrimas' is the name of a road in the suburbs, in a 'favela' of São Paulo where such tape is common currency for repairing cardboard shacks and cracked windows or for holding together the rickety doors of wooden sheds. I have made frequent visits to this area. What I saw in this manner of taping things together or fixing things with strips of old cable somehow corresponded to a show of defiance in a chaotic, perilous world, a gesture that proclaims: I want to live, however ugly my hut might be, I will survive, I will leave at dawn and find a way of struggling on.

DVD : Does this strike you as an 'optimistic' gesture?

PCR: It does, but not in the sense of humanist, contemplative hope, but rather in terms of militant hope, of a revolt. The issue here is pure survival. There is no room for romanticism. What counts is a radical attitude, the certain knowledge that you can no longer afford to show consideration towards other people, but simply make sure you save your own skin. This is a reflection upon every person's final ounce of energy, upon the compulsion to save one's own skin. Compared to this, human rights are nothing more than an abstract bourgeois concept. After the political experience of the 1974 revolution – although I was only 17 at the time it made a deep impression on me – I believe sometimes one first has to go through darkness in order to reach light. And that applies to everyday life as well. One needs to liberate oneself again and again, to make new choices again and again and to discard everything again and again – in the tragic sense of the individual. Be prepared each and every day to relinquish all you have and to simply take heed of your own needs.

DVD: Does this explain why the Room for a poet (2000) has no roof, why it consists solely of one wall, one door and one window? This outdoor sculpture is installed in the middle of a field with a tree as its immediate neighbour.

PCR: The poet's house is sheltered by the tree. But this protection might actually be very suspect. The wall is not yet fully built and the cemented bricks have been left untreated. It is hard to tell what is more important, the shadow of the tree or the shelter offered by the wall. The house might protect us, while nature could afford us shadow. Here it is difficult to know which is more important. Shadow offers comfort, while protection presupposes fear. Which is preferable?

DVD: You just mentioned creating light. How does this relate to the light in your work Cathedral #2 (1999)? Is the light that shines from the low walls or illuminates the floor from above similar to the sense of triumph felt at the end of an arduous journey?

PCR: Do you seriously believe that a cathedral has anything to do with light? In my view, the cathedral amounts to an impossibility, it acts as a sign for the impossibility of elevating a human being. We have long since assumed the place of God. This is why we have so many problems. In a strange manner our approach to the idea of God is linked to fear, hope and a certain sensation of vertigo in the face of death. By building a cathedral the artist is attempting to steer our gaze upwards. But every attempt to draw

our gaze upwards is a dangerous undertaking since it is always driven by a desire for power, be it theological or political – there is little difference. The upward gaze presupposes a viewer who is down below, someone who is afraid and needs the idea of ‘aloft up there’ – maybe God – in order to overcome his fear, his sense of being ‘down here’, his feeling of impotence. In other words, in its grandiosely uplifting construction a cathedral conceals a gesture of power that promises a God on high who will protect us from life’s perils and from death. In other words, the cathedral plays on the childish wish to delegate responsibility to a higher power. However, people who acquiesce to such a promise, who point their eyes up towards the sources of light shining high above, become hostages to their own fear. Caught within such a construct, they will never encounter God because they have departed from the only place where God might be – which is precisely down here, within us ourselves. I think the cathedral represents the same lie as the Tower of Babel does – the most beautiful lie in the Bible. It embodies our yearning to establish a unity between individuals, by renouncing language, creating an unmediated bond between individual people and through the promise of the presence of God to whom the tower brings us closer. But the Tower of Babel should be sought elsewhere, namely from a perspective located at sea level. The gaze that scans the ocean on the horizon holds a universal dimension – this, in fact, is the true Tower of Babel. Our power lies in the gaze which is capable of setting its sights on the infinite; out in the desert and at sea we are able to immerse ourselves in some idea of infinity, we are able to reconstruct our world anew. Church theology requires that we seek God outside ourselves. Yet we possess the power to see beyond ourselves and inside ourselves, this is our privilege. We are at all times constantly able to reconstitute our idea of God – for this we have no need of the stars, for it is entirely within our power to redefine ourselves and the landscape of the world. This is why my cathedral opens up the viewer’s gaze on a horizontal plane. The walls in my cathedral are low and the individual is large.

DVD: Standing inside your cathedral one above all realizes the sheer size of one’s own shadow...

PCR: Our shadows are all we have to grasp the radius of our reality and to measure ourselves within it. Human perception is rooted in the duplication of ourselves as a horizontal extension, in two-dimensionality, in the 90 degrees angle between our body and its projected shadow. This shadow that accompanies you whichever way you turn, a phantom you can never get rid of, is your personal enigma. You are unable to grasp your existence without questioning your shadow. Whatever you look at, your shadow will always peer back at you out of the object; inexorably, you will always be reminded that you are the one who is looking, who is perceiving, that you are the one who is called

upon to react. The shadow reminds you that you are the measure of all things, that within you you bear the nagging question of life – your shadow is your constant question.

DVD: Maybe it is similar to the word 'Adam', which Cabbalist numerology equates with the number 45, which in Hebrew is 'ma' and in turn means something like 'how, what and why'. Hence the question is directly inscribed in the Hebrew word for 'man'. So, going back to your cathedral, does this work actually have less to do with light than with the horizontal dimension?

PCR: For me it was an exercise to free myself from this urge to achieve height and elevation. I wanted to see my loftiest dignity precisely in my most physical, pitiful reality. In other words: me, myself and nothing besides, even if I continued to be dogged by my metaphysical phantom.

DVD: What interests me about this is, on the one hand, the immense size of the ego and on the other, this kind of damnation. Is there no way out anywhere? In Buddhism you can let the self merge into the flow of the universe, Christianity promises you redemption, Judaism offers you divine orientation in the world, in Islam you can comfort your spirit with mystical, sacred chants...

PCR: But how exactly is one supposed to propose a form of human life based on that? Are we not prisoners of this very dichotomy between a feeling of absolute power, the sense that everything belongs to us, that anything can be achieved – it's entirely up to you, vanquished angel – and, by contrast, our awareness of transience, of the constant dissolution of everything we do and everything we are.

DVD: Vanquished angel or fallen angel?

PCR: Vanquished angel.

DVD: Vanquished by blindness? In your work one frequently encounters painted glass surfaces. Whether painted on the back or the front, occasionally including transparent spaces, these glass panes entrap the viewer in a constant guessing game – especially when they are painted black, they seem almost to have been sealed; the viewer encounters his own image on one side, while discovering brushstrokes on the reverse.

PCR: What primarily interests me are the various states of glass. Some 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 heated until it turns fluid, from which glass is filtered and becomes solid. I impede its transparency, thereby creating, as it were, a mirror fountain. At the same time, in a quite simple, rudimentary way I am also thematizing several elements related to painting such as colour, light, transparency, construction and density. This is not a form of painting which attempts to depict or represent, but one which establishes an abstract, sensual system, a referential system rooted not in observation of the outside world, but generated from within the viewer – who himself is a part of what he is doing. This is a system which likewise integrates the viewer into the work instead of leaving him standing outside the picture. By creating an image of myself I am standing outside myself, and when I confront the surface of a representation of the world I am also outside what has been seen. Rather than concerning myself with the mask, I move beneath the skin. My 'pictures' always address both, the reflective surface here, the mirror there. What do we perceive? When can we see without seeing ourselves? Do we see something because we recognize it in the mirror of cultural conventions? Do we see something with immediacy, as new and unfamiliar as it occurs? Maybe we also have to look beyond the object in order to properly see it.

DVD: You also use glass in an entirely different way: in your work *Semina (Sowing)*, (2000) you have assembled over the floor an area consisting of a series of 11-metre long ridged concrete elements. Rows of painted neon tubes of the same length laid between the ridges produce tracks of light; the overall effect is of a ploughed field made up of glowing furrows. The title of the piece suggests the vision that one could somehow sow light...

PCR: No, no, it is far simpler than that. It is about opening up the earth in order to see light. If you stand on the seashore looking at sand that has just been dried by the sun and you simply rake lines in the sand with your fingers, water will seep up. The sun then sparkles in the water-filled furrows and you can see the sky's reflection. The light is within the earth, a fact proven by this gesture – just as Michelangelo claimed that the figure is already present within the stone. All I am doing is opening the surface to discover something that lies beneath it.

DVD: It seems to me that our whole conversation is circling around this question of how to find the 'light' deep inside oneself.

PCR: It is an age-old story. You have to close your eyes in order to see. I am drawn to anything that involves everyday human understanding. There is truth in the old proverb that he who seeks shall find. Which is not to say that you find what you seek, in fact you

might encounter something entirely different – but you do have to go out and search. You have to travel away in order to understand your territory. If you do not board a ship and leave your own harbour you will never get to see your harbour.

DVD: Can then, again and again, seeing be equated with an experience of freedom? You, after all, belong to the generation that was familiar with restricted freedom...

PCR: I was thirteen during the '68 period, which in Portugal was a time of strict repression. Six years later the revolution took place. Everything we did amounted to political work – whether I was employed by the city as a gardener, whether my fellow students and I published the magazine 'Arte e opinião' at the academy, or whether I worked for the party in my city district or made my first sculptures.

DVD: What kinds of officials do you imagine stationed in your watchtowers?

PCR: It is not a question of personified or narrative criticism. I am addressing the issue of desiccated vision, of passive staring, of filling in forms and pursuing any pointless and inhumane activity. It is all about the narrow-mindedness of any activity, about the exclusion of action and responsibility – quite the opposite of what observation really means. Here, the observing warders are incarcerated, maintaining the system of the oppressors and keeping watch over any divergence from a dictatorial regime of laws. My work relates to the perversion of refusing to become involved in, refusing even to be a witness to the broad diversity within reality and of shutting oneself off from it. However, perceptive vigilance means precisely tearing up the rules and regulations and breaking out of the prison. This work addresses the terror of normality, when fear and intimidation become all too familiar.

DVD: Does mounting the steps of *Altas Coelestis* or piercing the earth in search of light in *Semina* amount to the same endeavour?

PCR: Perhaps – whether I climb upwards or scratch the ground, I sometimes believe I can hear the echo of the Tower of Babel. From somewhere afar I can hear myself being called as if by an echo carried by the wind and there is something that moves me. This is the only way I can work, and in a flash I know what I have to do next. I have never doubted in my purpose – maybe here or there when it comes to certain formal issues – but never in what I actually have to do. I realize such an attitude is hardly 'en vogue', but I don't give a damn about that!

DVD: You have created several works in which doors play a crucial role, in some cases even whole series of doors, as in the pieces Dans les villes #1 or North Wing (both 1998). Which side of the door are you standing on?

PCR: 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 could be a strange house called 'North Wing' where the insane are kept. In other words, a place inhabited by those even shut out from the group which has already been ostracized from society. These doors lead out towards this building.

DVD: In order to enter it or to leave it?

PCR: Doors are a peculiar phenomenon. They are a division and an opening in one. There is a Chinese proverb that describes the gap separating good from evil as being no thicker than the wing of a butterfly. Doors are somewhat similar. A door always poses a question. Because of their transparency windows are quite different. Where windows are concerned there is never any doubt about which side you are standing on. The 'here' and 'beyond' of a door always depends on your movement.

DVD: That reminds me of what Fernando Pessoa wrote about the other shore. Can you actually ever get there? For once you've set foot on the other side where then is the opposite shore?

PCR: Exactly. According to a Portuguese saying, every 'saudade' is a quay wall. In other words wanderlust, this yearning for distant places that knows no remedy. For while the quay wall is made of solid stone, the first landing place joined to the mainland, it is equally an intangible no man's land, an immaterial place of constant farewell.

Doris von Drathen is an art historian and art critic who lives and works in Paris.

- *Pedro Cabrita Reis: blind sein, kann ein sehr erices sehen bedeuten.*

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