

PEDRO CABRITA REIS

MARK GISBOURNE

Mark Gisbourne meets the sculptor whose current exhibition at BALTIC prefigures his showing in the Portuguese Pavilion at the 50th Venice Biennale Mark Gisbourne. Your work has always been involved with spaces: found space, architectonic space, and sites of installation.

How are you addressing this issue at Baltic?

Pedro Cabrita Reis

At BALTIC, like anywhere else, the question was to find a tension between what I have in mind and what I had to confront. The particular space of BALTIC has a peculiar quality that requires an antagonism instead of a relationship. I don't know quite how to characterize this in English: it was supposed to be a positive or friendly relationship, but I would rather call it a tense dialogue. The space has a very strong presence in its internal architecture, which contrasts with the outside envelope of the building. From the outside you see the nineteenth-century legacy of an industrial building (the Baltic Mill) with its monolithic and functional block architecture, and on the inside a different approach in the treatment of the spatial nuances and details of the settings of the space itself. Therefore the work in this particular situation required a sort of indefinite autonomy, something that I could develop as a sort of territory with a physical, intellectual and sensitive philosophical presence. I intended to erase any possible or structural referent to the space. It must not be considered as a site-specific installation. It was designed in relation to the co-ordinates of the space, which required an outside look, a building up of tension between myself as an author and the given existing space as a situ.

M.G.

I am particularly interested in your use of materials and how you re-position them in the physical work, taking materials and, as it were, relocating them in other spaces. What does that mean for you?

P.C.R.

I am interested in using long-lasting materials regarding what may be considered a primordial human action – constructing. In that sense I am more touched (if that word can be applied today) by materials that carry with them a memory, even an auto-focused territory between memory and nostalgia: materials that allude to the memory of constructing with your own hands. I want to relate to a moment whence the first person comes (from who knows where) to establish a bridge and meaning, a functional and conceptual bridge between individual experience, and a direct relationship with the everyday life, the self-awareness of such a person who would be able to deal with this material. I would like to establish a territory where every single member of the public felt like it would be possible to refine, draw, or re-organise again the materials in order to make another thing. I want to make a taut surface between what one experiences and what one carries as a memory of everyday life. For that reason I use common materials like brick, stones, water, electricity or whatever.

M.G.

Your work in recent years has seemed to gravitate towards issues of architecture and the social. Do you see yourself as a socially committed artist on the interface between architecture and the urban?

P.C.R.

No, not at all! I see myself as a transporter of memory, an artist who produces, a semi-explicit producer of ambiguity and double meaning. I am not interested in sociological or political issues, because I feel they impoverish the relationship between the work of art and the audience itself. I would rather prefer a field, a no-man's land of incognition. I want to establish a chaotic point of departure, to re-establish perception with the world, and in that sense I would not consider myself an analyst. I am much more interested in the perception of decay as the opening up of possibilities, instead of the recognition of the network of failures, which a sociologically involved artist is engaged with.

M.G.

Perhaps, you could tell me why memory – not as remembering but as a trace – is so central to your art?

P.C.R.

Memory can in a certain sense be considered as a category or field in relation to religion, just as architecture would be a category of action in relation to the world. I am much more interested philosophically with whatever has to do with the assumption of humanity over the nature of the world, as against the assumption of a subjective view for free creation. In that sense, in as far as I can be considered a sociological artist, I am more interested in designing a square on the sand of a beach, and deciding this is my image of the world, instead of trying to establish a link or an integrated field of perception with nature itself. I tend to consider that a danger, a fear, and an irrelevance, and the lack of knowledge regarding the human condition. It is much more the field of action, rather than the statement or the declaration of principles, seen as methods of reasoning on a possible future. What is important about memory for me is that memory is the only theoretical or material aspect of mankind that can establish a possible notion of itself.

M.G.

Sorry, but as you describe it here, memory has much more the issues of the trace, memory as a trace of what once was, or a re-invocation of what once was, rather than as a narrative to be retold.

P.C.R.

I would dare to propose neither one nor the other, because I am not focused on things that existed before. Memory cannot just be the product of a post-nostalgia effect, nor can it be faced as a theoretical territory to establish human nature. I would rather say that memory functions with the power and the force, the glory and joy, and a courage of picking up possible leftovers of self-awareness. You will never be able to have a complete vocabulary or dictionary of yourself, you just have little fragments, pieces of nothing that come to you as subjective moments of information about your own life. Everything is a reflection of how you project yourself. Memory works as first-aid or life insurance, and is not about things you have lost, but things you still have.

M.G.

In what sense then do you see yourself as a poet, participating in the re-vivifying of the materials that you find?

P.C.R.

I would put it the other way round. I am not re-vivifying materials; I want to revivify the quintessence of art itself, through the use of a forgotten level of materiality in life. I tend to consider the most important and efficient sociological

engagement lies in the changing conditions of life. These things are not based in the debris of sociology, linguistics or neo-politics. They have to do with a different level of perception of reality. They are to do with interiority.

M.G.

There are clearly issues of scale as well as place that you consider. You work on both large and small scales. How does scale affect your working practice?

P.C.R.

Scale has to be always human in the sense that human reality can be too big or too small. I do not see myself working with monumentality. I prefer my work to be seen as testimonies of grandeur or littleness or fear, of love, of self-awareness. We are composed of these: what really makes us is this tension of being outside or inside ourselves. We can be both simultaneously too big or too small. Anyway, what really matters is that these supra or faraway dimensions always refer to an ability – in my personal view one of the most important aspects of humanity – of projecting an *aperçu* of the world itself, or a tiny little focus on just one thing.

M.G.

You mean a macrocosm or microcosm?

P.C.R.

Or, like having your eyes open or closed, evaluating and emphasizing the ability of being blind or not, like the ability of perceiving everything by not looking at it because you know already.

M.G.

I am also interested in how you incorporate issues of time in your work. It seems to me that you are concerned with duration rather than a fixed sense of historical time.

P.C.R.

The time that an artist can build for himself is that time which can be considered in the future as it gives coherence to the past. Though many do not share this point of view, we artists are producers of meaning. We are supposed – and here we might talk about social relevance and function – to build the evidence of self-awareness. In fact, we get paid to put things together, we are given a life without responsibility – i.e. not having to get up at nine o'clock – in order to have the time to put things together to create meaning. We are supposed to produce a post-discourse on the existence of ourselves, making and researching, creating a record, being conclusive and coherent, and productive in a historical lifetime. So we do not explain, or certify, or stand for. We create this strangely objective link – though apparently not important – but altogether substantiated by what others consider later on as history.

M.G.

What I meant is that there is a certain quality in sculpture, and in artwork in general, that is time-based inasmuch as it vindicates the time of its production, but is also somehow outside time in the aesthetic processes of its assimilation. In other words, duration would be that sense of time, which is non-specific.

P.C.R.

This duration in which we are sitting here only exists in the mind of the viewer, and that is the only indulgence we can have as an explanation of the approach to a modern understanding of art. For art only exists within the frame of the artist's discourse, but the duration of which you speak is, I am using your words, a

microcosm of legitimization through the act of perception, and is something, which resides only on the side of the viewer. As regards the historical, sociological, and hermeneutically interiorized, the duration of perception can be no more than the perception of the self, at different levels, and exists only in the eyes of the viewer. In the eyes of the doer time is absent because there is no history. History is a privilege, which implies an accumulation of facts, a stratification and hierarchy of facts, a network of meanings, which starts from and comes back to the viewer at the centre of his/her perceptions.

M.G.

There is rarely a sense of human presence in your work, and yet it seems extremely human: a sort of 'absence as presence' perhaps?

P.C.R.

Well, that leads to a very complicated question; it may be the only way I have found that leads to any sense of religiosity in art today. Given the fact that we have to face the situation and figure out for ourselves a possibility of redemption through the minor and often irrelevant actions of daily life, art included.

M.G.

So, you have an ontological sense of life?

P.C.R.

Absolutely! I do believe we have to face and confront ourselves with the notion of meaning. This meaning obviously does not have to do with the artwork, it has to do with the meaning of the human condition. Though it's a cliché as we know, it's seriously something that we have to figure out. The fact that we are finally geared towards a deep enquiry into the foundations of intellectual, emotional, philosophical and physical life, leads us to the fact that we are somehow left alone. However, this does not imply that we, even if left alone, should drop the idea of meaning. Being left alone does not imply that we do not have a territory of theoretical implications that together builds up a notion of belonging, even if it belongs to territory where we doubt ourselves.

M.G.

Can we locate this in relation to your work? I am thinking particularly of the Blind City series (1997).

P.C.R.

Well, first of all, Blind City does not imply a narrative approach. Blind City is a contradiction in form, almost a paradox. How can a city be blind, and how can the word 'blind' be used as an adjective. The city in itself is the quintessence of human presence. If we consider a very basic form of the perception of reality, humankind does not belong in nature. Though we tend to consider the city as chaotic, it is still the only lively approach to having a notion of humanity at its best; the blindness comes as a double-edged concept. Why is it double? Because blindness not only implies the inability to see, it also implies the marvelous ability to look inside – in my little dictionary of terms – into the inner eye, to have an inner point of reference. If you were able to close your eyes completely, it's like looking for the inner source, that which produces what you see outside with your eyes. Whatever you see outside of yourself, and the way you see it, is eventually achievable by a sort of blindness.

- *Pedro Cabritas Reis*.

Interview conducted by Mark Gisbourne. In: **Contemporary**. London. (December 2002); p. 66-71.

(english)