

PEDRO CABRITA REIS

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In the rooms of the gallery *objectif_exhibitions* in Antwerp, the Portuguese artist Pedro Cabrita Reis has installed two remarkable works. *Silent Around the Room*, in the rear, is composed of three freestanding parts of a steel rib structure: one at the entrance, one against the wall on the right, and the third in the far left corner. Fluorescent tubes, smeared with white paint, are attached to the horizontal ribs and spread a yellowish light throughout the room. Black cables run nonchalantly from the lamps to an adapter in the middle of the room. The structure is reminiscent of the impressive work *Longer Journeys* that Reis installed in a warehouse on the Giudecca at the last Venice Biennale, which consisted of an irregular steel framework, two storeys high, covered with wooden panels and fluorescent tubes. Actually, his original idea was for his work in Antwerp to be a smaller variation on this larger one. He had designed a steel pergola structure incorporating one glass door and one recycled door, but on arrival at the gallery, he decided to take the construction apart and divide its elements over the two rooms of *objectif_exhibitions*. In the front room, the recycled door, together with a standard store-bought door, makes up the work *Altar Piece*. The three panels hang in makeshift doorframes, at different heights, from the two walls in the corner on the landing over the entrance hall. By their placement and use of materials, both works have an unmistakably architectural appeal. They confirm Reis's reputation for being an author of 'architectural installations'.

In Reis's oeuvre, architecture functions both as a metaphor and as a medium. In an interview with Adrian Searle that was printed in a recently published monograph, Reis states that only the architectural practice is still capable of making the world 'comprehensible'. His entire oeuvre is an 'exercise' on architecture, conceived as a 'mental discipline'. In addition, Reis is also continuously 'building' all sorts of constructions, with a preference for cheap and recycled materials such as wood, bricks, mortar, plaster, glass, tape, cables, bitumen, and fluorescent lighting. But Reis does not create architecture. His works merely evoke the practice and the situation of building: they represent 'the making of' architecture, or 'the architectural activity'. Not infrequently, this leads to a cultivation of the 'building site' and a fetishizing of the state of being 'under construction'. Reis's works are often just a bit too neatly finished, too tidy in their roughness. That painstaking aesthetics of the unfinished also largely determines the reception of the work, that 'speaks to the imagination' and is interpreted as a source of melancholy, memories, subjectivity, collective history, and, of course, subversion and ambiguity. The poetic gloss of the materials usually absorbs one's attention completely, so that the questions that arise all refer to what the work evokes, and never what it is about. What does it mean to dream that somebody's house is a line (*I Dreamt Your House Was a Line*, 2003), to make 'a house in the wall' (*Una Casa In Il Muro*, 1999), or to build 'blind cities' (*Blind Cities*, 1999)? This immediately brings us to the question of where Reis stands with respect to the many other contemporary artists whose work revolves around the city, urbanity, the public space, and especially, architecture. For with his statement about architecture as a model for comprehending the world, Reis points to a major paradigm shift. Whereas in the sixties, architecture was mainly viewed as a discipline and practice that represents and perpetuates 'the system' – the institutions and the social order – today, on the contrary, it seems to offer a whole range of perspectives. It is no longer something that artists want to fight, pierce, or bring down. Instead, it is appropriated wholesale. In these times of

globalisation, architecture even seems to be the perfect medium for practices of resistance and opposition. By its intrinsic materiality, it resists the total rarefaction and alienation of life. The whole range of architectural objects that are presented today at art shows – interiors, shelters, living units, survival modules, and even complete settlements – are meant to enable us to maintain a place of our own, to define a territory. At first sight, this also seems to be a leitmotiv for Reis. Whether it involves his configurations of plaster volumes of the late eighties, the furniture- and wall-like sculptures of white-painted wood from the nineties, or the recent steel skeletons with assemblages of recycled scrap: each time, a surface is marked out, occupied, and 'built over'. Yet this architectural art is not about the same thing as, say, the polyester trailers of Joep van Lieshout, the living units of Andrea Zittel, the interiors of Jorge Pardo, or the dwellings of Marjeta Potrc. Reis never starts from a humanitarian or social 'project'. He belongs to the generation of artists who reacted, in the eighties, to the sterility and objectivism of the minimal and conceptual art of the two preceding decades. This was when the issues of authorship of the formal vocabulary and of personal idiom came back to the fore, and these issues are still central in Reis's work. For him, the occupation of a site and its transformation into a territory is a personal gesture, and especially, an aesthetic one, connected with the traditions of both sculpture and painting. Reis allows the meaning of 'territory' to shift continuously back and forth between the surface of a painting and the space of a sculpture. His early works, such as the suspended staircase that makes up Antwerp Stairs (1987), or the platforms of A Casa do Silêncio Branco (1990), look a lot like drawings that have been extracted from their two-dimensional plane. His large-scale floor sculptures (True Gardens, 2001; The Ground, 2002) and edifices (The Project, 2002; Longer Journeys, 2003), on the other hand, seem to 'spatialise' the pictorial technique of the collage into its sculptural variant, the assemblage. All that time, in fact, Reis continued making ensembles of 'paintings', in the form of aluminium frames (Black Monochrome / Triptych Landscape, 2002) or space-filling shelves with painted sheets of glass (Cabinet d'Amateur, 2001). One may wonder therefore whether Reis's main theme is indeed architecture at all. Is his work not more about the meaning of such a thing as an artistic territory, in both the pictorial and the sculptural sense? In the double installation of objectif_exhibitions, the architecture was used as a vehicle, precisely to articulate that question. The space of the work no longer stands on its own here. The works have no territory of their own 'in' the space, but use the entire space as their support. Reis probably realized that there was insufficient play between the steel pergola and the exhibition space for the work to function as an autonomous sculpture. By dismantling the structure and mounting the ribs on the corners and edges of the gallery space, Reis dissolves the 'territory' of his work. The place of the work is no longer situated 'in' the work, but somewhere in between its parts. The boundaries lie 'about' the room. The result is a sculptural intervention that also betrays Reis's pictorial preoccupations. Silent Around the Room seems to combine the rib structures of Sol LeWitt with Dan Flavin's 'pictorial' compositions of fluorescent tubes on the 'canvas' of the gallery space. At the same time, everything is suffused with Reis's will to form: the rib structure does not answer to a strict geometric logic and the neon tubes have lost their coolness by the nonchalant layer of white paint.

In Altar Piece, Reis created a triptych that refers to the works of Jan Van Eyck in the nearby Royal Museum of Fine Arts. But the panels that make up this triptych do not represent anything. They are pure material, and they fan out into space as sculptural elements. They do not even hang in the same wall plane, but are distributed over two walls that meet at an angle. This 'architectural exercise' transcends the romantic and poetic association with a building site. The works are more works of art than architectural constructions; and precisely in that capacity, they show that the potential and the meaning of architecture for art can go

further than the reference to building or buildings alone.

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