

PEDRO CABRITA REIS AND THE IMPROBABILITY OF UNNEGOTIATED SPACE

GERRIT VERMEIREN

In the winter of 2003-2004 Pedro Cabrita Reis displayed two works in *objectif_exhibitions*. The clear room at the front of the building was the location for *Altar Piece* (2003), made up of three recovered doors attached to the wall. In the more secluded room at the back, Cabrita Reis created *Silent Around the Room* (2003), an apparently modular and fragmentary construction, consisting of aluminum elements, strip lights and the black wiring for the lamps. The rather greenish light of the fluorescent tubes was rendered whiter and more diffuse by applying – each time in one decisive brush stroke – a layer of latex on the lamps. Both works have simplicity and an economic use of means in common, but contrary to *Altar Piece*, *Silent Around the Room* seems to belong to the more elliptical part of the oeuvre.

Altar Piece fits more comfortably in Cabrita Reis's typical poetic denseness of the place, a denseness triggered by the exact positioning of the object or the construction. *Altar Piece* hosts at least two important motives of the work of Cabrita Reis, the blind door and the inaccessible staircase. Because of the improper placement as shutters on the wall, the doors in *Altar Piece* are leading nowhere. Beside this, the work seems to refer to a staircase, because of the (from left to right) ascending line in the composition. The almost literal accumulation of inaccessibility is one of Cabrita Reis's methods to fill a place with immobility and silence. Particularly in this work, the muteness becomes even more manifest because Cabrita Reis, through the title of the piece and the formal reference to a triptych, takes his objectified vision on painting into consideration.

Cabrira Reis does not believe in a representational function of painting, or in something outside the strict immanence of the painting. It would be possible to describe this as an affinity with a form of idealistic late modernism, but it is more likely that Cabrita Reis goes one step beyond this and that his reference to a late modernist object hood is a way of setting the boundaries, creating the conditions for his poetry to emerge. In late modernist discourse, space and time were very often regarded as absolute. Space was defined up to its mathematical exactness, and just because of that kind of precision imaginable in its endless, eternal and transcendent qualities. The work flirts with that kind of eternity pretence, but (among other things) by his use of recovered, plain or poor materials, Cabrita Reis connects this with notions such as the everyday, the memory. Through the absence of true meaning in the pictorial presence and through what one might call the 'human scale' of the realizations of Cabrita Reis, the contemplative object (the altar piece) is taken up by real life.

The denial of a meta-existence is by no means a reduction; it's more a question of appreciation of the everyday, of what the artist himself defines as "one of the most complex forms of eternity"¹. It is the only form of eternity that, in its endless fragmentation, can be experienced with both feet on the ground; the only form of eternity that makes us realize that the only limit of our thinking is the limit of our memory; the only form of eternity that translates human futility in a more or less manageable loss. It is at this point that Cabrita Reis prefers the aesthetics of place to the rhetoric's of space. An aesthetic that is driven by the

¹ Adrian SEARLE, *A Conversation with Pedro Cabrita Reis*, in: Michael TARANTINO (ed.), *Pedro Cabrita Reis, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003*, p. 73.

memory of human presence and that generates a holistic 'here and now', in which a silent and fragile poetic moment comes into being.

In Cabrita Reis's specific aesthetic, the architectural references and the actual use of architectural elements usually function as the most important hold for the viewer, and it is perhaps in this aspect that the elliptical nature of *Silent Around the Room* is most visible. In *Silent Around the Room* Cabrita Reis does not use recuperated parts, neither other elements that establish an immediate connection to the everyday and the memory, or to the immanently necessary economy of the construction, in the sense of the favelas. Moreover, the work contains no hints towards a typology. In contrast to a lot of other works by Cabrita Reis, *Silent Around the Room* cannot be classified under a snug (architectural) category, such as the house, the aqueduct, the observatory, the window, the staircase, the balcony...

Silent Around the Room is largely stripped from the elements that lead to the more romantic interpretations of Cabrita Reis's work. It is possible that the architectural frame of reference remains standing in more abstract regions, such as the human scale of the piece and the reduction of spatial parameters to constructive vertical and horizontal elements, but the installation does not function as an architectural entity.

Cabrita Reis's art tends to show much more similarities with the strategies of drawing, than with those of architecture. It is no coincidence that his works are usually easier to define through lines, and not so much through volumes. Moreover, when defining the world or when looking for a position, it seems to be more logical and elementary to draw a line, than to place a volume. With this, Cabrita Reis is in fact falling back on an almost archaic function of drawing, drawing as study, as a medium that leads to knowledge about the world, both in the act of drawing and in the final result. Cabrita Reis's adaptation of the methodology of drawing is not a plain translation of drawing in a three-dimensional space. It is present in a more implicit way as a knowledge instrument, as the backbone of his visual intelligence concerning space. And that intelligence is manifest in *Silent Around the Room*.

Cabrita Reis succeeded effectively in balancing the space and in making the silence tangible. The true meaning of this intervention becomes clearer in the light of the understanding that *Silent Around the Room* is probably not even a site-specific realization. The almost uncanny exactness of the placement is weighed against the suspicion that this installation – for a large part because of the effects of light – creates entirely by itself its own spatial conditions. Within the emotional and poetic potential Pedro Cabrita Reis extracts Cabrita Reis's art tends to show much more similarities with the strategies of drawing, than with those of architecture. It is no coincidence that his works are usually easier to define through lines, and not so much through volumes. Moreover, when defining the world or when looking for a position, it seems to be more logical and elementary to draw a line, than to place a volume. With this, Cabrita Reis is in fact falling back on an almost archaic function of drawing, drawing as study, as a medium that leads to knowledge about the world, both in the act of drawing and in the final result. Cabrita Reis's adaptation of the methodology of drawing is not a plain translation of drawing in a three-dimensional space. It is present in a more implicit way as a knowledge instrument, as the backbone of his visual intelligence concerning space. And that intelligence is manifest in *Silent Around the Room*.

Cabrita Reis succeeded effectively in balancing the space and in making the

silence tangible. The true meaning of this intervention becomes clearer in the light of the understanding that Silent Around the Room is probably not even a site-specific realization. The almost uncanny exactness of the placement is weighed against the suspicion that this installation – for a large part because of the effects of light – creates entirely by itself its own spatial conditions. Within the emotional and poetic potential Pedro Cabrita Reis extracts from the space of objectif_exhibitions (a rather typical but small 'white cube' exhibition room), Silent Around the Room does not so much unfold in a dimensional space; the evidence of an almost paradoxical cerebral nature.

The parameters that establish a space as zone, place or territory are thinkable and manifest, but in their material state or in their spatial conditions they remain mostly implicit. Notions of 'here and not there', of territory and place, are at the foundations of a work like Silent Around the Room, and such notions are not built, they are negotiated. In this work Cabrita Reis appears to be virtuoso in the conciseness and wit of that negotiation. In the mystery and the melancholy of absence, in the tactile nature of memory and in the weight of silence Cabrita Reis negotiates on a level of an enormous matter-of-factness, the matter-f- factness of life itself, with life as a matter of negotiation. "I tend to go to restaurants and engage with the chef talking about what I'd like to eat."

© 2004 All rights reserved.

VERMEIREN, Gerrit

- Pedro Cabrita Reis and the improbability of unnegotiated space.

In: A.A.V.V. – **File notes: Camden Arts Centre: 2004.** London: Camden Arts Centre, 2004.