

## REPRESENTATIONS OF A COMMUNITY OF EXPERIENCE

Catarina Rosendo

What do the memories of those who visited the Galeria Quadrum over its twenty-three year life mean? How can the previous conditions that encompassed the concept of the "Galeria Quadrum" be worked? Should they be ignored, and then build something new on the operational neutralization of the past and its history, or contrastingly, should their context be used as material in the creation process of a work to be shown there? Alexandra do Carmo has chosen the latter; her project is elaborated precisely on the collection of memories associated with the place. However, perhaps the first question to ask is not *how*, but *why*, and one of the initial answers is this: when it took over the direction of Quadrum in 2009, Lisbon town council – the owner of the premises from the start – decided to revitalize it and also keep both its working programming and the name for which it became known. Neither, incidentally, were defined by the town council, but rather by Dulce d' Agro, the lesser-known artist who became one of the most important gallery owners in the country after she proposed in 1973 that the council use the restaurant (as it had originally been conceived) that served the Coruchéus complex to hold "modern art" exhibitions. The position of the Galeria Quadrum as one of the most significant exhibition spaces in the national scene, one that is still firmly enshrined in the memories of several generations of artists, critics, curators, and historians, seems thus to be almost inevitable both from its purposeful revitalization (in this sense, verging on patrimonial) conceived by the new council management, and from the appeal that the "subject" of Quadrum still exerts today over a new generation of artists and researchers.

This all comes from Alexandra do Carmo's interest in the ways a community of experience can be constructed between artists and the public, the latter being understood as an entity that intentionally seeks out art – as in the case of *The Steamshop (or the painter's studio)* or *A willow (or without Godot)*, both from 2006 and – to a lesser extent – in *Office/Commercial*, from 2009. The methods employed in the current project presented at Quadrum are common to several of her other works: a field inquiry that looks to examine a previously selected situation and that is

supported by audiovisual records (in this case only audio) of a documentary nature; an intensive and serial drawing practice based on the information from the recorded interviews that is collected and worked on; and the artist's (self-responsible) hyper-awareness as a kind of "dislocator" of the ways of seeing the situation that was the initial basis of the whole project.

*Tudo foi captado (mesmo os movimentos do cabrito)* [Everything was captured (even the movements of the goat)] happens in two distinct moments: a sound recording of statements collected by Alexandra do Carmo from the creators and spectators of the activities that took place at Quadrum under the direction of Dulce d'Agro, that can be listened to in the small hall preceding the Gallery's old deposit space, now transformed into a living room for the presentation; and a series of drawings made by the artist based on the visual elements and on the ideas in the statements, pinned in a straight line along the West wall of the main exhibition space. The effect of the space is one of emptiness: the drawings are arranged along the wall that least calls the attention of spectators as they enter the gallery, and the statements can only be heard through headphones installed in the backroom set aside for the purpose. The statements record the impressions of several people about works, performances or other events that took place at Quadrum, especially over the 1970s and 1980s. Different perceptive experiences stand out from what we are given to hear. For example, the visual quality of some of the descriptions: "[...] She finished by pressing rose thorns into her arm, delineating a line so to speak which went from her shoulder, or practically her shoulder, down to her wrist." Or the reactions of the public: "[...] suddenly the audience became really tense [...]"; "[...] it was all recorded, the way people looked, the questioning, the way they talked about what they were seeing [...]". Or the sensation of something new: "[...] It was an installation, and I didn't know anything about that then"; "[...] Finally seeing a big painting... It was one of the first times that I had seen my fellow Portuguese artists produce paintings of the size I had seen abroad". Or the awareness of the body as measure of comparison: "[...] created an abstract pattern in space, which was about an arm's length higher than the viewer's eye level, and the same again below and a generous arm span in width. So when you were in front of it you basically felt like you were part of it". Several of the statements are expressive and descriptive and, when editing the audio material, Alexandra do Carmo tried to make the different voices follow on from each other in a cadence of small narratives separated by silences long enough for each to remain separate from the next yet, at the same time, to be

interconnected through the visual thread and the sensations that they describe. In turn, the drawings themselves each bear a phrase at the foot taken from the statements which the artist has selected as condensing the central ideas of each of the interviewees are printed. The remainder of the paper (apart from the rare occasions it is empty) is taken up by drawings done in pencil (lead and coloured) with a lightness of line that verges on invisibility, creating visual representations of elements (ideas or objects) taken from the narratives and placed, in the drawing, in the eyes of human figures who directly face the spectator, now physically in the space of the Galeria Quadrum and looking at the drawings.

There are four clear transformational moments from the initial facts chosen by the artist in this work that move from a given reality (past events from Quadrum) to a symbolic construction that retains the characteristics of subjective densation present not only in the memories in themselves but also in their communicative process: firstly, the sound recordings of the statements, with their documentary character that is as neutral as possible, although the artist asked the interviewees for specific memories of actual works; then, the selection of excerpts for the audio piece, trying to maximize the communicative component of the experiences but also abstractifying the immediate referents as far as possible (each work mentioned and its respective creator is given as "untitled" and "anonymous"); then there is a second selective refinement that isolated the excerpts into ideas, emotions, or objects that arise in the drawings through the printed phrases; finally, the recreation and visual presentation of these elements through the drawing. Although the series of drawings follows on temporally from the recording, both function in the exhibition space in a circular complementarity and refer to each other in a constant transformation of the illustrated and narrative effects differently explored by the specific codes of perception for the sound, the written word and the drawing, and also by their own forms of inter-relationship and more or less innate forms of attention.

Two characteristics reinforce this complementarity between the drawings and the recording, the most evident of which is the spatial sequencing of the drawings that repeats the temporal succession of the recording. The other is the acceptance of "error", as Alexandra do Carmo calls it, that recurs throughout her work. In this case the variety of errors, clear in the drawings in their broken and crossed out lines, crooked perspectives and mistaken proportions etc., work as extensions of the oral pieces, with their interjections, pauses for thought, corrections of ideas and

repetitions of words that the artist has chosen to leave present in the recordings. Even the title of this project, *Tudo foi captado (mesmo os movimentos do cabrito)*, makes clear the margin of error innate to memory processes and that spills over into the drawings in the act of doing them. The phrase is taken from one of the interviews and the goat in question is actually the donkey that was part of João Vieira's performance *Caretos* that was presented with a group of paintings in 1984. This mistake is never clarified in the development of the piece, although the artist does show the contradiction through a second statement that mentions the other animal.

The importance of error in Alexandra do Carmo's work is tied to an idea of experimentation directly linked to communication processes and to the immediacy of action. In this case, as in many others throughout her work, what is important is an investigation into the modalities (or, even before these, into the possibility) of contact between artistic experiences and a particular audience. Her interest was not in the stories, numerous when the subject of Quadrum is raised, of the role and personality of its director, Dulce d' Agro, but instead in the narratives of the experiences of those who took part - whether assiduously or occasionally - in the gallery's activities and, above all, in the possibility of transmitting these narratives through a space of time that has stretched over thirty years. An important aspect of the statements collected by Alexandra do Carmo is that they record memories that are still vivid due to the feelings of fear, novelty, shock or derision, each of which is indicative of the participatory and experimental nature of the artistic proposals referred to by each of the interviewees, whether a performance involving blood (*A hot afternoon 3*, by Gina Pane in 1978), the leading of spectators to the interior of the work through the almost complete obstruction of the gallery circulation space (*Corredor*, by Ana Vieira, in 1982), a rolled stone placed on the ground (*Trajecto dum corpo [Journey of a body]*), by Alberto Carneiro, in 1977), the desecration of the gallery space through popular culture (*Caretos*, by João Vieira, in 1984), or the alteration of the normal scale of paintings seen until then in Portuguese exhibition spaces (António Sena's exhibition in 1975).

One of the questions that this project raises (and that is intimately related to the successive challenges that over the years the artist has made to the way that the communal notion of audience works) is to examine in what way the aesthetic options of a particular moment, moulded as they are by institutional and individual representations of a varying nature, interact with other aspects of a given society in

the creation of its cultural patrimony. The stories recorded by Alexandra do Carmo refer to some of the most intense episodes experienced by the Quadrum public. Through the closeness of the details described and their implicit meanings, each of the short personal narratives reflects a broader kind of perception and reception of art that constructs a shared, communal awareness of those experiences. Understood as a whole, the narratives here show a fundamental change in visual habits that were introduced at the time through the gallery programming, if not due to its radicalism then to its regularity. More than contributing to the introduction of the renovation of methods of artistic production, Quadrum's alternative statute configures itself in a rupture with exhibition and critical typologies that are still, in our own context, too dependent on Portuguese painting and sculpture (until then almost non-existent). Maria Nobre Franco, who in the 1980s directed another of the most influential galleries in our institutional context (the EMI – Valentim de Carvalho), clearly expresses in her statement what was to be the most common reaction of the Quadrum exhibitions' public: "I wasn't used to seeing an exhibition like that." Other galleries tried to break with artistic tradition, although in a more erratic way or, when more consistent (in the case of the Buchholz, under the direction of Rui Mário Gonçalves between 1965 and 1974), without the benefit of the visibility of experimentation and new *media* that the post-revolutionary period allowed and imprinted on the Portuguese context. No other Portuguese commercial gallery can be so legitimately registered as a promotion space for the most diverse experimentation, particularly in the period between April 25th 1974 and the start of the 1980s, when it was associated with an idea of the avant-garde that was often, due to the artists who appeared in connection with Quadrum itself (as in the case of Ernesto de Sousa), an inescapable concept for valuing artistic practices. The statements collected by Alexandra do Carmo allow us today to understand how a specific period considered itself. They involuntarily transcend the individual experience to construct in their entirety one of the most relevant historical experiences of Portuguese artistic circles, showing their structure of meaning more emphatically than any other "official history" of Quadrum would have been able to do (made impossible anyway due to the absence of any gallery records from the period).

Therefore it is not surprising that none of the interviewees mentioned works connected to French Informalism paintings or to kinetic art - both of which formed the gallery's main programming and exhibitions in its three first years of existence. These are memories that time has made irrelevant both for Quadrum's present and, above

all, for the creation of new ways of seeing and participating in artistic manifestations. At the same time, it is symptomatic that the descriptions recorded by the artist focus either on very concrete technicalities (the height of a suspended backdrop, the quantity of straw bales spread over the floor, the extreme liquidity of a paint), or on the strong emotions and visceral sensations engendered by some of the works. What is absent is the ambition, on the one hand, to supply a detailed and complete explanation of the works that are mentioned and, on the other, to elaborate on the meanings of what was seen or experienced. This internalization of the importance of the subjective experience, being the sign of a notion more real than academic of the role of the spectator in the construction of the (multiple) meanings of the works discussed, reveals eventually a kind of artistic perception that the exhibition proposals of Quadrum most certainly helped to create (or at least consolidate) in the Portuguese cultural context.

\*

At one point, Alexandra do Carmo writes in her work notes: "[a] gallery that functioned as a stage for experimentation"; "this gallery was almost a studio". These ideas clarify the experimental dimension of the numerous activities that took place at Quadrum as an extension of the rehearsal space associated with the traditional studio space and as an elaboration of the work of art in a situation open to a particular audience, the gallery's public. For Alexandra do Carmo, both the intention to leave the errors in her drawings explicit and this idea of a studio shape an investigation into the artistic practices understood as a free zone, one that is able to generate not only a discussion but a communication process constructed in real time, established between the artist and the public around the symbolic representations. As many *post-studio* practices have shown, it is about working within a given community, more than working for it. The elaboration and installation of Alexandra do Carmo's project are elucidatory in this respect: the work presented now at Quadrum completes a path that began in the work places of the interviewees (where the interviews were recorded) and that "served as a temporary studio" for the artist (as she has written in her notes), to arrive at the very exhibition space to which these interviews refer, in the form of recordings and drawings, both with a level of

referential and objective rarefaction that make the gallery seem *as if there was nothing to see*, only clues for *something to do*.

This is precisely the role of the public that today visits the Galeria Quadrum and finds *Tudo foi captado (mesmo os movimentos do cabrito)*. Referring to the first in the series of drawings that occupy the main room, Alexandra do Carmo wrote in her notes: "start with the drawing of an audience, it could be in the theatre". The path is here open to a narrative production in which there is an attempt to bring to the public, currently visiting an exhibition built from the memory of other exhibitions held there in the past, the awareness of a specific way of seeing and perceiving artistic practices just as they happened in Quadrum's heyday. There is here a confrontation between two distinct eras regarding the reception of art (more than merely at the level of its production techniques): how can the spectator of today understand the sensations of difference and novelty felt by the audience that Alexandra do Carmo has tried to capture, as the former has become so familiar with *media* research, discourse construction, de-materialization, inter-disciplinary blurring, models of participation, questions of identity, etc., that already shape, somehow, the *classical* repertoire that is part of the current broad institutionalizing context of experimentation? It may be an attempt to constitute a new kind of spectator, historically aware of their function and yet also conscious of the fact that the public, both past and present, is still largely circumscribed to a specialized audience (or rather, one that holds a certain visual culture), despite the (relative) commodification of art and the efforts of cultural institutions (particularly through museum educational services) to deepen understanding of artistic practices in the communities in which they are found. The impossibility, in the course of Alexandra do Carmo's research, of finding people connected with Quadrum's activities other than artists, collectors, gallery owners and other professionals from the field is eloquent, not only because of its exemplary characterization of the public of the times, but also because it suggests real possibilities for a public today.

The drawings made by the artist articulate themselves in this confrontation between the two audiences of the exhibition: that of the past and that of the present. By placing themselves at the heart of some of the issues associated with the transmission of experience, the drawings aim to mediate between a group of representations eroded by time and on which the artist has now imprinted a second level of erosion by fragmenting the original spectators' memories of Quadrum

activities into elements with little meaning on their own: a chair, a donkey, a stone. The articulation of these elements with the texts/captions that run underneath, and their positioning in the eyes of the "characters" (another expression used by the artist) that watch the onlooker of today, create an immediate connection with both their origin (the statements) and their destination (the current public). The gaze (one of the most symbolically vested visual representations) is, in the artist's notes, actually the "stage" where this "passage through time" is clarified. The artist also references the drawing as the place to create "fiction" and the text as an opening to "poetry" (since none of them are interested in being "illustration", but rather "suggestion"), marking her intention to engender a "new reality" open to "dialogue on the essence of the production of the work shared with the spectator". Through the three temporalities involved in this work (the past when the events took place, the transmission of the events through the oral descriptions and the drawings constructed from those descriptions), a fourth is elaborated, shaped in the course of the exhibition: that of the spectator walking through the gallery, looking at the drawings and listening to the recordings. Taken to an extreme, the audience that Alexandra do Carmo defines in her first drawing of the series, "that could be in the theatre" also ends up as spectators of the theatre unfolding before them, where the public of the present fills the gallery as if it were a stage. In this kind of Brechtian epic theatre, according to the artist's work notes, the aim is nothing less than the "creation of a space dedicated to awakening future spectators", demanding from them a "permanent commitment" to the artist through the act of experiencing the work and of consecrating a community of experience.