

Alexandra do Carmo: “Office/Commercial”

Prospective Memory for an artist studio in Brooklyn.

Bruno Marques

Smithson wanted his work to reflect the concept of entropy. Wanted to play with time, fight against it, accelerating or decelerating it until it breaks apart, accelerating the collapse of the structures and systems of that particular period of time in history- [...] On the contrary the Bechers [...] built a structure to meditate on the difference between things. [...] It is almost as [...] they want us to go beyond observing the singularity of each object by touching them, sensing their weigh, sensing the weigh of time through them

JAMES LINGWOOD, "O Peso do Tempo" in *Bernd & Hilla Becher Robert Smithson. Field Trips*. (cat. exp.). - Porto: Museu Serralves, 30.11.2001 - 03.03.2002.

Coming from the main “institutional critique” practices, mostly developed during the seventies and based on procedures such as investigation or journalistic techniques Alexandra do Carmo’s projects along with a consistent drawing practice, is situated in the “documentary” area, where video, cinema, reportage, photographic essay and other means in which different models and genres cross each other. Continuing the tradition of artistic projects of mapping and inventorying a certain context (which can be a place, a community, a site), as the personal (individual) reportage and field research, the artist problematizes the epistemic “discontinuity”, that in post modernity deconstructs the notion of “art studio”ⁱ along with particular circumstances (social, anthropological, espacial, arquitectural, symbolic or others). Concerning documentary techniques, the artist adopts well-known procedures to promote a *politic of the truth*ⁱⁱ, such as: the presence of the intervenient, integrating verbal testimonies, the action of a helper “pivot”, using the original sound etc.

In June 2006, within her project-artistic residence *The Steam Shop (or the painter's studio)*, which took place at Fábrica da Pólvora (Barcarena), Alexandra do Carmo’s *performance* consisted in a temporary studio in loco (studio interviews including the possibility of being seen by an audience in real time)ⁱⁱⁱ. The act served to alert her of the risk of loss due to the obsolescence of the *immaterial memory* of a *local*, she did it by capturing in video the testimonies of the living ex factory workers, rescuing an inter-subjective *memory* that was lost within the old protocol of mere conservation of artifacts inside glass windows.

Bringing these two vectors of research – *memory and atelier* - Alexandra do Carmo converts them in a researching field on issues of contemporary socio-political consciousness. In “Office/Commercial”, presenting herself as a “commercially” successful fine artist, with the company of a false assistant, and a previously contacted real estate agent, different each time, she initiates a path through Brooklyn, New York, pretending to rent an “art studio”. The starting point are encounters in different parts of the city, bringing a camera man with her, she collets video images and conversations with

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the excuse of being the subject of a documentary for her gallery in Lisbon, a documentary on her “arrival” in New York.

Emphasizing the symbolism of the *undercover agent* (imported from the international television journalism), the artist uses the records of those encounters in order to produce a video documentary, altogether different from the intentions transmitted to the real estate agents. The banalized narcissistic tone masquerades a sardonic irony in relation to an *unthinkable background*. The scenario that allows her to criticize the paradigmatic situation in which it is more profitable to rent a space to one person (the artist) than to accommodate two hundred manufacturing workers under the exploitation of illegal work (always carefully kept away from the camera lens under request of the boss or owner of the space).

Having the camera falsely shut off, the artist observes the overcrowded places of work, the precarious working hygiene conditions, and the poor infrastructures. A radically opposed scenario to the “new art studios”; it’s sober economic gigantisms, where an elegant interior design reigns; high-tech fixtures and sound-proof isolation materials.

The contact with the New York under world real estate agencies allows her to reveal a pre-existent cultural layer concerning the *exterior* of the studio *topology*: both sociological and economical: the pernicious real estate speculation of the grand metropolis, the eloquent strategies and overdone marketing slogans, as well as the not always honest pitches and arguments of the agents. As a video editing strategy Alexandra do Carmo momentarily separates image from sound and vice versa, ignoring one or the other in order to focus exclusively in each sense (vision or audition). This strategy aims to confront the raw physicality of the space with the rhetoric elaborated around it.

The artist mentions that “*her intention is to create a social memory of the spaces that are being designated to the work of artists in the city (studio spaces), in order to confront this memory with the past of these buildings exposing it’s transformation*”. Basically, Alexandra do Carmo positions herself in a *transitional* temporal site, precisely in the *transitory* space between the still functional place of the factory/warehouse and the beginning of its renovation. This way, “*the presence of the artist in the old manufacturing spaces and future artist studios is the reality that allows connecting the present and the past of the buildings*”, in other words and continuing to quote the artist “*it is a proposal for a future utopic occupation, building the memory of the site*”.

Contrarily to the Bechers systematic record on an industrial European architecture that in the sixties was threatened with disappearance due to negligence and deterioration, Alexandra do Carmo is not being moved by any feeling of “lost” or “nostalgia” toward “archeological preservation”^{iv}. Instead, we are facing a conscious political investigation, in relation to a deliberate attitude of breaking apart, reconstruction and reutilization of the factory spaces. A phenomenon that is coincidental with the capitalized expansion of contemporary art.

Both because of the memory of the ones who visited it and the subtle appearance of structural reminiscences that the building *does not hyde*; this intervention reveals a *space* that will *survive* in spite its sudden metamorphosis. Places impregnated with resonances that a new tenant cannot and will never be indifferent to because of this reportage. For some it might be a difficult memory to erase. Others, adopting the hypocrisy of the *system* would choose to convey with it. Or, the cynicism accomplice of the *ethical indifference* in favor of comfortable non-resolved ambivalence. *Denouncing* the duplicity sometimes works as a simple compensation or complement.

¹ In respect to what we can easily call the “the archeology” of the studio in modern art, see the admirable and stimulating Delfim Sardo’s text “The original site”, in *The Steam Shop (or the painter's studio)*. (cat. exp.) - Fábrica da Pólvora catalogue, June-July 2006.

¹ Following this type of “documental action” that is being referred here, we are tributary of Hito Steyerl’s essay “The politics of truth: “the documentary in the art field” in *Propostas da Arte Portuguesa. Posição: 2007* (ed. by Miguel von Hafe Pérez). - Público and Fundação Serralves, p. 147 (originally published in *Springer Magazine*, n.º 3, Viena, 2003), which was recently translated to portuguese.: “the expression ‘the politics of truth’ was created by Michel Foucault and designates a social order of truth, generating techniques and procedures to its production and determination and it is always associated to specific power relations. Power and knowledge cross each others paths when it comes to the production and organization of facts and its interpretations. The concept of document lives within this unbreakable tension between power and knowledge. [...] So, the importance of art works that are documents as well it is not its adaptation or correction of the representation, but fundamentally its internal politics of truth.”

¹ On Alexandra do Carmo’s performance in 2006 at Fábrica da Pólvora, see Bruno Marques text, “Alexandra do Carmo: ‘The Steam Shop (or the painter's studio)’. “From the expansion of the studio to an anthropological approach of site””, November 2006 in http://www.interface-artecontemporanea.org/ensaios_criticos.htm); and the important aspect of Sara Matos’s, “Experimenting the processes” in *The Steam Shop (or the painter's studio)* (catalogue. exp.) - Fábrica da Pólvora, June-July 2006. “Atelier 10. Alexandra do Carmo. 9 July”,

¹ See Benjamin Buchloh, “1968: Two major museums committed to the most advanced European and American art of the sixties...”, in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alan Bois and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art since 1900. Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*. - New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004, p. 521.