

Notes on the construction of time

Luísa Santos

Notes on time construction is an exhibition within the framework of the first edition of Anozero: Coimbra Biennial of Contemporary Art, which gathers three Portuguese artists in the headquarters of the Círculo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra (CAPC)

The first edition of Anozero, which has the theme *A throw of the dice*, has the main goal of reflecting on the University of Coimbra, Alta and Coimbra being granted the distinction of World Heritage by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). One of the central focuses of this edition is therefore, logically, the remarkable heritage of Coimbra, in its numerous meanings and cultural effects.

Founded in 1958, CAPC has witnessed key moments in the History of Visual Arts and Culture in Portugal. For over 50 years, it has developed a key role in the production, stimulation, promotion and dissemination of aesthetic trends. This role has been played both in terms of educational and artistic functions, such as the varied program, with an undeniable contribution to the development and awareness of new audiences for contemporary art in Portugal. With its role and testimony, the CAPC headquarters embodies a heritage that is intangible: on the one hand, crystallizing memories and the foundations of much of what we understand today as contemporary Portuguese art and, on the other hand, projecting possibilities for moments that are yet to come.

It is precisely within this relationship between different times that the story of *Notes on time construction* unfolds. The works that form this exhibition are joined by a series of paired relationships: time and space; the confrontation between construction and destruction; the tense dialogue between the past and the future; and, finally, the opposition between the ephemeral and the imperishable, rendered by the desire to hold or suspend time.

The work of Teresa Braula Reis (1990, Lisbon), which starts the route, relates time with space. This two-channel projection (*0:04:54*, 2014 - a collaboration with James Lake) puts us at odds with a space that is difficult to pin down. It is not possible to see the boundaries, like walls, doors, windows and ceilings, that we are used to in the spaces we inhabit. On a black background, only the heads, hands and feet of two bodies that are also dressed in black, with black shoes and sand that they pass from one to the other, are visible without any references to grant a sense of time and space.

One side of the projection reveals a space inhabited by two bodies, standing face to face, passing fine sand, from one person's hand to the hand of the other, of a shade similar to the skin of the hands that hold it, letting it fall in the process of passing. The other side of the projection shows the legs and shoes of those same bodies, with a distance between them. This distance, which can be understood as empty space, becomes filled with sand falling over four minutes and fifty-four seconds, until it fills it completely.

The work *Desgastar em pedra* (2015), by Dalila Gonçalves (1982, Castelo de Paiva), uses another method to confront the space with time. Sandpaper and small stones are arranged on the floor, in a transposition process reminiscent of the *Small White Pebble Circles* (1987), by Richard Long (1945, England), where marble pebbles collected from long walks are organised in concentric rings in the museum space. Objects that Dalila Gonçalves finds and collects are transported and organised in gallery and museum spaces in compositions that define spaces. The set of sandpaper and stones occupies the entire floor of the room in a manner that is as close as tense dialogue.

The extensive use of the sandpaper will inevitably lead to its destruction and impossibility of continuing its function. However, here, the destruction of sandpaper relates to the construction (or structure) of the stones that are now presented and which are nothing more than a cluster of the sandpaper's sand. Every worn piece of sandpaper relates to a single stone — the result of being used to the limit. From the use and destruction of a particular matter, in an agglomeration process, Dalila Gonçalves built another matter that now

confronts the one that allowed its existence. More than the final form, it is about an incessant search for material and particles that form it.

In the two concrete gates of human scale (*No Heroes Behind. Memorial to the Impossibility of Eternity*, 2015), by Teresa Braula Reis, the material is also equally formally and conceptually relevant. First used as the word to describe a sealing material (Bernard Forest Belidor, 1750), concrete is the most emblematic material and perhaps the most contested one of modernity, in its relationship to the culture of modernism, the way it influences our perception of materiality, nature and the passage of time.

The uncertain way these extremely heavy objects (about 500kg) are placed in the room takes us to the formal world of the 1960s sculptures by Richard Serra (1939, USA), like *Strike (for Roberta and Rudy)* (1969- 71) *Trip Hammer* (1988) and *2-2-1: to Dickie and Tina* (1969, 1994), sculptures with an unstable aspect and that are in constant tension with space. Before *No Heroes Behind. Memorial to the Impossibility of Eternity*, we saw the absurdity of any completely safe appearances. The two doors, installed vertically on the floor, about two metres high and one metre wide, appear face to face with a distance of just over half a metre. In spite of the solidness of the construction material, the doors have a fragile structure with a thickness of only six centimetres each.

The title *No Heroes Behind. Memorial to the Impossibility of Eternity* denotes the inability of both the matter and of the human being to achieve eternity. Each door has two holes, almost like goggles, that urge us to approach and make an attempt to see something more behind, or beyond, those concrete structures. This work, like other previous ones by Braula Teresa Reis, presents cracks that will open, causing it to collapse by the end of the exhibition, in a process reminiscent of the concept of self-destructive art enunciated in 1959 by Gustav Metzger. In this process, *No Heroes Behind. Memorial to the Impossibility of Eternity*, emphasises the fact that even the most solid-looking entities cannot escape the inevitability of degradation, a natural route outside the control of human beings. With this methodology, the

installation celebrates the conflicting obsessions of contemporary society: we want to be eternal but are attracted to destruction and, at the same time, we are assaulted by the urge to uncontrollably build.

In all three boxes of *Attempt to Avoid Nostalgia. Towards an Amnesiac State* (2015), Teresa Braula Reis creates a sense of suspended time. The notion of causing an internal, psychological experience, that goes beyond the understanding of shape, through objects with an almost abstract appearance, seems an impossible task. These one-metre long boxes, sixty centimetres wide and twenty-five centimetres high, lying on the ground, are the perfect metaphor for translating the impulse of wanting to avoid, at all costs, the feeling of nostalgia.

The urge to avoid death and any feelings close to pain, either physical or emotional, is inherent to the human being, despite being absolutely inglorious. In these three sheet metal boxes, closed with a transparent cover and a cold and rigid appearance, we find sand, gravel and cement. Each box corresponds to a material, which protects itself from contact with other materials through the walls and top of the box it is in. Each of these materials, by themselves, would not build anything, but when joined with a particular procedure, we have concrete. There is thus a kind of encapsulation of the time of these materials. They appear guarded, as something precious, depicting the absurdity of the attempt to eternalise, protecting us from being afflicted by the evocative, nostalgic feeling that those materials *were*, when they never were in fact anything but matter.

In *Fracção P* (2005) by Jorge Santos (1974, Silves), the feeling of nostalgia is exalted. This representation of a wooden fraction in laser cut acrylic, two metres long, tells us about the memories of matter. *Fracção P* was made, originally and specifically, for an old apartment with wooden floors. Corresponding to a wooden board of that house's floor, it has thin white layers, which highlight the layers that form the wood of this floor. The layers show, in turn, the age of the tree that is in the origin of the floor. The sculpture

therefore visually reveals the *time* of the floor through the sum of its age as a wooden board and as a tree, the commodity from which it originated.

Fraction P sets from the observation of a fragment of a place and its time. By highlighting the time of the matter that originated it, it takes it back to the outdoor and natural scenery, with a time different from human constructions. In the space of CAPC Headquarters, the sculpture appears on the wall like a picture of a representation, a memory of another memory. The way Jorge Santos appropriates the exhibition spaces is always based on the characteristics of space itself. If we are not familiar with the story of *P fraction*, we can easily believe that this is a representation of part of the floor of this building, also old and also with wooden floors. In order to discover that it is not the same matter, we will have to look carefully at the veins, both within the representation and the floor of this place. Only through a close observation do we realise there are two layers of time and memory.

The process of contradicting time in Dalila Gonçalves' work is comparable to the analogy of Didi-Huberman in "Before Time" (2000), in which the watchmaker disassembles the clock to see how it works. The moment he does that, it stops working. This stop, syncopated in the continuity of history, is the dialectical suspension that opens the possibility for the watch to work in a different way, setting it to the beat of a different temporality.

A dispute over time appears continuously throughout Dalila Gonçalves' work. An old stamp, found at a fair and now obsolete, served to print the brands in the twenty-four porcelain rectangles that complete *Days Series* (2015). The stamp marks reveal a calendar of entries and exits, the attendance records and productivity of workers along the twelve months of the year, done every fortnight. Some of these porcelain plates are flawed, but always with the marks of yearly records that arise here in a display of immortalisation, paradoxically portrayed in a fragile and inherently ephemeral material. The white and the absence of informative detail on the calendar, highlights the crystallization of time, due to the impossibility of continuing to fill any records like this.

In the *Modern Artefacts of Remembrance* series (2015), Teresa Braula Reis also presents a crystallization of time within a set of objects. The set records architectural spaces, fragments that are familiar to us, like windows, doors and floors. These are objects collected in homes that are undergoing renovations and are now seen as clutter, being replaced by newer objects in a process of common unbridled consumerism of contemporary society. When collecting these objects and creating a record in concrete, Teresa Braula Reis fixed them in a process analogous to fossilisation.

The title *Modern Artefacts* thus refers, by the choice of the matter and process, to the contradictory opposites modernity / antiquity. On the one hand it is about concrete, a symbol of modernism, however, on the other hand, they are almost archaeological artefacts, involving the study of a culture that, one day, will be part of the past. This temporal conflict and preservation of memory is reminiscent of the restorative Nostalgia idea expressed by Svetlana Boym in "Nostalgia and Its Discontents" (2007). This type of nostalgia underlines the importance of the idea of home in an assertive attempt to rebuild it formally and conceptually, in a desirable, although unattainable, reality. In other words, rebuilding the sense of home as a physical and intangible heritage, a reconstruction based on a limbo between the projected future and the lived past. The act of building modern artefacts is precisely a reflection of this limbo and of the inability to perpetuate the physical places and memory.

The series *Flower Ornament* (2015), unveils another methodology to reflect upon objects and their role in social and cultural behaviours. Jorge Santos shows in this series how drawing can represent spaces and its characteristics beyond shape. This series of drawings are actually reliefs (blind impressions on paper), a method of representation that allows creating different depths. Depth and flat colour play with light and shadow. This emphasis on matter relates to ideas about how to experience spaces, with social and cultural observations, like the human urge to organise nature inside houses.

The flowers represented here are a floral arrangement that is in itself a translation of the human need to organise the natural exterior in a designed artificial interior. The observation of the golden interior of a tea box is at the origin of the series - this tea box, like many objects of our daily lives, had printed representations of nature in the material itself. This idea of representation and decoration is reminiscent of the sense of order stated by Gombrich, who maintained that the formal characteristics of most human products — like tools, buildings, clothing or ornaments — may be seen as signs of a sense of intrinsic order inherent to the biological heritage of humankind. The artificial environment that humans have created for themselves pleases their dual need for an easy adaptation to something known, and a challenging adaptation to what is new.

With *Flower Ornament*, Jorge Santos reflects precisely on this dual necessity of organising nature inside the house: a flower arrangement collected in nature, displayed in a jar, reproduced in decorative arts, which in turn multiply the objects of our daily lives, and, on their side, may also multiply in a complex relationship. The complexity I refer in this case is one of the principles analysed by Hogarth in his "Analysis of Beauty" (1753). This understanding of complexity is masterly in the way it describes a fascination with objects in relation to human behaviour. To Hogarth, complexity is a habit that leads to a game of relentless pursuit, when faced with the beauty of an object. Complexity is thus born from the passion for search. The difficulty of understanding the objects extends the pleasure of discovering them in their relations with the memories they contain and the spaces they inhabit. The monochrome choice of gold in *Flower Ornament* starts precisely in the search for an understanding of the objects in their relation to human behaviour. With the same colour as the interior of a tea box, and with the same low reliefs, the series solidifies the artificiality of multiplied representations of nature's memories.

Dalila Gonçalves installations and objects can be seen as examples of what Aristotle understood about the notion of time as something intrinsic to the universe. The objects that inhabit it, and intrinsic memories, have an existing

circular motion in the way they have a beginning and an end, in accordance with a circle.

Dalila Gonçalves understands and interprets this definition of time in two main conditions: a tool-based condition and a metaphorical condition. As a tool, time exists in the practice of the physical building of all art objects that require, in themselves, the times of production, observation, of reality with an inevitable end due to the ephemeral characteristics of the materials, and the eventual perennial existence in memory by documentation or any other form of collective memory. As a metaphor, time exists in the theoretical reflection of the materialisation or dematerialisation of an artistic action that refers to human actions and natural features of contemporary society. Memory is possibly the only way to transform the ephemeral into anything close to the eternal. The set of old colourful stamps holders that form *Backgrounds* (2015), freezes the moment when these stamps stopped being used. They therefore integrate a decontextualisation of themselves as a memory of set of moments we did not witness, and as a utility that was left in the past.

Time itself is a powerful metaphorical construction at its origins are unconnected to the idea of shape, in the way it affirms itself as an allegory for how we understand the world. It is from that setup of time as an understanding of the world that *Rastos* (2015), by Dalila Gonçalves, is born. A set of used, round white sandpapers is presented on the wall. Two other sets are presented in stacks of different heights on the floor. This installation confronts us with two readings: sometimes we see a set of round sandpaper, sometimes we see cut wooden logs, in a joint opposition between artificiality and nature, deconstruction and construction in a circular and dialectic motion, which is at the centre of Dalila Gonçalves' work.

Man's relationship with time and nature are also represented in *Among the shadows of the grove* (2015) [*Entre o bosque de sombras*], by Jorge Santos. A sequence that comprises an eighty-centimetre high frieze, which occupies all of the walls of the rooms, creating a sense of delimited space only open to the outside through these dense black and white images, of trees with

shadows. These photographs of trees, with their relationship involving the passage of time with a sequence and play of shadows, surround us in a perfect metaphor for the disturbing relations between human beings and nature. The urge to visually evoke the sublime, the emotionally overwhelming experience of finding something much bigger than us, and what we can learn from it, is equally as overwhelming as terrifying.

Inside the room, an apparent invisibility seems to protect us. However, the route of painted photographs moves in a web of play between shadow and light, between interior and exterior: sometimes we seem protected as observers, other times we seem exposed to the nature around us. In a kind of game with the order between the real and the fictional, *Entre o bosque de sombras* develops in a close dialogue with the romantic ideal of the sublime atmosphere. This representation works as a tool to forget about ourselves as we stand before this nature that goes beyond us. In this room, we are led to our personal experiences before the grandeur of nature, with the sensations it causes on us. If, on the one hand, these images show a specific time and place, they also draw out the *time* of each of us, with our personal memories encountering and fusing with nature.

The image that we see in the large painting *Arvoredo ao entardecer* (2015), by Jorge Santos, was created from a photograph taken by the artist in Coimbra Botanical Garden. In this painting, unlike the work mentioned earlier, the trees come with less detail and are further away, closer to the idea of landscape. His changes to the observation of the photographic image involve a deletion of detail, blocking areas of flat colour. In this process, he builds a picture of a landscape in which it is impossible to identify the identity or the time it exists in. The only time that we can measure here is the time of day: the colours suggest that this is a sunset.

Faced with this two-metre wide image, we almost have the urge to enter the grove and stay there. Jorge Santos creates images from his own personal experiences, but depersonalises them in a process that allows an appropriation by those who observe his observations. We know from our

personal experiences, that colours in nature fluctuate throughout the day, the greens become more golden, and blue goes dark. This is the only clue to the identity of the image; everything else will be filled and built with our memories, personal experiences and observations. This landscape, which goes off to make room for other buildings, invites us, with the subtle yet strong characteristic of nature, to stop and withstand the time that insists on overcoming us in the contemporary world we have created and in which we live.