

### INTERVIEW

Hans Ulrich Obrist interviews Ana Vieira

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**H.U.O. :** I have studied this great book that is extraordinary (catalogue prepared in partnership between the Carlos Machado Museum and CAM - Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon).

**A.V. :** I also like the catalogue that was organized by the commissioner Paulo Pires do Vale who is still very young and has a degree in Philosophy. Did you read the text?

**H.U.O. :** Yes, yes. I thought it was very good.

**A.V. :** Starting at the beginning, how did it all happen, what was your first epiphany like, how did you get into art?

**A.V. :** I began by taking painting here in Lisbon, which interested me very little and that was totally academic, only formal and allegoric ... but fortunately I became involved with a group of students who were stepping out of such conformism. Among them there was an artist, a painter, whom I ended up marrying at the end of the course. He was the person who gave me strength, who understood my creativity, which was complicated once I did neither paint nor sculpt and this was disastrous at the time, at least in Portugal.

**H.U.O. :** It was a difficult time with the dictatorship in Portugal?

**A.V. :** Yes. But and besides the dictatorship, I think that Portugal continues to be conservative and insecure in its relationship with art.

**H.U.O. :** Which is interesting is that since the beginning and after leaving School, you were not connected with painting. You were beyond painting. How did you get the idea to go beyond painting? Had you already seen a lot of painting?

**A.V. :** Yes. In art books, in magazines, in the Paris biennials, and in New York in the end of the 70's that I went on seeing left a very strong imprint on me, including the confirmation that art should and could be lived in a more dynamic and active manner.

**H.U.O. :** Yes the biennials were important and they were set up at the Museum of Contemporary Art by its director (?) They were very important at the time.

**H.U.O. :** Further to the Paris Biennials, you also say that you were inspired by Lourdes de Castro and Noronha da Costa. Can you tell me about those influences?

**A.V. :** The first time I saw an exhibition of Lourdes de Castro was in Lisbon and I was not only enchanted but also expectant, without really being able to understand why. A couple of years later I found out that it was the concept of "absence", so detectable in the "shadows" of Lourdes de Castro.

In respect of Noronha da Costa it was the freedom to try out, to experiment, as well as to propose new perceptions for art. Noronha da Costa had studied architecture and maybe or certainly because of that, he had a very great connection with space.

**H.U.O. :** They are alive, aren't they?

**A.V. :** Yes. Lourdes de Castro has been living in the Madeira Island over the last couple of years.

Noronha da Costa lives in Estoril (near Lisbon) but he's rather ill. He was very important in the 70s, however. But I still have another very important source of inspiration that is Michelangelo Pistoletto.

**H.U.O. :** Yes, I knew him very well still as a student and I thought he was so important that it led me to learning Italian.

**H.U.O. :** Which was your relation with Pistoletto? The idea of the spectator entering into the work is very important.

**A.V. :** Yes, it is essential and it was a great discovery.

**H.U.O. :** Where did you see his works?

**A.V. :** I began by seeing them in the "Domus" magazine (an architecture magazine with articles on plastic arts).

**H.U.O. :** Did you read the "Domus" magazine on a regular basis?

**A.V. :** Yes, yes.

**H.U.O. :** How were you influenced by architecture?

**A.V. :** In principle architecture has always inspired me. I've always been very interested in space and architecture lives for and with space. At such time I was also interested in the theatre that lives on pretending (on make-believe), on illusion and on a particular notion of time, which is that it does not exist on a permanent basis.

**H.U.O. :** The theatre has a performative component.

**H.U.O. :** I've heard that you felt inspired by Joan Jons whom you saw with Helena Almeida, Artur Rosa and Eduardo Nery. In which year did you see her?

**H.U.O. :** More or less around 1973/74.

**H.U.O. :** What impressed you the most?

**A.V. :** Maybe the total integration of body and action.

**H.U.O. :** You made a work that was very new in 1968, the "Silhouettes". Where did they come from?

**A.V. :** I don't know exactly where they came from, always from within. But the "absence" that came from Lourdes de Castro is there, just as the integration of the silhouettes into the space, maybe via Pistoletto. But the figures I made were cut out and emptied, they were placed in space and they were human scale figures. They integrated the space including the people that walked around.

**H.U.O. :** There is a text in the retrospective book (catalogue) about your coming home from school. What is this story of yours in Sao Miguel?

**A.V. :** My parents' home was located on a small farm and there was an area closer to the sea where there were several stone walls that were very tall to protect where several stone walls that were very tall to protect the vines from the salty sea air. Such walls all had different doors and kees and in and in order to go through each one of them i had to take a brunch of keys with me. I had a true obsession I had a true obsession for such walked all the way through it every day. It was a very important path for me it entailed a journey, a ritual and a pace trough several types of spaces. It

ended by opening the door that looked onto the sea or still and as an alternative, next to a tide pool (in direct contact with the sea and, therefore, a former lobster nursery) where my sister and I sometimes bathed... it was icy cold!

**H.U.O. :** So there were doors and keys; are these memories from your adolescence?

**A.V. :** Yes, yes.

**H.U.O. :** You had those experiences and it is interesting because your first work, the “Silhouettes” began with two dimensions.

**A.V. :** But the silhouettes were placed in the space.

**H.U.O. :** So it was already three-dimensional. But the true three-dimensionality is in the “Ambiente” (“Environment”) of 1971. Can you tell me about such epiphany of the Environment of 1971?

**A.V. :** The “Environment” of 1971 was the beginning of my work on three-dimensional painting, which was also another obsession of mine. I did not want there to be only a (two-dimensional) image but the body of the image, visible through the body of the spectators, because you do not see only with your eyes but also with your entire body.

**H.U.O. :** Could one enter into the “Environment”?

**A.V. :** No, it was not meant for one to enter into it but for one to walk around the piece and its superimpositions.

**H.U.O. :** It is as if the walls were transparent and one could not go in. And then there are those fabulous painted fayades; were they actually done or are they sketches?

**A.V. :** I painted directly on the photographs. It was not my intention to make them in real life size. They are always an inside/outside passage. I’ve done this almost always that is mixing the inside and the outside, which cross refers to painting that is a sort of membrane ...

**H.U.O. :** A curtain, a clock, a table, it is the reversion ... (laughter).

**A.V. :** Yes, I did that many times, the inside and the outside.

**H.U.O. :** And then there is this famous “Mesa-Paisagem” (“Table-Landscape”) that is the inversion of your previous work, isn’t it?

**A.V. :** But it still has the inside!

**H.U.O. :** And the outside ... Where does this extraordinary invention come from?

**A.V. :** Where does it come from? Well, I think that it comes from me, I don’t know ... (laughter)

**H.U.O. :** One other version, is it?

**A.V. :** Yes, in another version.

**H.U.O. :** The idea is a landscape and a dinner or a lunch?

A.V. : Yes ... or the inside.

H.U.O. : Because there is the sea and there is the mountain ... (laughter)

H.U.O. : In spite of going beyond painting, you made these two-dimensional silkscreens. What is the role of these silkscreens?

A.V. : The role? Maybe it was to have more portable pieces...

H.U.O. : More accessible, to travel, like Duchamp with his portable museum ... (laughter)

A.V. : The truth is that further to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, there were no more Modern Art institutions at such time, let alone Contemporary Art institutions. And maybe because of that, at least in my case, I did not sell anything.

H.U.O. : How did you support yourself financially?

A.V. : I was a teacher, I taught and I did not live too badly.

H.U.O. : You had a lot of freedom ...

A.V. : Yes, I had freedom and I could have it.

H.U.O. : And then there is this object "Porta" ("Door") between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional in which both dimensions coexist, isn't it so? The doors are directly linked to your adolescence memories, aren't they?

A.V. : Yes, the doors, surely. But although I think that memory is very important, I prefer the word experiencing because experiencing things leaves more of an imprint.

H.U.O. : Living?

A.V. : Yes, living.

H.U.O. : Which has a lot to do with your relationship with living art. You have said that the theatre has inspired you a lot. You said in an interview to a newspaper that a production of Victor Garcia had deeply touched you. What did you learn with Victor Garcia?

A.V. : "O Jogo" (the "Game"). Victor Garcia made it quite a point that he was going to present and perform an illusion. In this case the artists entered into the spectators' space with common clothes on and they stepped up onto the stage where there was a transparent wardrobe hanging, from the time of the Moliere's "Tartuffe". Once they put on such clothes over the ones they were wearing, the "game" and the "illusion" began.

H.U.O. : Not hiding the illusion. This also leads us to this sketch.

A.V. : Which is part of the installation "Santa Paz Doméstica, Domesticada?" ("Holy Domestic Peace, Domesticated?"). I wanted to make a movie based on such sketch. I had requested a friend to direct it but the occasion was lost because on top of it all, she lived far away from Portugal.

H.U.O. : Can you tell me about this installation, which is very cinematographic? Did you watch a lot of films...did you?

**A.V. :** The entire installation is ironic and it's focused on the social role assigned to women. With regard to the cinema, yes I saw a lot of films including in Paris where one could see films that were forbidden by the censorship in Portugal. I saw "Teorema" by Pasolini, for instance, which touched me a lot.

**H.U.O. :** "Teorema" touched you, why?

**A.V. :** It has an approach to the sense of the sacred that is very unusual, almost seen on the reverse because it is neither kind nor redemptive.

**H.U.O. :** A little harsh.

There is a mirror, there are flowers, a chair, in the installation...

**A.V. :** It is all very ironic, about the role of women, exaggerated and very kitsch.

**H.U.O. :** May one think that in 1977 you already had a relationship with feminism?

**A.V. :** I never knew very well, but yes. I read Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Wolf, Ibsen, Anais Nin... further to myself being irritated at the time by domestic tasks that I had no wish whatsoever to perform...

**H.U.O. :** You say in such newspaper interview that it is not only a criticism of women but a criticism of society in general.

**A.V. :** Yes, I think that society in general is really male-centered everywhere. In the large centers where it is more disguised, or in the outskirts where it is transparent. What I can criticize women for is that they do not claim their situation of minority, whichever it is and **tor** not stating their "difference" and their ability to go deeper into their own self ... (added to the interview)

**H.U.O. :** Does such installation question women?

**A.V. :** Yes, yes, above all, women.

**H.U.O. :** The magazines, the photographs and the objects, where did you find them?

**A.V. :** In several places and they were not always easy to find.

**H.U.O. :** It is a piece that coincides with the revolution. How did you feel the liberation from dictatorship?

**A.V. :** It was very positive, very optimistic but once again difficult for art.

**H.U.O. :** Why?

**A.V. :** It was one more crisis that our country has gone through. Many people left the country and they were the ones who had a higher economic power, and also because art is always immediately affected by declared crises.

**H.U.O. :** Was the revolution a liberation for you?

**A.V. :** Liberation!... I was already free but I have a tendency to always be a little bit of an outsider, a little bit out of touch with what is surrounding me.

**H.U.O. :** And as such always free. What are these drawings that I cannot understand very well that you call "Janelas" ("Windows")?

**A.V. :** It is a script for a slideshow. This work is going to be assembled in January at CAM. If you could come and see the exhibition it would be great!...

**H.U.O. :** Yes, I'll come. And it is seen from the outside of the houses, isn't it? Yesterday I was on a terrace and I could see an elderly woman through a window who was watching TV.

**A.V. :** Ah, but that's extraordinary! This piece was made from the home of Helena Almeida and Artur Rosa who let us photograph the scenes we wanted. It was Eduardo Nery who took me photographs.

**H.U.O. :** Helena Almeida was a great friend of yours, wasn't she?

**A.V. :** Yes, we were rather good friends. And besides I think that she is very important as an artist, one of the best of her generation (independently of art forms).

**H.U.O. :** Are you still friends?

**A.V. :** Not really because in the last couple of years Helena Almeida has withdrawn herself a lot from everybody.

**H.U.O. :** She was a friend at the time. Were you part of a group of artists?

**A.V. :** We had a group, some of them already connected with Eduardo Nery. We were friends with Luís Noronha da Costa, Helena Almeida, Artur Rosa, Manuel Costa Cabral and Graça Costa Cabral, Martim Avillez, José Nuno Câmara Pereira and Mercês Câmara Pereira, Luísa Constantina Ataíde Costa Gomes, Marie Canto da Maya, Jorge Martins, Tomás Borba Vieira and others...

**H.U.O. :** The other question that still has to do with the 'Windows' arises out of this extraordinary photograph with windows from Lisbon. Tell me about these drawings.

**A.V. :** It is a montage. I placed a piece of glass that I carefully broke into small fragments over a photograph that already existed.

**H.U.O. :** Then it is not a collage, but a two-dimensional or three-dimensional montage. But it is about the "travel"; the aeroplane, the boat, etc., recurring themes in your work, as if you had your "home" on the one side and your "luggage" on the other!

**A.V. :** That theme is very, very important. As you've already understood, I lived on the Island of Sao Miguel until I was 19 that is, until I began studying in Lisbon. But my mother was from the mainland and she lived in Coimbra and, therefore, for a great many years we travelled by ship to the mainland to spend the Summer. Later on, already as a student, we began traveling by aeroplane, which was a bit complicated because we never knew whether or not we would arrive at our destination, at least on the date set. There was a large airport on the Island of Santa Maria but after that we still had to catch another small aeroplane from Sata to go to the Island of Sao Miguel where there was an airport that was a pasture where the cows alternated with the comings and goings of the aeroplanes in the same space.

**H.U.O. :** It was an adventure then, and all that are memories of your travels. Then there is this house "Ocultação/Desocultação" ("Hiding/Unhiding"). Can you tell me about this house, which is a cartography that allows the spectator to go in, and that is a very important project.

**A.V. -** Yes, yes, I don't know, but I like this piece. At that time I was about to leave to the United States in 1978, and I was very restless and not very well. It is a house in "suspension" that hands the entire experiencing and reading space over to the spectator.

**H.U.O. :** It is a house of expectation, things are awaited for. Can you tell me about such awaiting time ... there are sentences on the floor. What are these words?

A.V. : They are wishes.

H.U.O. : Then it's a house of wishes...

A.V. : No, of awaiting, of expectation, and still of suspension.

H.U.O. : Is it an evolving house?

A.V. : It is to come to be, it is not yet.

H.U.O. : After that there is another house that looks like a tunnel, an interiorized house, an empty corridor.

A.V. : It is a passage and an initiation. Painting is also a passage, or rather, everything is a passage.

H.U.O. : It can be a metaphor about your work.

A.V. : Yes, but always with the body.

H.U.O. : Then there is an exhibition under the title "Estendal, Texturas, Cicio e Percurso" ("Washing Line, Textures, Cycle and Path").

A.V. : It was commissioned by Museu Nacional do Traje and it was intended for the blind.

H.U.O. : One can understand that it is very tactile.

A.V. : It was necessary for it to be fully sensorial and tactile.

H.U.O. : To allow everything to be touched.

A.V. : Even more than touched; there were sounds and smells such as of the laundry bleached with ashes, wish was the "laundry wash" method that I saw as a child. The floor was varied with differentiated materials, such as gravel or sand, etc.

H.U.O. : And how was the painting touchable?

A.V. : There was no painting. There was a line where fabrics with different textures were hanging.

H.U.O. : A bit like a washing line.

A.V. : Yes, or like the very cycle of laundry, which is washed, put out to dry, ironed and finally stored. That was the general theme of the exhibition.

H.U.O. : In the midst of all that there is once again a boat. (laughter)

A.V. : Yes!? There is no doubt that I need to make a trip by ship and as a matter of urgency. On a real ship that does not look like a floating shopping centre. I would rather have it on a cargo ship where one experiences a pure and hard trip. I once travelled on one that was going to Leixoes (Porto) where I got off.

H.U.O. : Then there is the work "Diário de Cinco Dias" ("Diary of Five Days") that surprised me and that seems like a return to painting; is it ironic?

H.U.O. : Yes, it's very ironic. It's a standardized landscape with moons, houses, flowers and wings. Then there are also some plaster fragments of demolished buildings, of what is left from the traces of their inside... almost like a skin.

**H.U.O. :** It is painting and it is not painting, and there are three dimensions. There is also a very mysterious work called “Constelação Peixes” (“Constellation of Pisces”).

**A.V. :** It was made on the Island of Faial where I was at a symposium. In the end, each person presented their work. My choice of place was the Capelinhos volcano that emerged after a series of earthquakes in 1959. I chose to perform in the volcano’s crater where I wanted the shape of the constellation of Pisces to appear outlined by hand-made torches that for such reason only lasted for one hour and thirty minutes. The extension of the shape was four hundred metres so that the people at the top of the volcano could see and feel it rightly.

**H.U.O. :** The dimension is huge!

**A.V. :** Yes, it was a very intense and emotional experience that I really enjoyed accomplishing.

**H.U.O. :** These are projects that were developed. Do you have any projects that have not been developed?

**A.V. :** Yes, I have several. To start with, a commission for ICEP (presently AICEP - Trade & Investment Agency) for a fashion stand that I enjoyed doing but that ended badly. After that I had a commission for the Saint Paul Cathedral (Macao) to make a tent to celebrate a Christmas mass. And another one for Lisbon, in 1994, where I presented works with light projections on two buildings in Lisbon and one intervention in a building in ruins on Rua do Alecrim. I would very much have liked to have developed the first and the last one.

**H.U.O. :** A great project that was developed is “Casa Desabitada” (“Uninhabited House”), which is an extremely beautiful project in an empty house. Can you tell me about this installation?

**A.V. :** In the beginning it was complicated to find somebody who wanted to produce it, and it was an expensive production. But after a couple of years, I managed to have Jorge Silva e Melo, the Director of the theatre group “Artistas Unidos”, accept it enthusiastically... which was a great gift. It was a very provocative proposal in between theatre and inhabited cinema and that surprised even myself. There was a lot of emphasis put on the role of the observer. There were also water sounds, a discussion and finally, a voice, which was heard every now and then and that said that such space was a private home and, therefore, that it could not be occupied by strangers, inviting people to leave.

There were also five videos always shown through mirrors with staged angles but never in direct projection. Finally, there was a neon sign with the word “Look” that also offered a double view because by way of another mirror its contrary could be read, that is, “Kool”. I think that the entire exhibition revolved around this binomial of being one thing but also its contrary.

**H.U.O. :** What is the video for you, given that you always work with installation, the space... ?

**A.V. :** Maybe it is the replacement for things.

**H.U.O. :** Or then the absence...

**A.V. :** Yes, maybe rather the absence.

**H.U.O. :** Then there is the text, which amazes me.

**A.V. :** The things do not exist themselves but there is the text that leaves the spectator with the possibility of obtaining an image, a personalized and freer visualization.

**H.U.O. :** The History of Art once again enters into your work. What is the role of such appropriation?



**A.V. :** In the case of Manet and “Le Déjeuner sur L’Herbe 77”, it’s a painting that i like very much, and it was also a pretext to give it body, playing with its virtual and real sides.

**H.U.O. :** And the Venus de Milo?

**A.V. :** I don’t really know, but maybe it was its solemnity and distance.

**H.U.O. :** What advice would you give to a young artist?

**A.V. :** To make space for discovery.