

**Ricardo Nicolau, 2004**

**THAT FROM WHICH I AM EXCLUDED**

“The character who gives his name to Adolfo Bioy Casares’ most famous novel, *The Invention of Morel*, believed he had found a “scientific framework of methods for overcoming absence”: a machine which reproduces intermittently and repetitively (in a “terrible eternal loop”) the actions of whoever it records, setting in motion a series of characters who “appear to be circulating in another world, with which our own has made a chance encounter”. Does a better definition of ghosts exist? Or rather, does a better definition of images exist?

This machine has clear similarities to cinema, but also to theatre. Just as the first system of images - closely linked to extremities of settling and motion- involves a blurring between recording, memory, and an ongoing re-enactment; just as the theatre relies on an insistence on repetition (the scenes begin again, phrases are restated).

Morel’s machine differs from cinema, at least as we know it, in that it did not merely produce images in their conventional manner but attempted to achieve a fidelity which was not betrayed by the sensations of touch and smell. That invention gave life to a highly sophisticated sort of hologram, firm to the touch, capable of being smelt<sup>1</sup>. This hinted at a path which cinema has, on occasion, seemed to want to follow (with 3D images, Smell-O-Vision films), but which it rejected in favour of other realist conventions; it hinted at what João Mário Grilo defined as its “lost and unattainable model»<sup>2</sup>.

Some of the questions raised by the artist Ana Vieira’s latest project are linked precisely to the bringing to life of recorded images, and to the various protocols which give them life. What contract can be agreed with spectators so that, as in *The Invention of Morel*, they believe, albeit for a short time, that they are looking at real presences, physical objects? More importantly, how can the revelation of the mechanism, the acceptance of artifice, be turned into a revelation about the nature of images?

The truth is that in this work, *Casa Desabitada*, Ana Vieira succeeds in imprinting a heightened sense of physical presence, even if it is negated almost immediately. She does not use complex devices, she does not present Morelian hyper-holograms, but by using fairly unsophisticated devices she succeeds (we will see how) in making us believe that we are entering a physically occupied, inhabited house. Moreover, we believe that in some way we are invading privacies, consciously spying. The artist has ultimately carried out the ancient concept of treating the house as more than a theme or pretext: five years ago, when giving her retrospective exhibition in Serralves, she stated “In two rooms, {to go} to try that which appealed to {her} from the start, to treat the house like an object and objective, that is, like an emotive body of recollections”<sup>3</sup>. This was the natural result, for someone who created “environments”; she stooped over partition walls, outlined floor plans, built corridors; for someone who, since the 1960s, has come to favour a relationship of transfusion between interior and exterior, between light and dark, and the dilation of perception set in motion by the transporting of the spectator into the physical space of the exhibition. Additionally, Ana Vieira did not choose to try to transform a museum or a gallery into a house - to make them private spaces. The floor of this building really was inhabited, and has visible signs of this occupation, which are important for this project.

This house opens directly onto a room, where we find a sofa, a carpet, a lamp, nothing particularly novel. We immediately hear sounds, some of which are easily recognisable, like the flow of water in one part of the house (the bathroom?), a

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discussion in another room, and an anodyne, mechanical voice which asks us to leave the house. The trap is set: we have to see and hear everything. Later on, we see that the figures we are spying on represent the same scene ad infinitum. Like Morel, the artist succeeds here in bringing to life a series of ghosts: in exploring this house, with its signs of recent and less recent occupation (faded paintwork, wallpaper half falling off), we hear voices from inside some (closed) rooms, we manage to peek into others (whose doors are barely ajar) and to glimpse, through various mirrors, the characters who appear to inhabit them. Anyone who remains in the house for any length of time realises that the voices, noises, gestures are repeated over and over, always with the same rhythm, mechanically. We then realise that the people we are watching, and the dialogues we are listening to, must have been recorded. As David Hume commented in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, "Repetition neither discovers nor causes anything in the objects, but has an influence only on the mind".

What we are trying to observe through the gaps in the doors corresponds, therefore, to an image. This image establishes from that moment a tension between presence and absence (or appearance of life) and is recorded by the very important detail that we are able to see only through those mirrors. It follows that if there is a visual device that we know how to use, it is the mirror. We master their protocols perfectly - and acquired experience has taught us that they do not lie, they do not interpret objects: "If the mirror 'names' {...}, it names only a specific object, and it always names only the object before it. In other words, whatever the specular image is, its origins and its physical substance are determined by an object, which we call the referent of the image"<sup>4</sup>. This implies that the reflected object must therefore exist at that precise moment - the image cannot be produced without it, the relation between object and image being the relation between two presences, without any intervention.

In *Casa Desabitada* there are mirrors which enable us to see scenes which are apparently occurring live, but outside of our field of vision. It is through these that, peering through the door of the kitchen, we see hands preparing a meal; in another room we see a table being laid for several guests; in another, someone trying on various clothes; and in yet another, a couple dancing. From a technical perspective, these are images projected onto a wall, reflected by mirrors. This method requires a meticulous approach, the measuring of angles, and an understanding of the catoptric apparatus; but for the visitor, mirrors represent, above all, an act of faith: if we see them through a mirror, it is because those objects, those people, are physically present. Because this is how mirrors function, because we have had our whole lives to learn how to use them. It is therefore even more disconcerting to see how the mirror can emphasise an absence, rather than showing a presence in a particular place - to have to accept that those convincing inhabitants, who ignore us (our eyes never meet), could not in fact be aware of our intrusion. Will we continue to be voyeurs, faced with images, in the complete impossibility of our being caught by those we are gazing at?

It then becomes clear that we can never be seen by those whom we are spying on. But we do not cease to be permanently on display to the other visitors, who catch us slipping our head and shoulders through the gaps in the doors, trying to look through the keyholes of the locked rooms. In some parts of the house we surprise ourselves, suddenly reflected in a mirror, which shows us instead of aiding another attempt to peek into another blind spot. And what is the meaning behind all this? What can be glimpsed is sparse, fragmentary, disappointing - to some extent, forensic material. Seeing, the act of seeing (Look is written here in neon), must always have its opposite; everything it hides.

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If *Casa Desabitada* talks about intrusion, casting us as intruders who are permanently invited to leave (over and over, an airport-like voice can be heard asking us to leave), it is because Ana Vieira has decided to address, above all, everything that the images do not show. Above all, it casts us as voyeurs in order to emphasize the futility of always wanting to observe more. I shall explain further. As spectators, we are (too) used to trying to see, to wanting to see everything. We are used to looking at artistic works as an act of understanding evidence. But in this work, mirrors, which should help us in this task, are not merely aids to curiosity, prostheses which enable us to spy even behind a corner: above all, they focus on a notion which links particular systems of images (although not all) to the exercising of a right to see. As in a certain kind of cinema that of Straub, for example, or Antonioni – Ana Vieira separates bodies, presents unusual angles, wide shots, and focuses on (reflects) empty, sterile areas. She constantly presents us with the disappointment (small perversion) of the “out of frame” shot. Against a certain tyranny of visibility, the artist detaches the work from what is shown: is it not the case that *Casa Desabitada* lives off what is hidden, what is omitted?

The guests for whom the table is laid are never seen; no outfit is chosen, there is only an unbroken succession of outfits; the dancing couple are never seen in full (we see him or her, or fragments of the two); the cook never presents real dishes; the lively discussion is invested with a tension which is not resolved, which has no conclusion. The whole house is imbued with a type of transnarrative tension, emphasised by the rotational eternity to which images and sounds are subjected. The discussion, or the scene, which we are trying hear with our ears pressed hard against a closed door (which does not open) is paradigmatic of this type of tension: this verbal quarrel is not out of the ordinary, and, like all discussions, does not have a true meaning, or lead to the clarification of a truth, or at least to a conclusion, and is only continued for the “small” triumph of having the last word.

With no genuine narration, and with multiple situations in the balance, the spectators are allowed (asked) to wander about the house, and to invent their place, their paths. This does not mean that the installation was set up arbitrarily. Far from it: the space is, above all, defined by images and sounds, viewing and listening points being essentially sought out. This equates to saying that, in response to the doxa of strict visibility, it would have been necessary to control fairly precisely the level of sound and the location of the speakers (testing the reverberation of the walls). The simulated displacement of the spectator is the result of a polished and painstaking work of arranging sounds and visuals, to which Ana Vieira seems to attach exactly the same importance.

The length of the visit obviously does not have to be equal to the total length of the images captured, plus the length of the various sounds recorded: this experience is almost comparable to a type of inhabited cinema, which is equivalent to viewing from a cartographical perspective the images we can or cannot follow above all the places we decide to occupy, the paths to be invented, the fragments of narrative to be constructed.

I do not seek to claim that Ana Vieira is concerned with rethinking cinema in this work, or with deconstructing its units of meaning – her work cannot be reduced to this, or any other, type of programme. I do not even seek to liken her experiment to a sort of contemporary version of what, in the 1960s and 70s, came to be called *Expanded Cinema*, and which more recently has been instrumental in reflecting on contemporary video installations. It is clear that what we have here are various film projections, visitors who must move around (otherwise, they will quite simply not understand the piece), an

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alteration of the spectator's physical relationship with the image, a clear move towards polysensorial experience; but, on further reflection, the uniqueness of *Casa Desabitada* results precisely from its absolute divergence from the main requirements of expanded cinema, and of some recent video installations: the absolute visibility of the projector and of the projection process, an almost sculptural involvement (or screen-object). Here, on the contrary, the projectors are hidden, and screens are dispensed with. The idea is to forget that we are looking at previously recorded scenes. More importantly, we must not be allowed to forget this all the time, so that - once the belief that we are witnessing live presences has evaporated - we rapidly discover a vague point of corruption, a wrinkle in the protocol. When the mirror does not succeed in convincing us of the presence.

That point comes when we see the people there (in front of us?) as images. When what I glimpse through the doors leaves no room for me, I am excluded - Barthes stated that the image is that from which I am excluded; when the world is full without me. The first time that the narrator of Bioy Casares's book (a fugitive exiled on the island where Morel is using his recording machine) tries to interact with a person, he senses an absence in the characters he is spying on. The woman whom he has been observing for days, and with whom he finally attempts to speak (exposing himself to the risk of being caught) appears, against all logic, not even to notice or hear: "It was not as if she had not heard me, as if she had not seen me; rather it seemed that her ears were not used for hearing, that her eyes could not see". This is exactly as it is in Ana Vieira's *Casa Desabitada*, where, records at the ready, "the machines would eternally project the new week".

**Catalogue *Casa Desabitada*. Ana Vieira. Lisbon: Artistas Unidos, 2004**

**Catalogue *Ana Vieira: Muros de Abrigo / Shelter Walls; Ponta Delgada [Azores], Museu Carlos Machado, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2010, pp. 238-240 (org. Paulo Pires do Vale)***

## FOOTNOTES

**1** This is how Morel describes his invention: "I began to search for waves and vibrations, to devise instruments to receive and transmit them. I obtained, with relative facility, the olfactory sensations; the so-called thermal and tactile ones required all my perseverance./ It was also necessary to perfect the existing methods. My best results were a tribute to the manufacturers of phonograph records. For a long time now we have been able to state that we need have no fear of death, at least with regard to the human voice. Photography and motion pictures have made it possible to retain images, although imperfectly. I directed this part of my work towards the retention of the images that appear in mirrors./ With my machine, a person or an animal or a thing is like the station that broadcasts the concert you hear on the radio. If you turn the dial for

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the olfactory waves, you will smell the jasmine perfume on Madeleine's throat, without seeing her. By turning the dial of the tactile waves, you will be able to stroke her soft, invisible hair and learn, like the blind, to know things by the hands. But if you turn all the dials at once, Madeline will be reproduced completely, and she will appear exactly as she is; you must not forget that I am speaking of images extracted from mirrors, without sounds, tactile sensations, flavours, odours, temperatures, all synchronised perfectly an observer will not realise that they are images". Cf. Bioy Casares, Adolfo; *The Invention of Morel*. Edições Antígona, Lisbon, 1984. pp. 96, 97.

**2** Cf. Grilo, João Mário; "As imagens de Morel", in *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens*, n.º 4, December 1986, pp. 77-80.

**3** Pinharanda, João; "Ana Vieira. O teatro da pintura", in *Arte Ibérica*, n.º 20, December/January 1999, p. 13.

**4** Eco, Umberto; *Sobre os Espelhos e Outros Ensaios*, Difel, Lisbon, 1989, p. 24.

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