

# With the Sweat of your Brow

*Ruth Rosengarten: The title of this exhibition – With the Sweat of your Brow – has a clear biblical allusion. In the Book of Genesis, the sweat of the brow is a consequence of the loss of Paradise... and Paradise only becomes Paradise once it is lost, once it is in the past. So the biblical allusion has to do with work – with the physical labour that produces the sweat of Adam's brow – and also with a loss, a loss of a place and a time.*

Cristina Ataide: This exhibition has to do with a reconstruction of a past, of my past.

*RR: What we have is an installation occupying two rooms. In the first room, you've put ten wooden kneading troughs.*

CA: I got these in Alcains, which is where I spent my youth. I asked some women who live there to lend me the kneading troughs in which they make bread. I specifically wanted objects that had been used, objects imbued with memory.

*RR: In these kneading troughs, you've draped pieces of white cotton...*

CA: These "awnings" are used to wrap the bread dough before it is leavened. On these cloths I have placed objects, a single one in each kneading trough. These are objects that signify for me the particular reality that I experienced in the region of Beira Baixa.

*RR: You've placed here bread, olive oil...*

CA: There is also thistle, which is used to curdle milk for cheese-making, grains of barley, wool, slate, and granite – stone that abounds in that region.

*RR: So these are all products that allude to a specific local reality – one might refer to them as metonymies of the place. In this sense, each object not only transports a local memory, but also, for you, signifies that locality.*

CA: Each object does signify the locality, a mood that is particular to that region. It transports the memory of small things – the gestures, smells, sounds and colours that render that place unique, and it is the memory of these things that I wish to evoke.

*RR: The products you have chosen are almost always "raw" – in that distinction made by Lévi-Strauss between the raw and the cooked – with the important exceptions of bread and olive oil. These are ancient – even biblical – products of human labour.*

CA: Bread and olive oil belong to a cultural reality. There is a mixture of elements here, of the raw and the cooked, the natural and cultural. In the first room, I've collected products from that region and placed them there with no real intervention on my part other than their placement and grouping. In the second room, there are other objects which I have made in a more symbolic fashion. These are fragments of branches or bits of trunk from trees from that region, which I cut into relatively small pieces and around which I have moulded some clay. I get hold of these bits of tree and I touch and handle them as though I wanted to take care of this reality, of this landscape.

*RR: These fragments of are handled in such a way as also to invite handling on the part of the spectator too, who thus becomes a participant rather than a mere spectator.*

CA: I would like to change the normative notion of the work of art as untouchable – as something which distances viewers; the notion that a work of art is addressed only to sight and not to touch or smell. I would like these pieces to invite handling, to invoke touch, to invite the spectator to lay claim to them.

*RR: In addition to being extremely tactile – in fact sculptural – objects, these are also apparently symbolic. They allude, at least formally, to the language of ritual, of magic...*

CA: Yes, they are in a sense magic objects. You might say that when we lay claim to them, they transform our lives. It is as if through them, we are inhabited by the landscape itself. When I was making them, I felt almost god-like – as if I was moulding a tree. These objects are placed on a large table, almost ritualistically, as if on an altar. On the walls, I've hung drawings – all of them landscapes. This is my attempt at getting close to that landscape, trying to understand it and transport it onto paper, adding my sensations in that place.

**RR:** *In this installation, you seem to be attempting in some way to summarise or take stock of your earlier work, to deal, in a synthetic manner, with a series of concerns that have been evident in your work over the last few years. I am thinking, for instance, of the opposition nature-culture, or of the relationship between the human being and the external world. But one of the features that is most evident in this installation, or at least in the language you use to talk about it, is its autobiographic slant, the return to the site of childhood. There is implicit in this an almost nostalgic notion of "origins": When I was thinking about your work, the etymological root of the word "nostalgia" came to mind, the Greek word nostos, which means the return journey, the voyage back. Do you feel, in the autobiographic aspect of this work, that you are taking stock of your life and work – a kind of nostos? Would you define this as a nostalgic step?*

CA: Yes, entirely so, at least from the slant you give to the concept of nostalgia, its etymologic root. I began working on this project thinking: "what can I do that will bring me closer to this region, to this place that belongs to my past"?

**RR:** *Why did you feel the need to return to this site of the past?*

CA: I spent a part of my childhood – from the age of four to the age of sixteen – in Alcains, in the region of Beira and after that, I only returned there on holidays. I think I had some unfinished business with the place, perhaps because I was still so young when I left, and I wanted to reformulate these issues. I think that in the end, I came to understand them better, to understand better the place itself – both as essence and as lived reality. There is much that took place then with which I still feel a great affinity and which I miss – the solitude of the countryside, the silence, the hot, windless nights. I only understood that I missed these things when I came to experience them again.

**RR:** *So it was in repetition – in the re-staging of these moments of silence and solitude – that you took cognisance of the lack that had already been. One might then say that nostalgia is a kind of slippage in space and in time... Here, in this nostos, you appropriate a rural language. Was your childhood in Alcains actually a rural childhood?*

CA: Not properly speaking, no. My father was a doctor, and the village was big. We lived in a middle-class house in the midst of a rural context. But that rural way of life penetrated the house, because many of my father's appointments with patients were paid in kind. So coming down the stairs,

I would find bread, eggs, chickens, olive oil, sausages, things that my father's patients will have left in payment.

**RR:** *There is, in what you say, an implicit opposition between town and country. I'm wondering if this polarisation is not the result of a romanticised view. We have here someone clearly cosmopolitan, turning to look at her roots in a rural area with a sense of loss. Do you think you have a kind of romance with the countryside? When I say "romantic" in this context, I am referring to a kind of love affair with the idea of origins, a love affair with the "primitive", where all that is more rudimentary and simple is seen as somehow healthier and more authentic.*

CA: It's not an emotional romantic vision. What I'm concerned with is redefining that location for myself, meeting those people again, ordering my memories. I don't actually miss this rural existence about which you are speaking. All my memories of the place are basically about the silence, rather than about the rural existence per se or the manual or communal aspect of rural work because, as I said, in this rural existence, we were really outsiders. I'm basically an urban person – but what I do miss is the empty space, the solitude, the people....

**RR:** *So what exactly is your role now upon returning here to this location? You remain obviously an outsider, but upon your return, you have to deal with the people who live and work there, whose contribution you need in order to make your work possible.*

CA: Perhaps I need to do this now because I regret not having got closer to those people when I lived there.

**RR:** *So it is in this that the work acts as a means of recovery not so much of a time lost as of a time never had?*

CA: Precisely. It's a means of reconstructing a past that probably never existed. It's almost like telling a story, making a narrative of what ought to have taken place... What I am doing here is a means of dealing with this memory, and at the same time constructing it.

*RR: Here we enter into a domain that is almost anthropological, because you are now playing the role of an observer and a participant, which is the traditional role of the anthropologist – someone who is simultaneously inside and outside. Hal Foster has theorised this tendency in contemporary art, for which he uses the term the ethnographic turn, which in fact he, Foster, criticises. How do you feel about such a reading of your work, how do you feel about the role of artist as ethnographer? How do you feel about a reading of your work that sees it as a physical trace – as evidence, if you like – of an ethnographic or anthropological procedure?*

CA: I have not intention of producing a work of anthropology. I don't want to invoke a "scientific" reading; I don't even remotely wish to ally myself to this anthropological vein because in order to do so, I would have to undertake a much more detailed and profound form of research. This exhibition has much more to do with affect than with rigorous research – and with individual relationships. I want, through the work, to get close to these people that I once knew.

*RR: One of the reasons why I ask about the "anthropological" nature of your work is because I felt that such a reading was already implicit in some of your earlier work. I am now thinking more specifically of your collaboration with Graça Pereira Coutinho, the research it involved, its interactive component, the interviews with women, the way you used this documentation in the final work... there was an action which was not merely symbolic, not merely within the symbolic frame of "art" but that was also more social.*

CA: At the time of my collaboration with Graça, we were interested in touching people, in being touched by them. In deciding to work together, we embarked upon a project with somewhat different characteristics from our own individual work. We joined forces by turning not inwards but outwards. That work did indeed stem from research, from interviews. Things one produces are invariably linked to one another. But fundamentally, the present exhibition has to do with me and my relationship with the Beira region.

*RR: There are other questions that seem pertinent here. You evince, in all your work, an acute aesthetic sensibility – a sense of the beautiful, an innate sense of plastic organisation, an eye for "good composition". Do you feel that your initial profession as a designer has influenced your artistic production? Is this sense of design useful to you, or does it trip you up?*

CA: Perhaps that question trips me up! There are things that I find really easy to do and precisely because they seem easy, I begin to have doubts, to question myself as to whether they are efficacious or sufficiently strong. So sometimes I find myself trying to undermine this aestheticising tendency. Frequently, when I am drawing, I rub out what I've done, or I draw it with my left hand. I don't feel that my career as a designer interferes at all with my involvement in making art. They represent two entirely different ways of thinking.

*RR: The other question I wanted to ask you is a related one and has to do with the readymade, your use of already existing objects. In your choice of objects, you seem to have a sculptural eye, an eye to form, design, shape. Now the principle of the Duchampian readymade is – at least theoretically – one of plastic or retinal indifference. Contrariwise, there is a tradition that one might term surrealist or, in effect, Picassian, a tradition where the re-utilisation of already existing objects involves giving them new meanings through a process of recontextualisation. Do you fit better into this tradition? I am thinking of your earlier use of objects – the chimneys, the parapets, the bathtubs, and now the kneading troughs. These are all objects that, in themselves, have a powerful plastic and even symbolic presence. How would you define your relationship to the readymade, your relationship to the already-existing objects which you use in your work?*

CA: During the time I had the marble factory, Made In, in Alenquer, I would travel there every day and on the road, I would see these incredible lorries going past transporting anything and everything imaginable. I took everything in – every species of object: agricultural and industrial implements, even bridges, roofs, everything.... The most incredible forms would pass before me and I began to think that it was ridiculous to invent even more objects when such

extraordinary ones existed already. It just didn't seem worth while inventing anything else. I began to look for these objects. In the first exhibition I made using such found objects, I used them as a source, altering their scale and the material out of which they were made, or making other small changes – but basically using the objects as such. Now I find the objects I need in order to say what I want to say. It is not by chance that I choose those objects – these are not random choices but rather choices made in order to communicate. In that sense, they are not readymades – they have little to do with the readymade properly speaking.

***RR: You speak frequently of “wanting to say” or “to communicate.” It seems to me that the communicative aspect is very important in the conception of your work.***

CA: Sometimes this may not be fully explicit in the work, but for me the need to make is also a need to communicate. Sometimes, this has to do with a will to catharsis, a need to expurgate, a kind of purification of the self.

***RR: But catharsis is the opposite of communication – catharsis is not communicative....***

CA: Can one transform that which is individual into something universal when this is expressed as a message?

***RR: Perhaps... although personally, I have problems with the very notion of “message.” Catharsis is always a means of dealing with something unresolved in the past and in this sense, catharsis always involves a relationship with time. Now time is implicit in this work – there are two temporalities here, the time of childhood, and the present. The work oscillates between these two temporalities, and it is in this oscillation that the nostalgia that we discussed earlier resides.***

CA: This exhibition is an incorporation of these two temporalities, a way of linking the past and the present, my means of restructuring this relationship for myself and visualising it for others.

*Ruth Rosengarten*