

Being Space-Time

Where do we find Cristina Ataíde's work when we try to localize it on the map of the art of our days? Looking at her body of work (and how it evolved since the 1980s, but especially if we focus on the pieces produced in the 1990s and 2000s) it seems impossible to represent it in any defined place or territory. Her work materializes as a multiplication of events, not only because it uses a plurality of languages, but also because it is simultaneously placed (or drifts) in several locales of the imaginary map where the products of contemporary artistic creation confront and permeate with all other dimensions of natural and human life.

This multiplication we speak of can be justified by simply naming the disciplines the artist engages with (sculpture, installation, drawing, photography, performance...) but is transformed from a simple multiplication of languages into something more complex: events drifting in space and time. This is possible firstly because the artist imposes the coexistence of different and complementary ways of doing (and seeing) in the same artwork or exhibition; but also, and mainly, because by denying the simple cumulative effect of this multiplication of discourses, she makes it clear that memory (what memory constructs) lies at the center of her work and affirms it as a key element in her artistic practice, as her sufficient and necessary resource. Memories; this matter that feeds her work, which densifies around events and concrete objects, surviving them, replacing and subjectifying them, it is a matter that has no exterior, it drifts through space and time as a being/object, it grows denser or thinner, changing itself and what it touches. Feeding from movement (the journey), from an estrangement (travels to foreign cultures) that becomes identification (the desire to understand those cultures) – the artist exists in action in time and in space.

We have already mentioned the concept of performance. We should clarify that, in the context of Cristina

Ataíde's plastic oeuvre, this concept is understood in its broadest and most generic sense (much like we understand all actions of material production by an artist in or outside their studio), and, in the case of Cristina Ataíde, as a form of intermediation between studio production and the exhibition. Partly because of her travels, a significant part of her work does not hang from her studio walls, but is outside: works (or parts of works) built in natural or urban contexts that result from the collection and incorporation of natural and transformed (by human action) materials. The work the artist does or bases on the outdoors is rich in performative moments (often viewed or participated by the population of the urban scenarios where the artist intervenes, or simply the result of her solitary actions/travels in nature) that only indirectly reflect on the pieces presented in exhibition contexts, but always directly affect their meaning.

The work of Cristina Ataíde is a solitary work, even if it is often prepared in public and receives some kind of input from it, it is her own work, drawing from her, from her body, from her social and cultural context (from the contradictions between what she thinks and what she feels, what she knows and what she desires). For these same reasons, it is also a solidary work: the artist considers (integrates) the social and cultural reality where she intervenes and from which she draws her influences, and she aims to offer it to her viewers as a transformative poetic reading. Her work is feminine and historically determined: emanating from her, it emanates from the body and the mind of a concrete woman. Nevertheless, it is also universal: while denying all militant deliberation, her work considers the possibility of poetically engaging its discourse with an intentionality that, being humanist in nature, expresses a global and cosmological ambition.

Adding to the body that works (acts) and poses (meaning that the body is the model of her themes), the

word is a material essential to her artistic practice. Being physiologically determined (projected as sound/registered as writing) the word is primarily the mental manifestation of that same body, which allows it to exist as an individual thing (some of her collections of collective materials/testimonies are determined by the logic of offering each body its own word). Nevertheless, language is part of an autonomous system that goes well beyond the individual: it exists as a human, historical but universal reality – and the use of the word ends up being, in the work of Cristina Ataíde, the testimony of a manifestation that is as much universal as is the use of figurative images. It is through words that the artist materializes part of her work in the dimension of the performed or desired action. It is also using words that Ataíde realizes the modalities of an expanded relationship with the world as it assimilates, in a continuum of sentences of infinite intention (much like a mantra) the universe of natural and human realities. The artist singles out one verb to preside the long list of meanings she desires to include in her work. In some Indo-European languages (such as the Portuguese) the verb to be is broken into two states of being (one permanent, the essence, *ser*; and the other temporary, the state, *estar*). This verb (*ser*) offers us the possibility to affirm or establish without ambiguity a position in the world that is not only physical, but simultaneously physical and ontological. In the context of Cristina Ataíde's work, and assuming the value of a masculine noun the word *ser* (a being) deserves a further comment.

As she writes “sou...” (I am) or “ser...” (a being / to be) (organized in pages or in linear succession, we will later focus on this formal solution) Cristina Ataíde establishes an alternation between an individual affirmation and a collective orientation; potentially, she could integrate all nouns (in her work and as her work) and all the adjectives stabilized by human language, thus achieving the universality we have referred to. However, the humanistic intentionality of her work forces her to censor (i.e. an action that implies a cut or caesura) the meanings she considers to be negative in the manifestations of our humanity. Doing so, the artist leads the vertigo of

her desire to “be everything” into a dimension in which the confessional becomes the manifestation of a desire for perfection, a desire for moral and ethical, aesthetic and political, personal and interpersonal elevation. Establishing her identity in relation to what surrounds her and to an action she associates with, Cristina Ataíde relativizes the substantive value of the term “Being”. For this reason, her empirical approach and interest in Eastern cultures allows us to explore, in her works, the dimension of forsaking desire and renouncing the world that define them as an artistically productive deviation from the existentialist dichotomy between Being and Nothingness.

Other elements essential to the understanding of the work of Cristina Ataíde are the actual materials (biological, animal and vegetable; geological, metal and stone) the artist incorporates, transforms (manufactures), or figuratively represents in her works. Some complement the others, in the same way that they relate to the word (used to poetically empower them), and others often result from the artist's performative actions: surveys and interventions made with or based on the body (ceremonial wax offerings representing human organs and body parts; series of animal hearts preserved in formaldehyde) and made with and based on the natural or urban landscape; the use of materials transformed by manual or mechanical labor (bronze castings, wood carvings, the use of manually produced paper, stone carving and sculpturing); representation of landscapes and “direct” impression of these landscapes using frottage (the diversity of textures of the ground and urban walls or the multiplicity of the textures of stones, sands, soils, grasses, flowers and woods nature offers the traveler).

Part (the stone, the heart, or the flower) and whole (the mountain, the body, or the island that is also a mountain) match each other, they establish a tension of scales that is played between the territory and the map, between the walked path and the mapping of that path. Sometimes isolated, but almost always in the form of a list of things (seen or yet to be seen, already

done or yet to be made) the word unifies many of these series, revealing an often diaristic/confessional value. In fact, within the work of Cristina Ataíde nothing is made in the abstract (outside a space-time), and rather results from moments of continued reflection, preparation, observation and renewed reflection on what surrounds her, what she plans to do, what she saw and what she experienced.

Cristina Ataíde is a true traveler, her work reveals this passion and increasingly depends on it. Foreign landscapes and cultures (the Indian subcontinent, China or Indochina, North Africa) or landscapes and cultures whose exteriority manifests itself on the margins of Western culture (the Azores) are utilized by the artist to confront us/herself with a desire for timelessness, to merge, diluting contraries. The way she transfers this poetics into the aggressive landscape of cities (New York, São Paulo, Lisbon) sets the measure of her strategy of intervention. Faithful to the tradition of direct engagement (complemented by the ideas of voyage and of performative action), the works of Cristina Ataíde are always about the places she travels through or where she stays for longer periods. In addition to what she collects, realizes and recreates in the course of her travels "abroad", the artist forces herself to find in the cities (where she has her studio, where the museums and the galleries she works with are located) what she finds in the rest of the world, even if those things exist in cities in different, inverse manifestations (loud, violent, disconnected). But is precisely her renounce of the ground of the cities that allows the artist to find her world: the river water and muds, the flowers and the leaves in the forests and gardens, the stones on the mountain paths, the reflexes on the surface of rivers and lakes or the sparkling night skies, the dust and the colors of pure pigment, the balance between life and death.

If the lists of the mountains and mountain summits she travelled or wishes to travel to (indicated in her drawings with their geographic coordinates and altitude) are

presented as personal goals (where experience, physical challenge and the purification of the mind poetically complete each other), the listing of locations and combat values evoked by urban landscapes and registered on the frottages of these spaces are presented as the personal testimony of a political and social reflection, which the artist desires could represent the face of another human reality. A reality to which Cristina Ataíde (a western artist integrated in a western system of values) inescapably belongs.

While traveling (or creating art about the desire to travel) Cristina Ataíde creates work about what she sees, about what she wants to see, and about what she senses (or anticipates), about that which she finds, and about that which is hidden (or eclipsed) from our sight. The process of fixing the experiences establishes that which we may designate as being derived from languages, time and space: for her writing is like drawing and drawing is a writing. Under (or with) a prevalence of colors (the whites, the reds and, still yet, the blacks), making use of mainly paper and stone (especially marble) as her chosen mediums, utilizing the book as a complementary metaphoric element (theme/form/substrate), continually controlling (ritualizing) the gestures of the studio and the close management of materials (except for the frequent intervention of chance, in the dispersal of paint atop a surface) Cristina Ataíde obtains two-dimensional forms (by layering, pressing, or rubbing materials), linear forms (controlling the mark of the pencil) and even circular forms, in a play of forms and backgrounds: the picture plane being totally filled with color, linear forms traversing the background or forms in expansion/dispersion, originating from a central (circular) point, across the color fields.

Within these three formal realities, which the artistic language of Modernism has isolated since Malevich (the colored plane, or the flat geometric figure, the circle and the line, which may exist either isolated or as a crossing of lines) Cristina Ataíde gives a special value to line (which she reaches through multiple formal solu-

tions). In principle, nothing could arise as more contrary to the representation of space and non-Euclidian time (which dominates current scientific thought) than the line, with its image of continuum (precisely linear...), defining yet simplifying the forms (which may appear as an outline) – here we are again on the opposite side to the contemporary idea of fractals. But it is armed with this exact instrument of essential representation (the line of the pencil, the line of the awl, the line materialized as string, the linear succession of words written on the wall or paper) and by the wealth of metaphor it allows, that the artist will place her work in space-time. If the line, as a concept and as visual matter, is a way of organizing the world, Cristina Ataíde quickly understood that many lines would be necessary to complete this task; so many, that the original line is transformed into a net; so many, that the line may be composed of many materials: we have already seen the materialization of wires (but also of ribbons), the abstraction of the drawn line upon the wall or paper, the markings in stone; we already accentuated the fact that the artist uses the word as line, writing them as in a successive solution (alignment, chain, sequence) of words (in a book or on a wall) which function as a manifesto, testimony, deposition, mantra...

The conscience, on the part of the artist, of the precariousness of the world (into which the working material, the gestures and the conceptual options of each work are incorporated), become very evident in the drawings wherein the line is established as the visual axis of the image (vertical and central, aggregator and divider). We see, firstly, this line is not obtained by the tracing of a pencil, nor by collage, but by an absence within the color field (the line [string] is lifted only after the entire paper has been covered in pigment); but, more significantly, its path is interrupted – the line is broken, the two parts which run vertically across the surface lose contact with one another; broken as a life breaks, as a word is interrupted, as vision is obliterated; on the other hand, it is this very lapse which permits the two halves of the surface, which the line had divided, to communicate between themselves...

As a result of, and as a framework to all that has been surveyed as material/theme within the art of Cristina Ataíde, we finally must refer, explicitly, to the essential question of space and time in her body of work. There is, in the observation of this relevant reality, a generic truth that applies to all works of art, to all the human effort and all of the natural world: things (ideas, beings) exist and transform, they are captured and understood, in a concrete space and time, by someone who finds themselves also in a space and time which is concrete. That is to say, nothing exists independent of movement, nor of the time in which it is observed, interpolated, transformed. Instead of objects (beings) established and observed in/from Euclidian places (in three dimensions) we should rather think about happenings in space (considering a “where” and “when”) – the work of Cristina Ataíde helps us to think like this.

We may see how concrete examples from some series presented in this exhibition might (empirically) put us on the trail (in the necessity) to understand her work within these parameters. We have a series of drawings, created as superimposed planes, in stratifications and transparencies of color and writing, marked by the central presence of a line, and ruling out the possibility of establishing symmetries with the flat planes of stone, placed on the ground where they give reference to the demarcation of a line. We have references to the city (in this case, moments and places obtained/registered by frottages of the streets of Lisbon, distant from one another). All comes together composed as an antique panorama, but what it gives back to us is a fragmentary reality and never a totality. We have also the exercises of the freeing of the drawing material, through various series of “celestial” images: in black holes or blots of white light (negatives and positives of the same solar coronas of eclipses, simulated here by intentionally thinned liquid paints, battling against earthly gravity and the capillarity of the paper) as well as in the construction of a book, the pages of which actually served as a register to the observation of stars by astronomers. Finally, two conclusive pieces: a line of words, running along the

gallery walls, justifies the title of the exhibition (“being line being”), establishing what we have seen as a desire for a plurality of the artist’s identity and remitted to a logic, simultaneously, of the work as a manifestation of the infinite and the non finito; it is a set of drawings with collages of pressed flowers, result of an action of double meanings: the observation of a procession of Buddhist monks walking over an extensive carpet of flowers deposited there by the faithful, and the gathering of some of these flowers for the realization of a work capable of transferring the poetic sensibility of the reconnection between nature and humanity, the sacred and the profane, time and space, Being and Nothingness. We return to the concept of Being, which in the work of Cristina Ataíde, assumes a sense of identity.

But it is a multiple identity of which we are speaking – we may see the ways in which the artist has ambitions to a subjective dimension of being, and the power of an “all being” – and not of a static identity. The artist’s “way of (possibly) being” is resolved, by and by, as an exploration of the plurality of ways of belonging to the world, in an experiment which drives towards the contradictory dimensions of conquest or transformation of this world, by bonding or incorporating into this world and still, albeit in degrees of less evident explicitness, of the escape or renunciation, of dilution or the ascetic dispensation of this same world. In fact, the work of Cristina Ataíde is for the most part celebratory; it exalts the joy to be (being) in the world. But underlying this larger joy, a sense of nostalgia, a sense and a feeling of loss that each work (image/word) seeks to exorcize: a recollection of the landscapes, a recollection of the body, a recollection of the rituals of the body – it is exactly here that we take up again the idea of memory as another of the axes of her work.

What does the artist recollect? Her history. But also the history of others: the women, those who surround her, women whom she knows, the cultures that are important to her, the landscapes (always humanized whether by the symbolic representations that we make of them,

or by the real intervention of Man upon nature). How does the artist do this exercise in remembrance? Observing and altering, recuperating and changing, poetically manipulating diverse elements (often taking something to its opposite), forgetting what is accessory or overlapping various realities.

The work of Cristina Ataíde, departing from the positive energy it ordains, places us in a field where in the nostalgia of evocation drives towards the magic of convocation. The necessity and ritualization of this convocation of the world is at the core of her work; and the word, as well as the representative image, are resources which she uses to confront the violent difference of scales between the microcosmic representation that art furnishes us with, and the macrocosmic reality that, in vain, we pretend to embrace or understand. The choices, in her work, are not so much tasks of exclusion but of distinction (although at times also of fusion): for example, between the high and low, nature and human, heaven and earth, between good and evil, between insecurity and the long term, between the self and the others...

The fragmentary discourse of her work is that of commentary and illustration. As a verbal discourse it can be devised from a superimposition of an archaic knowledge (which classifies the world) and an experiential knowledge (which experiences the world). Between these two historical time periods of western reason, the idea to desire to know what is exterior to us (to be close to what is different than ourselves) predominates in the work of Cristina Ataíde – for beyond the said magic tone, we have a diaristic and reflexive staging of the work of a naturalist and traveler. Her work is memory and poetry: images of thoughtful silences against the Silence, images of deserts made against the Desert.

*João Pinharanda
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