

AMONG THE WHITE

Conversation with Fernanda Fragateiro and Rui Mendes led by Sara Antónia Matos

The conversation, which is transcribed below, took place on the morning of 22 July 2013 in the White Pavilion of the Museu da Cidade (City Museum) in connection with **R9F6BRANCO**, an exhibition featuring works by Fernanda Fragateiro and Rui Mendes. I asked the authors to lead me among the white, giving me a guided tour through which I would gain insight into the exhibition. In it, white is established as a concept and assumes the condition of a quasi-object, appearing as an environment or a thick, almost tangible mass that we feel as we enter it.

This intangible thickness is related to the nature of the intervention. At root it is founded on a paradox: the white, stripped-down environment that envelops the exhibition, making it a dense and unique piece, is the same white that places it on the threshold of non-existence the minimum boundary of action.

The fact that, on the one hand, it contains pieces that appear in the form of an absence and are evoked through a title-inscription and, on the other, that it houses formal/conceptual signs alluding to works outside the exhibition makes this intervention radically abstract, to the extent that it may present the spectator with difficulties of interpretation as well as certain challenges.

To assess the scale of the gesture involved when the principle that brings something into existence is also that which could destroy or nullify it is to work on the boundary of defencelessness. Moreover, this working principle seems to be shared by both artists, which partly justifies the symbiotic nature of the work on display. The aim of the conversation was therefore to lead me, piece by piece, to the threshold on which need and power work side-by-side simultaneously to bring about the emergence of the place where, in all likelihood, silence and beauty sustain each other.

This exhibition makes clear that contemporary art requires the spectator to undertake work that has long ceased to be merely visual and is also not limited to the physical or experiential. Current artistic practices require an arduous exercise to be carried out that involves a series of specialised representational tools and a period of time in

which to construct the corresponding mechanisms of analysis. Although artists are aware of these questions, they are ultimately questions of a critical and meta-critical nature that should not disturb or alter the result of the artistic work. They can therefore be considered as themes which exist in parallel to the production of the works and which were deliberately not broached in the conversation.

During the dialogue, mention was made of the various contexts that are necessary for the production of analytical tools: a) the context in which the exhibition has appeared and its seminal idea; b) the position adopted by the artists in relation to questions of authorship; c) the methodologies developed by the artists and the collaborations that they established to enable these methodologies to link together; and finally d) each work in particular and the multiple references that contribute to them.

The conversation presented below and the book that it forms part of therefore constitute tools of and for the exhibition which are intended to provide mechanisms of analysis. The decision to transcribe the conversation was justified by the fluidity with which it passed off and the way that the artists took us through the creative process, casting light, as if presenting an image, on a stage to which we rarely have access. The text has undergone a minimum of editing so that the oral tone of the exchange would be retained.

sara antónia matos (sam): Would you take me among the white? How did this joint work come about?

ruí mendes (rm): We didn't take any statement or narrative as a starting point. We were trying out a series of signs, testing a range of materials related to the idea of white. Rather than seeing it as a colour, white was considered as a concept linked to the act of stripping back and the void, characteristics of both our bodies of work.

sam: But there is a direct allusion to colour in the title of the exhibition "R9F6PBRANCO". It sounds like a reference to a Pantone.

fernanda fragateiro (ff): Yes, there is an abstract allusion to a colour but there is also a code that refers to the initials of our name associated with the number/place that the letters occupy in the alphabet together with a P for Pavilion and ending with the word

Branco [white]. The idea for this combination came from Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici's Villa E.1027, in which the name of the house arises from a play on their two names.

sam: In any case, that abstract idea of the chromatic reference is materialised in the 'wall of Pantones' that we see before us. Tell me about this piece.

ff: It's a reprise of Jan Dibbets' work 'A White Wall' (1971), which was bought by the Guggenheim Museum. He took ten shots of the same white wall and as he was taking the photographs he altered the exposure time and the aperture of the camera by applying a mathematical progression so as to obtain a scale of whites which, while being the same, contain a decreasing amount of light, tending towards black. It is a work which actually constitutes an impossibility since what Dibbets formulated at that time was impossible to conserve. Photographs and negatives undergo chromatic changes over time so the work that he conceived no longer corresponds to that which exists today. The exact record of the reality of that light could exist only for a very limited time. Here in this exhibition, we refer to that work precisely because it treats white as an impossibility but we extend it throughout the space, granting it a different scale.

sam: Bearing in mind the importance of certain words in this exhibition, tell us about '(não) esquecer MoMa whites' [(not) forgetting MoMa whites'].

ff: There are five pieces in the exhibition that allude to works or projects by other artists. We have added 'não esquecer' ('not forgetting') to the title of each reference to serve as a reminder of the original piece. In this case, we are evoking a work by Kate Ericson and Mel Zeigler from 1990 which is composed of a shelf on which there are eight bottles of white paint used by different curators to paint exhibition rooms. Each of the eight curators chose a different white, which demonstrates that the white that is chosen is not a matter of indifference, that white is not neutral.

sam: And if we go back a bit? How did this exhibition come about?

rm: As we said before, there was no founding statement. We felt that there were points of contact between our bodies of work, as if we were searching for the same thing, the same white. We also have space in common. Space is our working material. I can't quite recall the slogan that gave

rise to the collaboration but I remember the time when Fernanda asked me to make a scale model of the Portimão fish market (where she created an intervention) and it was there that, without exactly knowing why, we began to exchange ideas about white.

ff: It's curious to note how the signs unfold and the memories are transported from one place to the next. In fact, this scale model was created for the exhibition at the Portimão fish market. The process of creating the scale model involved a discussion between me and Rui about the positives and negatives, the solids and voids, the structures and proportions. I ended up 'paying' for Rui's work with the negatives of the scale model. They are a 'cut-out piece' of the wood from which the object was made. In retrospect, it was another sign that stayed with Rui.

rm: For me, it is a 'void-piece', an initial sign, exchanged between us, about white.

sam: So that might be the root of your collaboration.

rm: Yes, afterwards we began exchanging small texts every now and then, with no defined aim, odd phrases, references to works by other artists which in some way deal with the question of white.

ff: Later, when we were incubating and creating the exhibition, that exchange extended to other people with whom we spoke about the project, particularly artists, architects and curators. When we decided that a project about white could only take place at the White Pavilion, the ideas began to be complemented by materials, objects and words.

rm: I think there was a period when we didn't think about the project as an exhibition. In our minds, it was in the form of a book. We were putting things together to form pages.

sam: You mean that the pieces in the exhibition were not conceived in advance, before the installation. Did they happen here? Did they acquire body and form in situ?

ff: Some did and others didn't. Some pieces were brought from outside (they originate from other projects and situations) and clung onto the space, finding their place. Only those that seemed to fit stayed, making a locus out of each position. Thus, as the fragments adapted to each other and to the space, generating gaps and voids, points of

attraction and separation, the exhibition as a whole gave rise to an atmosphere in which all of the elements - the light, the walls, the materials - work together. The same thing happens in a book, in which the text, graphic areas, images and intentionally blank pages play a necessary role. I still see the exhibition as a book. A book whose pages you flick through in a gesture, where you see text and images, and where the writing does not necessarily take precedence over the illustrations, or vice-versa. At a given moment, it might be more important to focus on the image while in another you might spend more time on the text, or even move intermittently between one and the other.

sam: Do you succeed in developing this parallel between the exhibition and the book?

ff: It's the way that things fall into the space. It has to do with cadence and the way that the pieces appear in each place. Certain phrases appear in isolation. It's necessary to create a gap and turn to the next page, where others appear. The written words fall onto the blank page and each new word that arrives changes what was already there. We undertake a relational exercise in which the elements depend on each other, interact with each other and mutually affect each other within the exhibition space. There is no rigid hierarchy in this exercise. Despite their volume, the sculptural elements do not impose themselves on the text pieces, whose presence is almost immaterial. Even the legends are not just legends. They assume the condition of floor paintings. For this reason, everything establishes a multi-sensorial, body-to-body relationship, regardless of the scale and materiality that it acquires. Thus, the work in the building, the garden, the birds and the people are an integral part of the environment that has been designed here. We were unsure about what was or wasn't part of the work, or up to what point the work could expand. That doubt remains and we do not expect to be able to resolve it.

sam: You're talking about the assembly and layout, which, as you know, are tasks that fall to a curator. In this regard, it's occurred to me to ask you how you have managed the process of working together without using a curator.

ff: At bottom, the work in this place is a conversation between me and Rui in which we talk about memories and desires. We were particularly interested in developing a work in and for this place and not just installing a previously made product in it. For this reason, as you say, the pieces emerged as we experienced and spent time in the

place, as trials, advances, and retreats. Besides that, we wanted to question the conventions that govern what an exhibition is and to determine the extent to which these convictions could be deconstructed and whether or not they constitute an obstacle to the spectator's reception of the work. I'm referring to the way in which the spectator finds what we are offering him or her and whether the presentation of the work as an environment full of immaterial references causes him or her any difficulties of analysis and perception.

rm: The pieces in the exhibition have to do with revealing things that already existed in the place, which lays bare the working process used and the dependency on the White Pavilion. It's not a question of placing or adding things but of working with what already exists. A process of reading the space takes place followed by a work based on that reading. The construction of the 'struts' involves just that. They are in fact structural. They function as anchors-supports of the building and the exhibition. They reinforce the identification of the constituent elements of the space (paved floors, walls, openings and roofs) and establish the dimensions, proportion and scale of our mode of working. From this point on, the various forms of intervention that have been developed correspond to ways of weighing up the structure of the place. The piece entitled 'Bitola' [gauge] is an example of this. It is a construction tool that condenses in itself, in the various rulers, all of the units of measurement required for a particular construction work. We lay it down because it differs from the 'struts', the structural elements, although it has the same volume.

sam: In what field do we find ourselves? That of architecture, or sculpture, or an area where these two fields meet to revise their assumptions and challenge each other?

ff: Yes, we're working in a shared territory to which architecture and the visual arts belong without being exclusive domains. Perhaps we are in that nameless field, shared by both disciplines, and others, to which these works belong.

sam: Could we perhaps call it an area of spatial intervention or of spatiality? Talking about the structural questions that are inherent in architecture and sculpture, how is it that these columns, or 'struts', can enter the space when they are exactly the same height as the building, extending from the floor to the ceiling?

rm: An angle was calculated to make a cut at the top of the wooden beam to create a removable section that would allow the beam to be rolled in and put in place, fitting exactly in the vertical position. The removable section was the first part to be attached to the roof. The rest of the beam was then turned until it fitted into it, leaving the cut visible as part of the construction process.

ff: Throughout the process of designing the parts, special attention was also paid to the plane of the floor, the broadest space. Besides having a wonderful colour, cracks and characteristics, the ground is the place where we walk, where we try things out, advance and retreat. What we place on it delicately touches the surface or creates another floor. For this reason, however minimal the intervention might be, it alters the perception and movement that take place on it.

sam: In choosing to paint two sides of each wooden beam white, how did you decide what to paint and what not to paint?

rm: The rationale was very simple. Depending on the position adopted inside the space, or outside it in the garden, it is always possible to see two sides of each beam at the same time. You either see white or wood. Note that, in some situations when you can only see white, the volume of the beams disappears and the space appears empty again. A sort of elimination or fusion of the elements and the space takes place. There are other positions in which the nature of the matter, the presence of the wood, is highlighted. This can make the visitor realise that seeing is thinking.

sam: Let's now talk about weight, which is inherent in the work of both sculptors and architects. These two 'boulders' that make up the piece 'Prumos' [struts] are hovering above a horizontal beam. Tell me about the relationship between weight and lightness.

ff: They're cannonballs that belong to the collection of the Museu da Cidade. They're objects with a magical charge, very dense and strong, in contrast to the apparent delicacy of the suspended wooden beam. They appear to be in the air. This weight was necessary in order to force the (warped) beam to remain level. We chose the darkest part of the pavilion to install it. Of all the works in the 'prumos' series, it is the one with the greatest density. While the other rooms are more transparent and permeable to natural

light (and therefore the pieces are lighter and more fluid), this darker area required a greater 'concentration'.

sam: I mustn't forget to ask you about the joint nature of the work. Are there pieces by one artist or the other? Does that matter? "Or should they be seen as works by both of you, indiscriminately?

rm: Apart from the books, which belong to Fernanda's working world, the whole exhibition was structured jointly. The intervention would not be the same if just one of us was working on his or her own. Of course, we each bring our references and our own language with us and this is transferred to what is shown here. What we've been doing was a sort of mutual evaluation, in which one helps the other to understand how far he or she should go, what is indispensable and what isn't. This is perhaps the most interesting side of collaborative work, which includes leaving certain decisions to the other person that we knew would crop up during the assembly period. To do this, trust, empathy, and even professional intuition are necessary, which are not found in all collaborations. Professional trust allowed us to construct an archive without foreseeing any irrevocable decisions. The assembly period was another phase of the work in which the pieces took on relations of contiguity where other kinds of relations did not occur. What was on our conceptual horizon was the construction of the body-environment.

ff: Since this work has been a conversation between myself and Rui, I think that we asked each other very simple questions and highlighted the points that we had in common. We could have chosen to do the opposite, accentuating our differences, but we didn't. This working methodology led to the encounter, an atmosphere of levity and suspension, which in a certain sense also sought to suspend the voracity and weight of reality. When I refer to a 'conversation' in which there were 'questions', I'm speaking metaphorically. As you can imagine, questions can occur in silence through gestures, the arrangement of the pieces, the tests and trials carried out, and through the doubts that were often reflected during periods of inactivity.

sam: With regard to the mutual inputs and the inputs of third parties, tell us how these white books appeared, which were subsequently integrated into your pieces.

ff: "Rumor Branco" [white rumour] was a book that I discovered when talking to a second-hand bookseller who is a neighbour of mine. I spoke to him about the project that I was preparing and he mentioned "Rumor Branco" by Almeida Faria, which was written in 1962 when the author was nineteen. The edition that I bought dates from the 1980s and is in a series of white shades caused by the effects of time. All of this has artistic value. The text was controversial when it was published since it broke with what might be called the realist or neo-realist tradition, triggering a line of existential thought. A series of published pieces that emerged around this work, around the rumours and discussions that it caused, allowed me to understand the echoes that it unleashed. As you see, the entire exhibition is permeated with phrases, thoughts and inputs of this kind.

rm: Yes, there are echoes of several works which are not physically present. They are merely indicated by a title. The inscription '(not) forgetting teatro del mondo' recalls the incredible piece by the architect Aldo Rossi [1979-80], which had a very short life-span, only three months, and was a theatre constructed on top of a boat. An architectural structure was erected on a barge in which several events related to the Venice Architecture Biennale took place. Although it was an ephemeral project, the 'theatre' became a key reference point in the history of architecture, enduring symbolically in the photographs that show the 'mobile' palace as if it were a building that formed part of the architectural make-up of the city. We linked this episode to the history of the White Pavilion, which I researched by asking to look into the history of the process. Built to house exhibitions when Lisbon was the European Capital of Culture in 1994, the White Pavilion was erected as a temporary structure. However, on the date when its life was due to end, it was decided not to demolish it and it remains standing to this day. The structure therefore has no foundations: it simply rests on the ground, containing a foundation lintel that measures only one metre. The structure has been giving way over time, which is shown by the cracks in the paving and in some slight structural subsidence. These are not the result of an inadequate plan but of its longer than expected working life. In some ways, the histories of the 'Teatro del Mondo' and the 'White Pavilion' are similar. Both have lasted longer than expected.

ff: Here in the exhibition there is only one indication of these episodes that we have touched on. It is within this context that I would also place your evocation of 'Ecrú', the Narelle Jubelin exhibition held in this same pavilion

in 1998, in the phrase '(not) forgetting ecru', painted on glass. The exhibition was unforgettable for me and was also my first memory of this space. Narelle is an admirable artist with whom I have become friend and by mentioning her exhibition in one of the window openings in this pavilion you mark the presence of an absence.

rm: Let me say that this 'sentence-piece' only found its position on the last day. Our thoughts wandered until the exact position in the space had been defined. The same thing happened with the piece 'White' and Kenya Hara's book *White* [2010], which also contains a reflection on white that is related to the author's oriental culture. This reflection is related not only to white as a colour but also to its various accepted meanings, particularly concerning the idea of the source and the void.

sam: With regard to the void, for Oriental and Asian cultures, the terms nothing or void do not necessarily have a negative connotation. Rather, they mean the power that lies in possibility, or the necessary condition for becoming, for something to be created and to appear. Does this notion of the void underlie this exhibition?

ff: Absolutely. I have a phobia of full spaces [laughs]! The void is a space to be filled by the body, which is dependent on it to the extent that only it can perceive it. The void is self-sufficient, that is to say, it is enough.

rm: In our intervention, everything was thought out so that the tools could be used in a 'non-doing' way. It is symbolic and literal. It means: proceed with minimal gestures: do not add, do not fill.

ff: The book "White" that we were talking about, which is placed on a trowel, is a further allusion to the world of building that runs through the whole exhibition and stems from this minimal gesture. I found the trowel during a research period when I went to see some materials and I immediately associated it with the open book. I looked at it and realised that the right angle of the trowel (which is designed for making wall corners) was the right place for the book. In this respect, material and formal relationships are key.

sam: I understand what you mean by 'not doing', the idea of a minimal intervention. Shall we go up to the top floor?

rm: The piece 'Azulejos' [tiles], as its name indicates, is comprised of white tiles that are raised off the ground,

held in place by the edges, or perhaps sheets of paper, if you like. To ensure that they would acquire presence and lightness, we wanted them to occupy the length of one and a half walls, following the perimeter of the room at waist height. The material was taken from somewhere else, another part of the city, and the memories of it were transported here.

ff: This piece gave us a different awareness of remains and unused materials. We went to get the tiles from a dump belonging to Lisbon Town Council in Santa Apolónia. As a matter of fact, we were keen to use these materials (as well as other services offered by the council) rather than buying similar new ones, which, for us, would not have been the same thing. As I was saying, when we collected these materials we realised how careful and precise the workers at that dump were in handling and separating out the rubbish. It's very demanding work.

rm: However, as there weren't enough tiles, the remainder were brought from a work that I conceived and that was being created, which is another example of this process of transferring signs, memories and reminiscences from one place to another.

ff: This transportation process was also used here for the piece 'Pensar é Destruir' ['To Think Is To Destroy'], which was created for another exhibition and is made up of 3000 ceramic mosaics whose glazing produces a multiplicity of whites. The piece is installed on the ground, uniting the eastern and western sides of the pavilion. Although its configuration has been altered (in relation to its previous form), I opted to keep the same title. For me, it's the same piece in another place. This might be a condition that is intrinsic to the work, which changes depending on the architectural place that houses it. The impossibility of giving the piece a fixed form, which I suspected was characteristic of it, was confirmed in this installation.

sam: And the piece 'White Album', which is opposite, discreetly protected by the ceramic mosaics, how did it come about?

ff: It was made with the White Album, no. 069625, made by the Beatles in 1968. It's not easy to find original copies of this album, which has a totally white cover designed by Richard Hamilton. We can see the marks of time on it, the dirty white circles created by the vinyl kept inside it. If we look at the piece without reading the legend, what do we see? The first feedback that we received came from the

exhibition attendant. The cover opens up in the space, causing the circumferences corresponding to the record to emerge from it and look back at us like two eyes.

rm: We could say that the notion of collaboration was one of the premises that we wanted to take on and incorporate into the finished work, right from the start. As Fernanda has just said, when we interact with other people they give us their impressions, which are very useful to us and provide us with feedback about what is on display and the way that it is laid out. Cooperating with the various departments of Lisbon Town Council (carpentry, printing, rubbish dumps, the archives of the Museu da Cidade, etc.), and particularly with their staff, sharing their materials and working processes, also means benefiting from their participation/dedication, promoting recognition of their roles and bringing audiences to the artistic world that are apparently alien to it.

sam: On the subject of returning the gaze, I don't want to go any further without commenting on this mirror piece, which passes almost unnoticed.

rm: 'Vão' [opening] was one of those pieces on which we acted as each other's barometers. We were unsure whether the mirror placed in the window opening, creating a link between the inside and the outside, should also be extended to all of the openings in the facade or be limited to just one of the windows. Note that it's the place where the space merges and there is no longer any separation between the outside and the inside. I think that we got the size of the piece right. I had the feeling that if it were bigger, we would destroy it, turning it into something spectacular that created a gratuitous effect.

sam: The two strips of mirror cause the window to disappear and a hole in the ground opens up.

ff: This piece realises a desire: to eliminate the barrier between the outside and the inside. Just as Le Corbusier used to say that 'to paint a wall is to knock the wall down', here the reflecting surface eliminates the window frame and brings the garden inside.

sam: Let's move on to the white paper, this pile on the ground.

rm: This was another find.

ff: In the piece 'Papel' ['Paper'], we made use of existing materials that we found in Lisbon Council departments, in this case, the municipal printer's workshop, where we choose piles of white paper - so-called copy-paper that was used for making copies in the 'age of the typewriter' but hasn't been used for over 30 years.

rm: The column decreases in size as we and the people we work with remove sheets for drawing. Spatial thinking, which involves the art of drawing on various levels, is intrinsic to the project and to architecture. 'Curvas de Nível' [Contour Lines], the roll of paper that unfolds here over the glass, fits into this context. Drawing identifies the altimetric levels of some parts of the city, which, in a continuous but abstract manner (contour lines are invisible), link the position of the White Pavilion to other key spaces in the city.

ff: This drawing was the last piece to be placed in the exhibition. Rui has represented several places on it, including our houses. We now understand why we were working on a project together: we live on the same level, in different parts of the city. I say this because I think it's a beautiful metaphor for our collaboration.

sam: Is a drawing something organic that fuses with the leaves on the trees seen through the large window. Shall we finish on DidiHuberman's book?

ff: The piece 'Blanc Soucis' forms part of George Didi-Huberman's book of the same name [2012], in which he discusses Sarkis' short film 'Le commencement' and an installation by Esther Shalev-Gerz, both of which are about white and silence. I came across this book in Paris, before the exhibition. The book rests on a wooden block that comes from the work I did for a public space in Paredes. This wooden block, a box that is almost a safe, is exactly the same size as the book. They look as if they were made for one another. My earlier work has ended up being referenced in this exhibition on several levels through signs or memories of other pieces.

sam: Before we leave the place, this inclined plank with a wedge...

rm: It's a cadence of words that interested us during the whole construction process. The words brought together here in this 'table of elements' provide names for the pieces. It's a sort of table of materials: ramp, opening, paper, struts, stone, contour lines... We wanted them to acquire

materiality as the concepts were as important as the materials.

ff: We recovered the 4 cm MDF board from the municipal carpenter's workshop. According to what the carpenters told us, it's a device designed to absorb gunshots fired by the police during training sessions. We were fascinated by them. We decided to use one and we noticed that it's the same size as a body. We thought about drilling through it, simulating the bullet holes, but we opted to paint it white, inscribing a list of words on it that replace the bullet marks.

sam: Do you have any idea what you are going to do with these materials, what condition they are going to assume, when the exhibition finishes?

rm: Perhaps the physical and material relationship between the pieces could produce another installation when this one is disassembled and we have to bring it together under another format.

sam: Shall we leave via the last piece in the exhibition, by walking over it?

rm: 'Rampa' [Ramp] is the entrance piece, which ultimately grants access to the space. It's as literal as that. It replaces the device that was here before.

ff: I'd like this piece to be kept after the exhibition as part of the facilities of the pavilion. As long as white endures.

sam: Let's use it then.

Sara Antónia Matos (1978) Director of the Atelier-Museu Julio Pomar/Lisbon Town Council since 2012. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Sculpture, a Master's degree in Curatorial Studies and a Doctorate from the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon, where she is also a visiting lecturer. The title of her thesis was 'From Sculpture to Spatiality'. Some of the key exhibitions that she has curated since 2006 include Zona Letal, Espaço Vital: works from the collection of the Caixa Geral de Depósitos (2011); Arquite(x)turas: the collection of the Banco Espírito Santo (2010); Khora (2009); Desenhos, Construções e Outros Acidentes... (2008), both of which were held at the Carmona e Costa Foundation. Exhibitions in preparation include: Paisagem Interior (2014) at the CAM - Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. She publishes regularly in

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