

Silence, space and time in the work of Fernanda Fragateiro

"This is how space begins, with words only,
signs traced on the blank page." ¹

Georges Perec

In 1990 Fernanda Fragateiro organised, on her own initiative, an exhibition of her work in a large room at the Museu Nacional de História Natural e da Ciência,² a room situated in a part of the building that had been in disuse for years due to an earlier fire. After locating the room and arranging for the requisite permissions, she cleaned the space thoroughly, emptying it of its refuse, sweeping, scrubbing and scouring its damaged surfaces into presentability. Fragateiro then assembled and hung a makeshift yet effective lighting system. Finally, she created, in situ, a remarkable series of sculptures out of concrete, bricks, wood, plaster, and aluminium. These sculptures would become ephemeral when she later removed, dismantled and destroyed them all, relegating them from the present to the past, their only remaining traces photographic.

Among the works in the show (which was entitled, simply, *Instalação na Sala Sul*, "Installation in the south hall") was a wall sculpture composed of a series of white, narrow, box-like forms of varying lengths, hung in straight, parallel rows. While formally abstract, this quasi-modular sculpture clearly referenced writing - if any further clue were needed, it was supplied by the interspersed presence of smaller elements reminiscent of punctuation, in particular quotation marks. Or rather, it more specifically referenced printed text, with its regulated line spacing, font size and alignment. As Fragateiro later recalled:

My first use of text occurred in my first installation, in 1990, at the Faculty of Science in Lisbon. It was a citation from Maurice Blanchot that I read in a text by Peter Eisenman, I don't remember the text or the citation anymore, but I still remember transforming the citation, a phrase, into an object: each word was converted into a white piece, like an empty shelf suspended on the wall, very much like Donald Judd's works. Not readable as semantic text,

but as form. [...] Maybe this first use of text was a prediction that influenced and anticipated future works. What I'm really interested in is thinking/working about space. Theory is so much a part of it that I cannot separate textual materials from other materials, as text is memory and also anticipation, and it participates in the construction of reality.³

It is striking to note that Fragateiro refers to her "use of text" in this work, although in point of fact there is no element of text present. Text (i.e. the quotation from Blanchot, already once-filtered by Eisenman) may have been useful as a generative element in the artist's creative process, but in the course of that same process it has been converted into a non-verbal object that, as far as it is readable, is now exclusively "readable as form". The skeletal structure of printed text has been recognisably maintained, but a shift of focus and emphasis has been enacted on the material level, substituting for verbal signification the haptic qualities that constitute the final sculpture: its volumes, surface textures, inner rhythms, along with the play of light and shadow, and its physical presence on the wall.

Thus what is at work here is a kind of *ekphrasis*, an interpretive restatement or conversion of content from one medium of expression to another, a device generally associated with literature but that in fact can bridge any media. But in Fragateiro's wall sculpture, if this be *ekphrasis*, it is *ekphrasis* of a brutalist sort. The translation into a visually communicative form is evident, the "poetics of the object" palpable; but the particular kind of conversion that has been enacted has entailed an act of silencing, and thus of silence. The voice within the writing has been made mute, the paths toward meaning once mapped irremediably blocked; even the artist herself no longer knows what those lost, ghostly words once "said".

What is involved in this work, in other words, is what might be considered a "creation" of silence - a technique that is frequent within Fragateiro's overall practice. It is seen, for instance, in the many works in which she employs printed matter - i.e. books and magazines - in such a way as to make them hermetic, literally sealing

their contents into materials such as concrete or steel while, at the same time, producing accomplished minimalist-inflected sculptures. Examples abound in Fragateiro's production, and are particularly frequent in her most recent work: for instance, *Architecture, a place for women?*, 2016 (included in the present exhibition), in which old copies of the Italian architectural magazine *Abitare* are compressed into a solid object that resembles an iron beam, spanning the exhibition space; or *Concrete Words, 2*, 2016, in which a book on art history has been sandwiched between two delicately pigmented concrete blocks; or *(Not) Reading Modern Painting and Abstract Painting*, 2010, in which art books from the 1950s have been cut and encased in acrylic supports, hanging on the wall; or the various iterations of the "Building Blocks" series, such as *Blocos de Construção, 5*, 2016, in which sections of an encyclopaedia are placed within marble housings and scattered across the floor, like uprooted cobblestones. These volumes continue to speak volumes, but exclusively in a new idiom; or as in Robert Smithson's phrase, this is indeed "LANGUAGE to be LOOKED at and/or THINGS to be READ",⁴ but taken to an extreme. Silence and silencing permeate other aspects of Fragateiro's work, often in less immediately overt ways. For instance, Fragateiro's dogged reclaiming of forgotten figures from the history of 20th-century art and design (especially women artists and designers whose obscurity has been imposed, directly or indirectly, by their male colleagues) is no more than the incorporation of an historicised silence into her own work, albeit from a critical perspective; here silence is not so much made as utilised. This can be seen in works such as *MR10*, 2009, which alludes to the work of the designer Lilly Reich (1885-1947), who worked with Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969); or *forget me (not)*, 2017, which references the palette of the textile designer Otta Berger (1898-1944). A work that seems somewhat anomalous in Fragateiro's oeuvre but that might be reconsidered in this light is *Lugares perfeitos*, 1997-2000 ("Perfect places"), a shelf of books written exclusively by authors who committed suicide, thereby silencing themselves. A connection might even be drawn between the interplay of silence within Fragateiro's work and the preliminary, quasi-ritualistic cleansing of exhibition spaces that she so frequently performs (from

the *Sala Sul* to the present exhibition spaces at MAAT) and which, as Paulo Pires do Vale points out in his deeply reflective essay on Fragateiro's work, she tellingly refers to as "the eliminating of noise":⁵

Verbs such as clean, remove, unblock, eliminate, open up, and relieve emerged in the artist's discourse as essential gestures. She considered these to be not just actions preparatory to placing the piece but part of the work itself. An essential act of emptying without the utopia of immaculate purity, because the absolute void, as Cage taught us about silence, does not exist.⁶

Silence, as we see here, intersects inevitably with its spatial counterpoint: space, emptiness, "the void." And although, as Pires do Vale asserts, neither absolute silence nor the absolute void may exist, the same can not be said of the somewhat paradoxical "creation" of silence and the parallel "production" of space. Furthermore, while such acts may involve reduction (e.g. silencing, emptying), they are not necessarily *negative*, insofar as they yield a *positive* via the phenomenological experience of the artwork. In keeping with Carl Andre's *ethos* (Andre's work and thought being of fundamental importance to Fragateiro's),⁷ the essence of the sculptor's act is to effect a transformative "cut", altering that which was already, primordially *there*, and yet producing something else which is equally *here*. This procedure with regard to the production of space has driven much of Fragateiro's work, particularly in its earlier periods, as well as in her highly successful public projects.

For instance, Fragateiro's *Caixa para guardar o vazio*, 2005 ("Box to keep the void"), as its declarative title indicates, is a human-scale box containing just that, a void, i.e. nothing; and yet at the same time, it is a layered and multi-faceted work of relational sculpture, its versatility in part due to its very simplicity. In a similar fashion, *Jardim das ondas*, 1998 ("Waves garden") is an undulating grass-covered public space in Lisbon that adds no object to the existing landscape (other than a few lovely poplar trees), and yet that precisely through the understatement of its fluid design utterly reshapes the experience of that same landscape. *Existe um substituto*

para a experiência?, 2, 2002 ("Is there a substitute for experience?, 2" , included in the present exhibition), as well as structurally similar works such as *MMM*, 2001, are latticed floor structures under which mirrors have been placed; the lattices serve to fragment and call attention to the fact of the floor and (when permitted) to the act of passage; the mirror, however, subverts the experience entirely, inducing disorientation yet without any actual distortion. Fragateiro's oft-displayed mastery of floor works - one example of many is provided by *Pensar é Destruir*, 2012 ("Thinking is destroying"), a flowing current of terra cotta bricks - underscores this aspect of her method: as Fragateiro herself has said, "my favourite space is the floor. Only the sky is bigger than the floor. The floor is primordial and is the minimum we can use to build space".⁸

The space "built" or "produced" in these works often invites and even relies on a participatory or relational response, whether unscripted by spectators or when, on occasion, Fragateiro has enlisted transdisciplinary collaborations - such as choreographers and dancers in *Caixa para guardar o vazio*, or gardeners in *Ar, terra, água, luz, aço, tempo*, 2008 ("Air, earth, water, light, steel, time"). These spatial works are also, as Ruth Rosengarten has pointed out in her discerning essay on Fragateiro's work, fundamentally social, in that they invoke human agency - the presence of living, breathing people, coming and going, moving and not moving. In other words, of people experiencing, and thus existing, in time, so that "time and space are interwoven in these at first apparently static works".⁹

This temporal element, however, is not limited to Fragateiro's participatory--performative works; indeed it has been a constant across her oeuvre, from the *Sala Sul* to the present exhibition, at times direct and at other times oblique, at times declared and at other times more subtle. For instance, a temporal element lies latent within Fragateiro's insistent reuse of pre-existing materials - a technique which, indeed, is one of the most characteristic aspects of her artistic practice. Moreover, in Fragateiro's work this reuse often achieves the status of repurposing; in other words, not only reusing a chosen material or an object but rather assigning it a new function, shifting it from one cycle of use into another,

lending it a new purpose and a new identity, and in so doing retrieving it from the past and placing it in the present.

An emblematic example of this is *Unbuilt*, 2010. In *Unbuilt*, Fragateiro collected maquettes that had been discarded from an architectural studio in Lisbon. Fragateiro refashioned the plain plywood maquettes into an extended, sequential, horizontally-oriented object that visually retained the references to modular architecture while, at the same time, by enhancing the play of volume, proportion, light and shadow, also functioned as an autonomous work of wall sculpture. The original maquettes were elements of design, plans or proposals that by definition point toward some later realisation as buildings in time future. On the other hand, they had been discarded into the trash - that is, relegated rather unmercilessly to time past. Fragateiro, in repurposing them into sculpture, thus retrieved them from both the past and the future, placing them squarely into time present as sculpture.

Further examples of such repurposing are found across the breadth of Fragateiro's production, at different periods and in different media, from various points of departure and towards different formal ends. These include works such as *Construir é destruir é construir*, 2009 ("To build is to destroy is to build", included in the present exhibition); or the use of silk threads salvaged from a defunct German haberdashery and used to demarcate (and thus "produce") sculptural space in *(Not) connecting, 1*, 2007, and *(Not) connecting, 2*, 2007; or the numerous instances of books and magazines converted into sculptures, referred to above.

This artistic repurposing (not unrelated to the *ekphrasis* discussed earlier in this essay) bears within it an ethical component: that of frugality, of a wise use of resources, of rescue.¹⁰ It is an *ethos* that, in its resistance to adding more material to the material world, is particularly resonant today, in the face of the anthropogenetic glut that is choking our ecosystem, ourselves included. It is no small matter. But at the same time, Fragateiro's repurposing is not limited to the salvage of materials such as rubble and thread, out-of-date magazines and obsolete encyclopaedias. Or rather, for Fragateiro, "materials" are not limited to the physical

realm per se. As she has stated, "Ideas are materials. Ideas are like bricks. That's what I think when I'm using other people's ideas. I build a new thing with them."¹¹ Hence Fragateiro's insistent, even obsessive, referentiality to history and the work of her predecessors, the references to the lesser known, to the more obscure, to the overlooked (especially women). The dead cannot be revived, but they can, perhaps, be saved. Thus voice is given to that which has been silenced; space is made for that which no longer had space; what is past is lent presence - via the present fact of art.

George Stolz

1. Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* [*Espèces d'espaces*, 1974, etc.]. Ed., intro., transl. John Sturrock. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1997, p. 13.
2. National Museum of Natural History and Science, in Lisbon.
3. George Stolz, "Ideas Are Like Bricks", in *Proyectos 2014*, Bogotá: NC-arte, 2015. p. 155.
4. Robert Smithson (1938-1973), press release for the Dwan Gallery, 1967.
5. Paulo Pires do Vale, "Prepared Places. Exercises for Keeping the Void", in *(Não) Ver*. Lisbon: Projecto Travessa da Ermida/Mercador do Tempo Lda, 2013, p. 19. This book was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Pensar é Destruir*, held at the Ermida de Nossa Senhora da Conceição, in Lisbon, between 26 January and 24 March 2013.
6. *Idem, ibidem*, p. 17.
7. Carl Andre, b. 1935.
8. George Stolz, *op. cit.*, p. 156.
9. Ruth Rosengarten, "The Art of Relating: Fernanda Fragateiro in Context", in *DARDO* magazine, no 11 (June-September), Santiago de Compostela: Dardo, 2009, pp. 106-131.
10. See: Delfim Sardo, "Emotional Ecology", in *Fernanda Fragateiro: Caixa para Guardar o Vazio*. Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim, 2007, pp. 41-51.
11. George Stolz, *op. cit.*, p. 153.