

PREPARED PLACES.
Exercises for keeping the void

*The object itself has not become less important.
It has merely become less self important.*
Robert Morris

*(...) void is that which is able to be occupied by being
but is de facto not occupied (...).*
Sextus Empiricus

Some exercises, both material and spiritual, for keeping the void¹:

1.

Emptying: subtracting.

When I spoke to Fernanda Fragateiro about the projects brought together in this book², what immediately struck me about the description of her working process was her initial openness in relation to spaces: she studies them carefully, assesses them, and then strips them of all superfluous elements. Her first gesture was not to add to the space but to experience it (to look at it, feel it, get to know it, reflect on it) to be able to *judge* what was unnecessary – and then remove it. 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. Other verbs-actions followed: painting (in white, always white, making the space more abstract), illuminating, intervening, adding, constructing... However, the first gesture is to undo, to deoperate, *to deproduce*. A movement of subtraction that can only be recognised by someone who knew the space beforehand and can perceive the difference: what is no longer there. But what is not there, the absent, is now what allows us to see what is there. Thus, what does not appear is essential although unrecognisable. The *unapparent* is what permits appearance, just as the void is what allows a space to be occupied, although it is not.

2.

Prepared places: elementary exercises.

The artist proposes to undertake a relational task: to establish contact between, to confront, and to enhance the tensions between elements. The relationship is also *unapparent*; it does not appear; it is of the order of the invisible: but it is towards this

¹ With this formulation, I am reprising the title of a work by Fernanda Fragateiro: *Caixa para Guardar o Vazio*, 2005

² *Pensar é destruir*, Ermida Nossa Senhora da Conceição, Belém, 2013; *Expectativa de uma paisagem de acontecimentos #3*, Igreja da Misericórdia, Silves, 2009; *Não Ver #2*, Mosteiro de Alcobaça, 2008

non-appearance that these interventions point. The meaning of the work is created by the series of relations established and not by the object-sculpture in itself. It asks us to undertake a subtle exercise, that of an *intuitive and intellectual act of seeing*: to relate what is before our eyes with what is not revealed immediately. Like a *prepared* piano, the architectural structures in which Fernanda Fragateiro intervenes were prepared for a concert whose performance can be triggered by the spectator, or not. Like *sonatas for prepared churches*: the space is worked on, like the strings of a piano for a work by Cage, or Satie before him. But it is necessary to listen to it, to make it play, in order to perceive the difference between it and the habitual sound: the space beforehand, the movements of the observer's body, his or her affects and thought.

3.

Silencing.

Among the initial *exercises* carried out by the artist before the existing space is the 'eliminating of noise' – an expression that conveys the artistic action of spatial depuration in a sound-based metaphor or in the field of language, and there, in the linguistic field, we find a clue by which to understand her three proposals. The elements that the artist adds, which we usually call 'sculptures', do not exist in isolation: meaning is produced in the relations that they create with other elements. The sculpture is in the space as a word exists in a sentence, and that sentence forms part of a discourse made up of several sentences: the meaning exists neither in the isolated word nor in the single sentence but in the discourse, the complete text, the work. The exact execution and careful placing of the element in space corresponds to the precision and exactitude with which a word is placed in a poem. And if each sentence is a proposal for a distinct relationship with the word, a series of sentences corresponds to the multiple possible relationships that can be established with the object: the space and its architectural characteristics, which are or have been places of worship, the religion to which they are linked, their history, the light, the body of the observer and his point of view. This is the work: it is this that points to the meaning. Silencing, eliminating noise, is an exercise that is even more necessary in the exhibition in the Ermida, because we need to listen to the work: inside it, we hear the unique sound of each of the 3000 ceramic mosaics being put in place, forming a new yet incomplete floor, emerging there like a fictional archaeological find. Dual memory: the sound of the process of creating the work and the fictionalized memory of the historical discovery of a previously existing space. The distinct character of each element – which is already indicated by the different shades of white – is revealed by the sound of its being placed. And what usually remains hidden in this artist's works, the *process* by which they are made, becomes an integral part of the exhibition. Thus time itself, and not just space, becomes an essential category that is immanent in the work: sound is the memory of the time when the work was being created but is, now that we are seeing it and listening to it, the measure of our experience and part of its reconfiguration. Sound becomes another element by which to relate to other elements in the process of perception. In *Box with the sound of its own making* (1961), Robert Morris presented the process by which the object was made as a way of destroying the romantic aura of the work of art, demystifying it and moving it away from a meaning that is purely visual: the recorded sound of the wooden cube being made reaches us from inside the cube placed on top of a plinth. In this gesture, he transformed the sounds of work into musical sounds; he made them worthy of attention, enhancing their value. It is said that Cage sat in front of the cube and listened carefully for the three-and-a-half hours that the recording lasted. The

chapel is Fernanda Fragateiro's box, where we enter, and inside it, the strangeness of the sound, instead of demystifying the work by referring only to its material construction, adds a mysterious musical tension that transforms the perception of space.

4.

Simplicity and the rejection of self-sufficiency.

The minimalist aesthetic of the 1960s rejected the easiest, most intimist forms of psychological expressionism just as it rejected the spectacular, the complex appearance, and the monumental. It rejected what does not allow *relations* because it is self-sufficient; because it is enough in itself; because it closes on itself. The work is therefore not only the added object but also the experience that it makes possible in relation to other elements: 'the object is just one of the terms of the new aesthetics', as Robert Morris wrote in 1966. Also in these three interventions, rather than any apparent complexity, the elements comprising the works are simple, austere and rigorous. The artist applies a reduction in the gesture of adding, establishing simple internal relations between the elements of the sculpture in order to intensify the external relations and the experience that they make possible in these gaps. The artist is interested in the *variations* that the object creates in the space of the experience, and what the space creates in it: the light conditions, the presence of other bodies, the lines of sight, other pre-existing elements or symbols, the history and fictions that are created, time and sound. Sculpting relations: not internal or self-referential ones pertaining to the object, closed in themselves, but relations between the object that has been added to the space and the exterior elements³.

5.

Sculpting oneself.

The simplicity required by the minimalist aesthetic led Robert Morris to state that it is 'more reflexive, because the awareness of the self [of the observer] existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous works with their very internal relations'. Of these three works by Fernanda Fragateiro it can also be said that by rejecting any complexity of appearance, by using simple and repeated geometric figures, industrial materials or things manufactured by others that are neutral or bear the marks of their making, they become *reflexive*: they do not leave us lost on the outside but make us return to ourselves. We are not the spectators of something but of ourselves. They make self-consciousness possible to the extent that we perceive ourselves as being part of the terms of the relationship that the work requires: the observer is an incarnated being and knows himself as such, as a body. A co-presence in the space of the work: awareness of the self in relation, *able* to relate. The position of each person – in space and time – determines and shapes his or her view of reality. The position or the point of view that marks our identity is not an a priori. The place where we are situated shapes *who* we are. It makes us see – or *touch* – in a particular way. It frames us, in the same way that Fernanda's work frames the space anew: it indicates and offers things to be seen, felt, experienced. For the same reason, the demand is greater: we ourselves are producers of complexity. We do not attend a show that is outside of us, or rituals that are strange to us: we form part of them. We

³ An earlier work by Fernanda Fragateiro, *Só é possível se formos 2* (2000), provides a good example of her approach to establishing relations.

practice the exercises; we do not witness the practice. This is one possible response to Nietzsche's criticism of Aristotelian poetics for focussing on the experience of the spectator and not on that of the actor and the creator, the symptom of the decline of a culture.

6.

Finishing with illusions: disillusionment.

The literal nature of the works, the simple and repetitive character of the elements, the severity and asceticism of the images, are a way of rejecting illusion. Without distractions, immediate or apparently consoling images. Without deceptions. For this reason, the control exerted by the artist is fundamental. The images are always rarefied. The gestures are minimal so that the consequences might be enormous. Even the titles form part of this game of renunciation: *Thinking is Destroying, Not Seeing or Expectation of a Landscape of Events*. They introduce a poetic and discursive dimension that becomes essential for the artist and takes us away from the practice of literally indicating the materials used or calling the work 'untitled'. The titles are another element to be added to all of the relations that make up the works. They allow interferences to take place with other material elements because the words of the title are also matter that is inherent in the work. Thus we better understand that what we see is never just what we see – the minimalist tautology is destroyed – because the eye sees through many filters, many voices and influences, and is marked by many desires and prejudices. The eyes hear, as Paul Claudel wrote. But even the most poetic titles indicate a negation, an absence, or an act of destruction: the *expectation* is still a not-being, a process of waiting that involves a void; in Alberto Caeiro, for whom not-thinking, or rather feeling, was indispensable, thinking would be the destruction of experience; or the indication of not yet seeing or not being able to do so absolutely. The titles, like the artistic gestures or exercises analysed above, also indicate an *aesthetics of no*. A *via negativa*, which, rather than being a desire for negation, is unequivocally affirmative and positive. It is not so much a *refusal of action* as it is an *act of refusal*. The free refusal of complex elements or noise that might make the relationship impossible. The positive choice to do without what is superfluous, what is filler, what does not allow the *spacious space* to exist (and Jean-Luc Nancy taught us that the truly spacious space is the body). Fernanda Fragateiro permanently seeks to undertake a productive act of emptying: a void that makes it possible to receive a body and to produce or recognise thought, sensations, emotions and experiences. The void is a creative space of fecundity, of birth. A beginning.

7.

Exercising the attention.

The supreme spiritual and material exercise, a form of prayer of the body and the spirit – a manifestation of their unity – is *attention*. At the start of these exercises I highlighted the attention given to space: *here*, what to undo? *Here*, what to do? And what is *here*? As stated above, Fernanda Fragateiro's first gesture was to pay *attention* to what already existed there, and this is also her final proposal: to create the conditions required to prepare the attention. To train it as an athlete trains and to exercise it continuously: *askesis*, the Greek word that gave rise to asceticism, was used for both physical and spiritual exercise and lacked the meaning that asceticism came to acquire in Christianity: *askesis* involved daily exercises in practical wisdom whose aim was to produce a man who would be more free and the master of himself.

In this sense attention, like prayer, is rooted in a form of hospitality and not in the imposition of our knowledge, certainties or desires. It is openness, stripping away, detachment, welcoming. A leaving of the self. Exercising the eye until meaning is constructed in front of us in a drawn-out assimilation of evidence or suspicion. Attention is the antithesis of haste. As when the eyes get used to the light or the dark, we need time. Without wishing to possess, understand or immediately control the situation. Not immediately interpreting but looking, looking until the unapparent relations appear, take shape in front of us – or inside us – and are recognised. Bearing the difficulty of the void, the discomfort of being lost or the lack of any answer to the questions posed. Paying attention is an exercise in perseverance: although the immediate reward, whether this be emotional or cognitive consolation, is not felt. In this context of sacred spaces, I would dare to reprise an axiom of negative theology that the mystics used to repeat: if you understand, then it is not God.

8.

Looking at the ground.

With the exception of the intervention in Silves, where, using elements of polished steel, she creates a curtain hanging from the ceiling down to the floor through which light reaches us from a Manueline doorway that she ordered to be unblocked, verticality is apparently rejected in these projects: the ground is the place of choice. It is, as the artist says, 'the minimal architectural space', as well as that which can be transported most easily: the modular structure that she repeatedly uses is evidence of this interest. The ground is also what we look at least: it is the ground that she points at, what we do not see. She makes us lower our eyes. But, whether in the mirrors used in Alcobaça, which turn the place upside down and show us the space above, creating diversions along unexpected inclines on this surface, or in the clarity with which the mosaics of glazed white Meknés terracotta transform the ground, we perceive the distancing that characterises the works of Carl Andre, the proximity of which resides in the principle that altering *the* materials is less important than the way that the space is altered *with the* materials.

In symbolic religious topology, the ground is the place of the human whereas the world above is the place of the divine. In this respect, Fernanda Fragateiro points not to ecstasy but to the fragile human condition and its paradoxes, which are also the specific characteristic of Christianity. Also by creating paradoxical situations, the artist makes us lower our gaze and there shows us what is higher up, like an abyss; or she makes the light emerge from the ground, a glade of lunar light that appears despite the lack of any entry points.

9.

Reflecting on the empty tomb.

The spaces reconfigured by these works – these exercises for keeping the void – are or were sacred Christian spaces of ritual and prayer. And at the core of Christianity there is an irrefutable relationship with the void. In St John's gospel, after the death of Christ, the indicating of an empty space is clearly shown to be a creative act: 'Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre. So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre. And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in. Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the

linen clothes lie, and the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself. Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed' (John 20, 3-8). In this narrative, the void is described through the spatial relationship between objects that become the traces of an absence: we are given details of the linen clothes and the position of the napkin in a sentence created with that purpose in mind, highlighting the importance of space in this story and emphasizing what is not *among* what is there. And these traces, abandoned on the ground in an unnamed place that is not identified, are signs of what is no longer there, of an absence, a body that has removed itself or been removed. The bodies of the disciples, and even their personalities, are described in the relationship with the open sepulchre and the emptied space within it: the description of their hurry to reach the place and the fact that they arrive at different times; the way that the disciple who gets there first sees the empty interior but does not go in straightaway, although we are not told why. Peter does not hesitate to enter, but it is the other unnamed disciple who, the text tells us, *saw and believed*. What did he see? Nothing. He saw nothing. The void between the clothes is the reason for his faith: he saw the void and believed. He believed not in what *was there* but in what was *not there* and was revealed only through its absence: the promised resurrected body. That which does not appear, the invisible, is what determines, often unconsciously, the way in which the visible appears and the appearance that things have. The unapparent is what the attention can and must make manifest, as we are able to experience with the devices offered to us by Fernanda Fragateiro: they are the consequence and the cause of exercises that help us to become aware that seeing, like seeing ourselves, is difficult and the result of many relationships. Material, spiritual, aesthetic and ethical exercises to maintain the void through its genuinely visual creative potential, because it shapes not only the work, the space, and the elements of which it is made up but also the subject, his point of view, his body, and his awareness of himself. The void that these works safeguard – create – is the permanent place/time of the origin of a self that is always being born, always to come.