

# MUTE LEGACIES

## Silent Practices of Resilience

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Joana Maria Pereira, 2 January 2020

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## ABSTRACT

This practice-led research focuses on the relationship between power and the exercise of speech. It considers connections between silence and the body that form a space where vulnerability and social injustice become manifest. It examines these through ideas of muteness.

I trace evidence of this relationship back to my own childhood and the history of my country, Portugal, since 1974, following 48 years of fascist dictatorship under the Estado Novo ('New State') regime of António de Oliveira Salazar and his successor, Marcelo Caetano. It is precisely this cultural and political legacy that gains preponderance as this project develops and eventually comes to inform (demand) an art practice that tends toward a 'poor', minor, and precarious aesthetic, posing questions of value and permanence. Hence in this research 'muteness' is itself a question. Why are these legacies mute? Yet the aim of this PhD is neither to revisit the past nor to uncover this long period of silence. Instead, I 'walk nearby', revolving around personal memories and experiences, to address that which has largely fallen outside of speech, sight and authority – namely, poverty and illiteracy. I consider how these legacies – passed down in silence and in continuous flux for generations – are still largely embedded in the way the people of Portugal think and create. This study seeks to offer new insights into silence and also into new art practices that explore and interrogate static notions of legacy as a means of demonstrating resilience. It questions whether an art practice can meaningfully both escape and contest authoritarian and dominant narratives through muteness.

As Roland Barthes has noted, silence, always at the level of the implicit, has a 'speechly' substance that escapes control. What I therefore propose is an original approach to muteness that challenges its perception as a lack to demonstrate that muteness can in fact – paradoxically – have something to do with 'diversity and mobility'. This means I move away from Salazar's discourse and any historical facts towards the possibility of discovering other senses, 'different voices', mapped outside speech and utility, and implying the need to think of language as something beyond the verbal and the abstract.

My claim is that muteness, even though closely related to silence, has a more concrete, corporeal dimension. Throughout the project, however, the definition of muteness remains precarious. I intentionally slip between terminologies (weight, invisibility, mobility), often embracing a series of paradoxes, precisely in order to avoid fixed and final perspectives, thereby suspending the binary logic of opposition that often frames thought and speech.

What I set out to do is to explore the possibility of muteness both as subject and methodology of research through an art practice that explores writing and its silences and through work consisting of prints, videos and installations that privilege the fragile and provisional. Not-saying and not-making become almost as important as what is said and done. This, I argue, is neither a matter of hiding nor of leaving things unfinished; it consists rather of leaving things open. The fragmentary and the provisional are therefore my privileged methods of research. Furthermore, the project has involved conducting research on material that was censored by the fascist regime but can now be accessed at the National Archive in Lisbon. Notes made during these visits, along with a series of other notes – based on my observation of (and my listening to) people carrying on their ordinary lives, as well as on films and filmmakers, on artworks and found materials, and on my own memories – are incorporated, articulated and reanimated within this project to produce a unique approach to muteness as a powerful way to demonstrate resilience.





## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| STATEMENTS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS                    | 3   |
| ABSTRACT   | 7   |
| CONTENTS   | 9   |
| LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS                              | 10  |
| INTRODUCTION – TO THE LITERATURE AND MAIN THEMES   | 13  |
| CHAPTER 1: MUTENESS (AS WEIGHT)                    | 47  |
| Another Sound (Another Sense), a Sound that Weighs | 51  |
| Another Time                                       | 56  |
| Animal Bodies: Speech and Weight                   | 62  |
| The Weight of Films                                | 68  |
| CHAPTER 2: MUTENESS (AS INVISIBILITY)              | 71  |
| Ruins and Some Other (Invisible) Aspects           | 75  |
| Evidencing the Invisible: The Artwork as Gift      | 86  |
| Into Scale: Space of Childhood                     | 94  |
| CHAPTER 3: MUTENESS (AS MOBILITY)                  | 101 |
| Notes and Letters: Mobile Nature                   | 104 |
| Mobile Roots: A Pot of Flowers Instead of a Tree   | 114 |
| FINAL NOTES: CONCLUSIONS                           | 133 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY                                       | 138 |

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1 – Béla Tarr, *Damnation* [still], 1988

[Snapshot from DVD, (Midas Films, 1988)]

Fig. 2 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Some details are lacking, others are suspect, the whole is rather blurred* [detail], 2015

Soft Pastel on wall and floor

Fig. 3, 4 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Dancing Grains* [stills], 2015

Video performance, 00.01:53 minutes

Fig. 5 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Before and After the National Archive*, 2019

MDF studio wall piece, paper, staples; 22×22 cm

Fig. 6 – Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 'Untitled' (A walk in the snow), 1993

[Image from Julie Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York, Göttingen: Steidl Publishers, 2016), p.173]

Fig. 7 – Roni Horn, *Paired Gold Mats, for Ross and Felix*, 1995

[Image from Julie Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York, Göttingen: Steidl Publishers, 2016), p.151]

Fig. 8 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Model 1636814 for a Portrait*, 2018

Diptych: glass, black carbon paper, tape, drawing on wall; 2×(14×8, 5 cm)

Fig. 9 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Dancing Grains II* [still], 2015

Video loop, 00.02.09 minutes

Fig. 10 – Hélio Oiticica, *Nildo of Mangueira with P15 Parangolé Cape 11 'I Embody Revolt'*, 1967

[Image from Philomena Mariani, Katie Reilly, ed., *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium* (Munich, London, New York: Carnegie Museum of Art and Prestel Publishing, 2016), p. 98]

Fig. 11, 12 – Pedro Costa, *Colossal Youth* [stills], 2006

Fig. 13 – Joana Maria Pereira, *At least two times darker* [Installation view], 2016

Video loop, 00.03:00 minutes

Fig. 14 – Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 'untitled' (Double Portrait), 1991

[Installation View, photographed by the author at Tate Modern, London, in 2016]

Fig. 15, 16 – Abbas Kiarostami, *Close-up*, 1990; *Through the Olive Trees* [stills], 1994

[Snapshot from DVD, (Janus Films, 1990); (Miramax, 1994)]

Fig. 17 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Dancing Grains II* [still], 2015

Fig. 18, 19, 20, 21 – Francis Alÿs, *Ambulantes (Pushing and Pulling)* [slide series], 1992-2002  
[Image from Francis Alÿs, *Francis Alÿs: Walking Distance from the Studio* (Wolfsburg: Hatje Cantz, 2005), p. 8, 24, 84, 120]

Fig. 22 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Portraits of Aunt Gininha* [MAS, Installation view], 2018  
Stone lithography on office paper, tracing paper, check, clip, found letter and glass, wood structure; 9 × 61 × 139 cm

Fig. 23, 24 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Portraits of Aunt Gininha* [detail], 2018

Fig. 25 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Portraits of Aunt Gininha* [detail], 2018

Fig. 26, 27 – Joana Maria Pereira, *You See as You Move and You Move as You See* [stills], 2015  
Powdered drawing on floor

Fig. 28 – Joana Maria Pereira, *You See as You Move and You Move as You See*, 2015

Fig. 29 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Shades* [Installation view], 2014  
Diptych: lithography/drawing, make-up on paper, plexiglass; Sheet: 2× (100 × 71 cm)

Fig. 30 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Shades*, 2014

Fig. 31 – Joana Maria Pereira, *The Singer* [FBAUP, Installation view], 2015  
Make-up powder on wall and floor

Fig. 32 – Joana Maria Pereira, *The Singer* [detail], 2015

Fig. 33 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Some Details are Lacking, Others are Suspect, The Whole is Rather Blurred* [Installation view], 2015



# **Introduction**

## **To the Literature and Main Themes**



In this text, I gather together the main references and themes that have informed my practice as a Fine Art researcher to ask whether silence can operate as a mode of resilience. This involves questioning how silence operates visually (and beyond). The intention is not to represent or produce silence, but to make an original contribution to the study of silence as practice and as a tactic of resilience.

It is important to clarify that although this PhD involves a reflection on my own personal legacy, this was not, however, its starting point. It was rather a reflection on an art practice that consisted of a particular mode of making that led me to address this topic of investigation. The interest in fragility comes from my background as a sculptor with an emphasis on materiality and dematerialisation.<sup>1</sup> From this source a persistent interest in the exploitation of the provisional and the fragmentary in a wide range of media has also arisen. This has enabled me to establish a link back to my childhood, shortly after the long period of dictatorship in Portugal ended in April 1974. I cannot, therefore, consider my practice a direct response to authoritarianism, but I have come to recognise that this insistent exploration of the impermanent emerges from its questioning.

Additionally, António de Oliveira Salazar's emblematic speeches have been very present in my mind. In the first, made in May 1936, he sought to re-establish 'the comfort of the great certainties', followed by a list of subjects 'we do not discuss';<sup>2</sup> and in the second, made in May 1966, he argued that 'the human spirit must stick to the truth', for 'doubt in its hesitations and ravings cannot allow an efficient work.'<sup>3</sup> Such certainties and efficiencies not only presuppose that certain topics cannot be questioned: they also suggest a line of continuity, fixity, and the obligation to keep silent on anything that refutes these certainties. Hence the question: why are these legacies mute? And, being mute, can they nevertheless 'speak'? Can muteness become a valid form of resilience through art and film?

These methods and processes of working do not attest to a desire to negate or oppose Salazar's certainties. The goal is not to replace one system for another, substituting uncertainties for certainties. Claiming a position as an insider, the purpose is to undermine from within, asserting that silence can be an active and resilient force. I also want to suggest that the body itself cannot be silenced, for the body always reveals. As Gilles Deleuze argues, 'we must believe in the body',<sup>4</sup> for the reality of the body refutes the 'truths' and the 'certainties' of the discourse; it exposes the incongruities of speech. *Mute Legacies* places, therefore, a particular emphasis on the body. Legacies of, for instance, poverty and illness can be apparent in an individual physiognomy as if imprinted on the surface of the skin. It is this connection between silence, body and resilience that enables me to identify the three key topics that form the chapters of this thesis: weight,

1 'Dematerialization' refers back to Lucy Lippard's iconic book *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. Composed of fragments and arranged chronologically, the book includes interviews, texts, documents and artworks. Reflecting the 'chaos' of those times, the book focuses on Conceptual art that attempted to escape from 'cultural confinement', and offers a fascinating overview of the world of artists who used ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and unconventional approaches, with a general emphasis on process. Conceptual art, she says, represented an opening up after Minimalism closed down: it 'was about saying more with less.' Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997), p. xiii.

2 António de Oliveira Salazar, 'Salazar Speech with English subtitles', 22 May 2016. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7\\_Mzcf0Ef6Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_Mzcf0Ef6Y)> [accessed 16 July 2019]

3 Salazar, 'Salazar no 40.º aniversário do 28 de Maio de 1926', 28 May 1966. <<https://arquivos.rtp.pt/conteudos/salazar-no-40-o-aniversario-do-28-de-maio-de-1926/>> [accessed 16 July 2019]

4 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 178.

invisibility and mobility. Filmmaker and feminist writer Trinh T. Minh-ha claims that ‘the best thing you can do is probably to use simultaneously several terms at the same time.’<sup>5</sup> The use of multiple terms, as Trinh suggests, links back to silence, and the use of fragmented and provisional methodologies as a means to introduce difference. This also invokes the changeable nature of images and meanings; for the artwork is never limited to a single set of readings. Yet, although one term and sense often leads to another sense and term, it is fundamental to identify those mute senses that repeat or reappear in the project. This logic implies that although I am not constrained to a single term there are, however, ideas which are transversal to several works. Weight, invisibility and mobility are the terms (the aspects, the qualities) which persist, and ‘muteness’ is, in this case, the invariant that permits the variations. Let us consider for example, *Untitled (Double Portrait)*, 1991, by Hispanic artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, for this is a work that has shaped my practice from an early age. The pile of prints has the exact *weight* of his boyfriend Ross; the weight of this work also refers to the body we ignore or refuse to see: this *invisible* body is a portrait without a face (or name, or history); and after all what looks like a solid piece of sculpture is no more than thin layers of material that share with my own body a surprising sense of *mobility*.

Weight, invisibility and mobility – functioning as both aggregating and dividing themes – are vehicles through which particular lines of making and thinking develop to address silence as resilience within this project. These three lines of investigation are intertwined in both the written and the visual components of this research to challenge ideas of permanence, control, and categorisation. For me, it is within this challenge that resilience can be proposed. The body, therefore, constitutes not only the mute link between the three chapters, but also the mute link between the writing and the visual works produced (and studied). Thus, one of the intentions of this project is to reveal through an art practice the correlation not only between ways of doing and ways of thinking, but also between the personal and the political. Hence, the notions of weight, invisibility and mobility also allow me to address the notion of legacy as something invisible that is carried both individually and collectively.

Note that this practice-led research centres on notions of resilience rather than resistance. My claim is that ‘resilience’ allows for a critical relation with ‘legacy’, avoiding a radical confrontation or denial in relation to the past, for the past inhabits the present. Nonetheless, legacy (and its muteness) is understood here as something that can be changed and transformed by means of silence (by means of resilience). The most vulnerable in our communities may not demonstrate a great capacity of resistance, yet they often endure an extraordinary capacity for resilience. For example, to overcome precarity, poverty or illness is a long-term challenge that requires persistence. Compared to ‘resistance’, the term ‘resilience’ suggests a more silent, embodied and peaceful process; it invokes a different rhythm, a certain slowness, that can be linked with repetition and endurance. On the other hand, ‘resistance’ implies a movement against something, or in opposition to something; it denotes power (which I want to avoid). Moreover, we often ‘choose’ to resist through concrete means, yet I argue that resilience indicates a movement that feels more distant from being a premeditated act, and closer to vulnerability. Although Judith Butler doesn’t use the term resilience, she often touches on the notion of ‘persistence’ to speak of practices of resistance. And Butler’s approach



to 'persistence' resonates with my own perspective on resilience and how it implicates the body and its vulnerability. In Butler's recent book *The Force of Nonviolence*, she writes: 'persistence in a condition of vulnerability proves to be its own kind of strength, distinguished from one that champions strength as the achievement of invulnerability'.<sup>6</sup> According to Butler, vulnerability should be seen not as an attribute of the subject, but as a feature of social relations. In other words, the body is vulnerable to historical and political circumstances. In *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler offers another relevant perspective that connects vulnerability with unpredictability: 'vulnerability denotes some dimension of what cannot be foreseen or predicted or controlled in advance'.<sup>7</sup> The dimension of unpredictability in vulnerability is a condition of both persistence and resilience that, as Butler suggests, may be a function of openness and flexibility, and as such offers *silent practices of resilience*, insofar as it demonstrates fragility and carries within itself a historical and political awareness. Practices of resilience can therefore be understood as practices of resistance that are silent.

I have structured this text in four main sections – Introduction to the Literature and main themes; Chapter 1: Muteness (as weight); Chapter 2: Muteness (as invisibility), and Chapter 3: Muteness (as mobility) – arranged in a non-hierarchical and non-chronological order. In the three chapters different elements are repeated and intercalated – images, short essays, quotations, notes on my own visual practice and other notes incorporating observations on autobiographical and everyday experiences, exhibitions and travelogues. I pass from one theme and reference to another, yet the connection between the elements is not intended to be fixed. This is important: I do not wish the chapters to lead towards a closure, for this would contradict the nature of the project. In fact, they could have been arranged differently. Although they often work in pairs or groups, I want to create the impression that some of these elements (missing from the Table of Contents), like brief notes temporarily attached to my studio wall, could potentially circulate, taking up a different place within the thesis. The intention is to create intervals in which silence can operate, so that certain topics, such as illiteracy, madness, religion or death, function as 'mute' rather than exposed or 'heard'. For similar reasons I have chosen to give different headings to the chapters from those developed in The literature and main themes to allow concepts to return, sometimes on many occasions, for new exploration as contexts shift, enabling fluidity within the writing.

In *Notes on visual practice* I introduce some of the visual work produced during the course of this research. I have chosen to present it in this way to prevent the writing from becoming a mere support for the visual elements, and vice versa. In this thesis, however, much of the artwork is not addressed in text form. I have intentionally chosen to add these works at the end of the writing. This doesn't mean they have less value than those works/images which appear in and between texts, but rather confirms the importance of what is inevitably left unsaid in the work.

The first chapter, *Muteness (as weight)*, takes as its starting point the work of Hungarian film director Béla Tarr to demonstrate that it is possible to discover other senses, outside of speech and beyond the visual. It is the idea of a sound attached to a moving body, and a silence which is heavily loaded, that allows me to draw a line from muteness to sound, from weight to legacy. What happens, therefore, when speech is

6 Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London, New York: Verso, 2020), p. 201.

7 Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 148.

removed? I want to argue that, in this case, our attention shifts towards the physical: a material presence that necessarily implies a sense of gravity. It is both the weight of a body and the burden of a tradition that is being exposed (and heard). In addition, I consider the mute figure of the animal to reinforce the idea of weight as a form of resilience. For my claim is that the animal reconnects us to the physical, calling into question the privilege given to speech. The purpose is to undermine the human-animal distinction and hierarchical structure which places humans at the centre, and some humans above other humans. I then use the notion of ‘thicknesses’ to bring to light a series of questions around time and duration to address the existence of parallel and multiple temporalities.

*Chapter 2: Muteness (as invisibility)* proposes invisibility as a form of resilience; it starts by addressing the importance of not-knowing, following on from Jacques Derrida’s concept of the ruin as experience, to consider looking as a process that forms a dialogue with the invisible. *Muteness (as invisibility)* seeks to include the absent, the overlooked, the neglected, the insignificant, the minor. *Invisibility* thus functions as a strategy to ask questions about the writing of history, inviting us to consider the gaps left by it. *Invisibility* denotes a more conventional indication of silence, yet there are other relevant implications. I propose that there are forms of oppression and authoritarianism that only become manifest through detail. In a paradoxical way, however, certain aspects tend to escape dominance and control. In particular, I focus on the artistic practices of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Roni Horn. Reflecting on how their practices relate to one another, I explore the idea of the artwork as gift to prompt questions around value. Here, as in Chapter 1, vulnerability and resilience are brought together. Finally, I consider childhood as a space where rigid sociocultural divisions tend to disappear, and where value is also questioned.

The third and final chapter, *Muteness (as mobility)*, is largely informed by Roland Barthes’ ‘fugitive’ figure of the Neutral that presents silence as a tactic to avoid dogmatism and control. It is this definition of silence in terms of a non-fixed and non-circumscribed space which led me to focus on the fragment and its potential to circulate, the information it holds often being elusive, ‘fugitive’. I explore these ideas through the fragmented nature of letters and notes. And I do this by way of an analogy between the approaches to correspondence taken by Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa and Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica. Despite their differences, these two artists have been chosen primarily for the working methodologies they adopted, which I argue function as means of resistance against rigid and oppressive socio-political structures, against bourgeois and colonial habits. Both artists also turn to the body, reminding us of its demand for space. Silence is equated with the absence of rigid artistic processes and principles. The focus on ‘letters’ and ‘notes’ is not aleatory: these also operate within my own work, where they play a crucial role, particularly in regard to the structure of this thesis, that comes together based on the possibility of repetition, combination and the reorganisation of various elements. I then move on to consider the distinction between space and place. I return to the question of legacy and expand my study on mobility as a form of resilience by focusing on the gesture of return (to a place or a motif), here defined not by a nostalgic desire to restore the past, but rather by a gesture of persistence as resilience. In *Muteness (as mobility)* emphasis is placed less on the outcomes and more on the methods, for I wish to argue that methodology and subject matter should not be thought of separately in this study.

This research addresses a range of visual and theoretical sources in its scope; the result is an egalitarian structure in the form of an assemblage of references and themes

that gather around the umbrella of muteness as weight, invisibility and mobility. Despite speaking of silence I choose to work under the influence of widely-known figures – white, male, French philosophers – namely Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze and Jean-Luc Nancy, among others. The intention is not to replicate an already established knowledge; the aim is rather to place within the same ground different periods of time, activating a conversation between well-known and lesser-known authors, between writers and visual artists, between my own work and the work of renowned contemporary artists and filmmakers, and in turn allow for different notions of muteness as resilience to develop. In other words, I engage with these thinkers to map out the ground on silence whilst then considering and examining the work of those whose thinking stems from various perceptions of ‘margins’.

In general terms, most of the authors whose work is relevant to this PhD manifest an urgency to deconstruct the power of language and challenge the fixity of ideas and concepts, turning their attention to ethical and political questions (frequently through indirect and fragmented discourse) to reposition the body in a prominent place. The work of Derrida guided me through an extended reflection on time (archive and history as *weight* and *invisibility*); he addresses silence through the mute/invisible figures of the madman and the animal, while questioning, via subtle autobiographical moments, his own position of authority. I first arrived at Deleuze, Nancy, Rancière, Laura U. Marks and Trinh via my interest in cinema. Deleuze developed one of the most prominent and influential studies of the field. In particular his analysis on body and thought in *Cinema II: the Time-Image*, largely following from the writing of Antonin Artaud, introduces an original perspective on (the materiality of) time, memory and sound which operates as a critique of theories and systems that aspire to linearity and totality. In her book *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* – Marks examines a wide range of work by experimental and peripheral film-makers; she argues (building on Deleuze’s theories) that certain films activate bodily memories and senses in the viewer; Marks suggests that *intercultural cinema* is characterised by gaps and silences, also providing evocative considerations of the limits of visibility. Like Deleuze, Jean-Luc Nancy is generally concerned with questions about the body (and its political dimension); following his philosophical reflections on art, plurality and community made it possible to me to draw an association between the notion of *listening*, *spacing* and silence, and it enabled me to explore these concepts under the prism of an artistic practice. In regard to Roland Barthes, the special consideration given to his work largely relates to his original understanding of silence as an important tactic to disrupt notions of power and authority. Focusing on the role of writing and filmmaking in relation to notions of femininity and ethnicity, Trinh also points to the potential of silence to operate as a means of resilience, and as a strategy to unsettle the legacy of male, white, dominant language. Both Barthes and Trinh contributed to the idea of silence as difference, and silence as *mobility*. Judith Butler shares with Trinh an interest in feminist theory; both authors have been committed to a certain idea of marginality, discussing issues concerning class, poverty and gender, and notions of vulnerability as quiet resistance.

In the field of literature, examining the paradoxes related to death and time, Maurice Blanchot’s texts embody a relationship to the fragment, pointing to the potential of the fragment to address what is invisible or mute. Alongside Blanchot, Barthes and Nancy, the book written by Maria Isabel Barreto, Maria Velho da Costa and Maria Teresa Horta – banned by the Portuguese fascist regime – that includes personal considerations of the body (silenced) is particularly relevant here, and is also important in terms of its fragmented methodology. Another important contribution to the writing on the

relationship between silencing, silence, invisibility and the (female) body is offered by Audre Lorde, who looks at legacies of colonialism and explores the potentiality of silence to transform while emphasising the value of non-verbal communication.

Different approaches to silence were also mapped in the field of visual arts and cinema. I consider a group of visual artists whose practice deals with the notion of vulnerability and precarity. The body is always invoked, even though the literal body does not always make an appearance in the work. I draw on the work of artists who stand out for their interest in the poverty of materials, and in exploring unpredictable relations with time, often leading to critical reflections on their own place of authority as artists; examples of these are Francis Alÿs, Hélio Oiticica and Carlos Bunga. A second group of artists, which includes Gonzalez-Torres and Roni Horn, more strongly inspired by autobiographical elements (and the artists' own personal experiences of marginality and homosexuality), encouraged an investigation into the interference between the private and public spheres. Together they provide an original reflection on how politics impacts on the body (weight, invisibility and mobility).

With regard to cinema I focus mainly on films in which the relationship between the body and politics is also articulated. Fundamentally marked by silence and discontinuity, it is often through the presence (and absence) of bodies that individual and social struggles are revealed. In particular I have chosen to look at filmmakers who work with non-actors, use non-linear methodologies, and are especially interested in the position of people on the margins (particularly the working class and the poor). The non-actor offers a portrait that is at the same time intimate and collective, unpredictable (real) and rehearsed (fake). Most of these works occupy, therefore, a hybrid position between fiction and documentary, inviting the viewer to listen and take into consideration what is unspoken in the film. This group of filmmakers includes Chris Marker, Agnès Varda, Werner Herzog, Abbas Kiarostami, Ben Rivers, Wang Bing, Filipa César and Pedro Costa. And finally there is a particular focus on filmmakers whose work either draws inspiration from their own place of origin, and its history as marked by authoritarian political regimes (Béla Tarr, Kiarostami, Costa, César, Bing), or is marked by personal experiences, emotional bonds that in one way or another involve a reflection on their origins and roots (Ingmar Bergman).

## **MUTENESS AND THE BODY: THE IDEA OF THE PARADOX**

Muteness turned speech is in itself a paradox.

The refusal of opposition, for instance, between right and wrong, high value and low value, materiality and non-materiality reflects a tactical goal. The use of the paradox – also referred to as counter-sense, denoting a logic contrary to accepted opinion, or contrary to common-sense – offers the possibility of discovering a third 'sense', echoing precisely my desire to avoid dualistic approaches and to enhance my aspiration to introduce rupture within the text. Indeed, the hyphen (like the parentheses) as a punctuation mark that both joins and separates (as in counter-sense and common-sense) immediately makes perceptible the gap – the spacing. And I shall try to demonstrate that, among its other functions, muteness is a form of spacing.

It is worth noting other paradoxes. For a second general paradox exists in the fact that I propose to draw our attention away from speech towards mute figures (with special attention to childhood, the woman, the animal and madness, and their links with illiteracy,

poverty and 48 years of dictatorship). I will develop methodologies that are essentially provisional; in order to do this, however, I engage with writing, which is a permanent form of speech. Nonetheless, I will also try to demonstrate that my writing – whose structure has a direct correspondence with certain modes of transitory and fragmentary art-making – is composed of intervals and discontinuities in order to convey a sense of mobility and openness that is essential to my practice.

Thus, a third paradox lies in the correspondence between muteness and mobility.

And yet, following the idea of a silent speech on speechless things, what straightaway comes to the forefront is a sense of redundancy rather than movement: tautology, since the art object, as such, cannot respond – that is, it cannot speak of this or that. Existing in an irreversible condition of silence, the art object is therefore always mute. Which means that, at its core, a visual project on muteness already implies a repetition, a form of duplicity. But isn't art, in essence, as 'redundancy' indicates, something 'not or no longer needed or useful';<sup>8</sup> thus, by this means, escaping the realm of utility?

This is not a matter of correcting or restoring the function of muteness, it's a matter of recognising it – making it reappear, giving it a certain visibility (a voice, a space) – and claiming its importance in the context of contemporary art practices. Reappearance is in fact another important aspect of my practice: these things that happen again, which return, entail the possibility of exploring minor differences and changes – which, by themselves, express perseverance, resilience. For one look might not be enough. Note that the second look, or the prolonged duration of the look, already implies spacing: space-time and body-space. Perhaps only after a second look does one come to realise that things have changed, that they are different: nails are longer; hair has turned grey; the pumpkin jam tastes slightly different on the second bite. And that's why 'muteness' also changes throughout the research project: it varies, evolves, adapts, refuses to truly become a fixed notion.

## MUTENESS AND DISORDER

(Creed; Gonzales-Torres)

A friend told me that, in his mind, 'muteness' is a word that cannot be detached from autism: muteness in the form of selective mutism or sickness. Specialists<sup>9</sup> say that selective mutism is a failure to speak that cannot be explained by a lack of language skills. Instead, it exists within a rare social anxiety disorder, a reaction that underlies the absence of speech in specific social situations. I do not wish to reflect on autism, yet I'm particularly fond of the word 'disorder'. A correspondence between muteness and disorder could be proposed. I'm interested in thinking on the possibility of using the term 'disorder' in its potential for reordering.

For example, the component parts in Felix Gonzales-Torres's 'stacks' pieces are replaced and often reinstalled in different configurations. Similarly, in Martin Creed's exhibition *Toast* at Hauser & Wirth, in London, films, singers and paintings alternate

8 'Redundancy' as defined in Lexico English Dictionary.

<<https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/redundancy>> [accessed 20 January 2018]

9 NHS; Selective Mutism Foundation and American Speech-Language-Hearing Association.

<<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/selective-mutism/>> [accessed 16 May 2019]



throughout the day. Visitors are given the impression of having entered a stage instead of a gallery. The artist himself is there ‘rehearsing’, while two people with a trolley reinstall work on the same wall on which a film is being projected.

Every time I visit the weekly market in my hometown in search of the old lady who sells plants, I never find her in the exact same place as before. What interests me here is the idea of the momentary break, aligned with the sense of both impermanence and mobility, because I seek to emphasise not so much the lack, but the gap resulting from these movements. Note that ‘sickness’ cannot be entirely neglected either. For ‘sickness’ in Portuguese – *doença* – from the Latin word *dolentia* – is an act of feeling pain (*dolere*, *dolor*), which, in the case of selective mutism, does not result from penalty (as the Latin original (*paenum*) of the word ‘pain’ indicates; penalty, as in censorship), but rather comes from an involuntary reaction, a failure of the body, perhaps. Furthermore, any ‘sickness’ – often seen as an intermediary state – is the return of a symptom that has a direct relationship with the geographic and socio-cultural conditions in which it develops and spreads. And pain and sickness always leave a bruise, a wound, a physical mark in the form of a legacy: an often invisible burden. In fact, according to Gonzalez-Torres, when the ‘forced invisibilities’ become exposed in the public arena, pain itself can become a political act.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps that’s why it is not so surprising that the word ‘muteness’, unlike ‘silence’, immediately redirects me to the space of the body, and to the idea of the body as evidence, as a living document.

## MUTENESS AS IMAGE AND SPEECH SUSPENDED: THE NOTION OF SPACING

(Marker, Harbord, Deleuze, Nancy, Barthes)

I recall that at an early stage of this research I explored notions of suspension mainly in relation to film and to printmaking procedures. The term ‘suspension’ has lost its preponderance, but nonetheless it persists. It links, I argue, to both spatiality and temporality, the space-time of making (not-making), and the importance of irresolution within contemporary art practices. I realise that suspension is not solely the effect of a gap produced, for instance, by specific printmaking procedures or film-editing techniques. As in Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1966), where the absence of the image through the use of the black film leader between frames throws the audience, according to Janet Harbord,<sup>11</sup> into a state of suspension, making them aware of its presence as well as its absence, making them stop, listen. Hence, I argue, suspension refers to the possibility of thinking the value and importance of this visual interval beyond purely aesthetic and technical terms. For it is not only a matter of seeking to slow things down – pause, questions of temporality in response to the alarming rate of acceleration induced by our everyday engagement with digital technologies – it is more than that: at stake here is the opening of a space that becomes a mode of socio-political critique.

For it is no longer a question of associations between images, says Gilles Deleuze – it is, instead, a question of ‘a spacing’, an operation of ‘differentiation’ capable of producing

10 Julie Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York and Göttingen: Steidl Publishers, 2016), p. 173.

11 Janet Harbord, *Chris Marker: La Jetée* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009), p. 42.

a third image, or something new. What counts, therefore, according to Deleuze, is the *interstice*: 'It is not a matter of following a chain of images, even across voids, but of getting out of the chain of the association'.<sup>12</sup> I attach a great deal of importance to the notion of the interstice precisely because it reinforces the fundamental role of 'spacing' and punctuation (muteness and silence) in communication, which in turn makes me think of it as a form of 'justice'.

Spacing marks perhaps a shift towards a fairer more open relationship with the world.

In fact, I mainly owe the notion of 'spacing' to Jean-Luc Nancy. 'Spacing' is a key term throughout Nancy's writings and can be found in almost all of his main texts.<sup>13</sup> The term 'spacing' could be expanded to imply, besides justice: opening, extension, thought, interruption, interval, proximity. But Nancy's notion of spacing also refers to the space of the body: the local 'ground' occupied by each unique and individual body. 'A departing body carries its spacing away,'<sup>14</sup> says Nancy. Body is '*weight*', '*thickness*' 'dislocating itself'.<sup>15</sup> He continues, 'bodies are places of existence, and nothing exists without a place, a *there*, a "here," a "here is."'<sup>16</sup>

But spacing is also that of the organs (body fragments, parts, pieces, sections). And Jean-Luc Nancy – who received a heart transplant – knows well what the physical and emotional sensation of a sudden opening up of a space in the chest feels like. Philosophically meditating on his illness – in his text entitled 'The Intruder', published in *Corpus* (1992), which opens with an Artaud quote – Nancy speaks of 'silent evidence': the event of the heart becoming a stranger. Yet the heart became both silent and strange not because it had stopped beating or because it could not be heard, but above all because Nancy's heart (which soon would cease to be his heart) became at once both extremely close and extremely distant (in excess). Bodily and mental failure. Silence equated with loss of power: loss of words. In excess too, because it exceeds, interrupts, suspends speech. Nancy recalls (as Jacques Derrida did) how the body cannot rely strictly on speech, for it holds within itself a collection of mute senses whose unities form an untranslatable, non-fixable and 'non-totalisable' relation.

This leads me back to a major difficulty I encountered during the course of this research: for I never seemed to be skilful in finding the right terms, the right discourse, to pin down a particular idea. In a sense I feel that, as in nature and therefore like the body itself, everything is provisional and mobile. For the body forms and is formed by a plurality of relations that cannot be confined to a unique term or entity. Perhaps only the provisional truly consents to inclusion (openness, mobility). Inclusion is understood here not merely in its possible socio-political dimensions but also in its aesthetic and technical dimensions, as seen in Hélio Oiticica's work and also, for instance, in Francis

12 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 185.

13 Jean-Luc Nancy's definition of spacing is complex, and takes several different meanings/senses. What I find quite useful and unique in Nancy's work is the fact that 'sense' itself never seems to crystallise (like muteness, which can be linked with both the provisional and the mobile). Sense is like an element in a constant process of mutation. In each book, therefore, Nancy puts forward the extraordinary exercise 'to stretch the meaning or sense' without necessarily blurring its distinctions.

14 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 33.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 144. It is worth mentioning another concept to which Nancy returns frequently: 'extension'. And I can see why he speaks of extension instead of 'excavation', or 'concentration', for instance, because 'extension in general is not to be known; it is to move, to be moved'. Nancy is reinforcing – following Deleuze and Antonin Artaud – the fundamental question of the inseparability between body and thought and their intrinsic mobility.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Alÿs's work, since they both seem to have developed an aesthetic and technical vocabulary that entails new perspectives on the precarious and the transitory.

This mode of thinking (making) is similar to the one formulated by Roland Barthes, which entails the desire for silence, which he defines as 'the Neutral'. For what Barthes postulates is 'the right to be silent', but in such a way that silence and the game of speech are never systematic.<sup>17</sup> Overall, it becomes a problem of desire: 'not of law: not a desire that one should reach but the desire for silence, fugitive but insistent figure of the Neutral.'<sup>18</sup> Thus the desire of the Neutral is, according to Barthes, a desire for: 'first: suspension (époque) of orders, laws, summons, arrogances, terrorisms, puttings on notice, the will-to-possess.'<sup>19</sup> Note that Barthes expressly ties spacing to the Neutral: 'Neutral = spacing (production of space) and not *distanciation*, distancing'. 'Neutral would be a subtle art of keeping the good distance between landmarks.'<sup>20</sup>

Hence we have blackness as blankness, and as interstice: the suspension of the image that creates a break in the narrative of *La Jetée* resonates with Barthes's claim – following the Nietzschean view that links meaning and power – that the only radical solution to arrogance is the suspension of meaning and the refusal of a pure discourse of opposition.<sup>21</sup> Blankness, I claim, implies here one meaning that cannot be completely grasped, or one that is not immediately accessible, that is not obvious, a meaning that is open. The suspension of the image, like the famous blink of the woman in *La Jetée*, creates a gap in vision that points to a gap in memory and history.

Something appears (disappears), here or there, which makes one stop: a certain tension – desire, joy, pain – that leaves one speechless, mute. Suspension can also be taken in a more restricted sense as the interruption of speech. As Georges Bataille writes of the Lascaux paintings: our first reaction 'is obscure, half mute, only half intelligible'. In the underground space of Lascaux, he says, 'we are left painfully in suspense'.<sup>22</sup> What seems to be suggested here, once again, is a prolongation of a look: a spacing of time. A zone or period of impasse, a hesitation prompted between two or more options (non-action, irresolution, 'disorder'). That being said, suspension corresponds to a space-time before decision, to a period of time where nothing conclusive is said (or done), but is only a wait: a breathing-space.

In my case, both suspension and spacing can be translated into a certain insistence on inconclusive and unstable working methodologies. Thereby, I seek to emphasise the importance of rethinking the body today, its weight, its vulnerability, and above all, its right to space (to move as well as to be still).

Perhaps one needs to remain halfway in order for others to pass.

17 Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 23.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 155.

22 Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art* (Milan: Skira, 1955), pp. 12–13.



## SILENCES WITHIN ART PRACTICES & THE BODY

(Cage, Sontag, Duchamp, Nauman, Marks, Harbord, Bergman)

One of the most influential theories of silence is that of John Cage. Cage's thinking is relevant in this context because he considers silence in relation to a particular visual practice. By employing processes similar to those he used in writing music and poetry, Cage developed alternative ways of approaching prints that went far beyond the medium's specificities. In this sense, there are a few parallels between how I approach printmaking and Cage's way of working. Therefore he offers me the possibility of considering the question of silence in relation to my own working methodologies.

According to Cage, 'whatever appears does so by virtue of an emptiness of the space'<sup>23</sup> in the physical world. Cage's radical manner of operation – as he liked to remark – bears witness to an approximation of 'how' certain systems in nature operate, demonstrating that everything in the world is made up of moving and changing particles. From this argument follows the idea that these corporeal intervals are not in any way empty but are filled with details. These are spaces of transit, which is the equivalent of saying that none of their elements have a fixed position, but a provisional one.

'Silence is all of the sound we don't intend,' says Cage: which means 'free of our activity'<sup>24</sup>. The link between silence, freedom and non-intentionality is relevant in the sense that it allows me to reflect on power and control, and on the potentiality of 'silence' to convey resilience and inclusion. My interpretation is that Cage is claiming a space of experimentation for visual works that relates to a dual dimension of openness and freedom. Hence 'the emptiness of the space' that silence is for Cage – it allowed him to explore indeterminacy – is a true space of possibilities that, in fact, is neither empty nor motionless. Silence is, rather, this moment when one stops exercising control, when one steps back and gives space, allowing other things to happen (to be heard and seen) and take part in the work. And those things that exist beyond human control are, I think, one way of defining Cage's approach to silence. This radical notion of silence, which escapes dominance, explains in part why his work not only reflects an aesthetic/artistic approach but can also be thought of in terms of ethical and socio-political commitment.

Susan Sontag, in her essay 'The Aesthetics of Silence', published in the autumn of 1967, provides another important perspective on the relationship between silence, art and society. What she calls a choice, or appeal, for silence is seen by her as an indicator of a 'highly social gesture'.

To the question 'How literally can the notion of silence be used with respect to art?', Sontag reiterates, following on precisely from John Cage's words and work, that 'pure silence is not feasible'. Therefore, 'as a property of the work of art itself, silence can exist only in a cooked or nonliteral sense.'<sup>25</sup>

Initially, via an analysis of Surrealism and Dada (with particular reference to Marcel Duchamp), Sontag demonstrates that silence represents, above all, an art that favours *minimal transitions* and *minimal exchanges*. The artist, not content with breaking a series of disciplinary boundaries, uses silence as a form of *self-negation*. Silence thus

23 Kathan Brown, ed., *John Cage: Visual Art: To Sober and Quiet the Mind* (San Francisco: Crown Point Press, 2000), p. 50.

24 John Cage, *Every Day Is a Good Day: The Visual Art of John Cage* (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2010), p. 71.

25 Susan Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence', *Aspen*, No. 5 + 6, Item 3, Section IV (1967).

entails a provocative campaign against a certain hierarchised and institutionalised aesthetic. For instance, ‘Duchamp has turned to chess.’<sup>26</sup> In this context, Duchamp’s ‘exemplary renunciation’ of art highlights the fact that silence not only does not negate the work, but on the contrary can become an original source of validity, functioning here as a positive attribute, adding power to the work and further freedom to the artist.

Sontag identifies three modalities in which silence exists in the arts: as a decision; as a punishment – self-punishment; and, finally, as the experience of the audience.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the text, she formulates a vast number of correspondences, claiming that silence can be used/regarded, for instance, as: a zone of meditation; a standard of seriousness; a strategy of impoverishment and reduction; a renunciation of vocation; emptiness and blankness; and impenetrability and opaqueness.

Among all Sontag’s thoughts on silence in relation to the arts, I would like to insist upon two issues that I feel are more closely related to my own primary concerns of research: the problem of attention, and the problem of language.

Traditional art, she says, invites a look. ‘Art that’s silent engenders a stare.’<sup>28</sup> This aspect is important, for it brings about the possibility of thinking silence in relation to time and attention (repetition, and the duration of the look). Although Sontag does not make any direct reference to the subject of time here, she speaks of silence in her next section as something ‘equated with arresting time (slow time)<sup>29</sup>’: something she then defines as a more positive possibility of conceiving the *opaqueness* of silence in opposition to the anxiety potentially caused by it. Further on in the text, she also mentions the use of silence as a strategy to provide ‘time for continuing or exploring thought’.<sup>30</sup> That is, perhaps: silence as extra time, and silence as the time that thoughtful thinking demands. Personally, I link the term ‘stare’ to her previous argument, where she discusses the connection between the faculty of attention, the impoverishment of art (its reduction of means) purged by silence and the capacity ‘to transcend the frustrating selectivity of attention’.<sup>31</sup> As John Cage says: ‘You must give closest attention to everything.’<sup>32</sup>

‘The motion is towards less and less. But never has “less” so ostentatiously advanced itself as “more”’.<sup>33</sup> There is here a sort of commitment to the idea of inclusion, so that the power of art is located not so much in its power to negate but to include: a non-closure.

So when Bruce Nauman states, ‘I had an idea that I could make art that would kind of disappear – an art that was supposed to not quite look like art. In that case, you wouldn’t really notice it until you paid attention,’<sup>34</sup> I believe he is arguing for the possibility of an art that can be both silent and critical at the same time.

With regard to the problem of language, the appeal for silence results, according to Sontag, from a ‘decline in meaning’, with language seen ‘as burden’. This means we might experience language ‘not merely as something shared but something corrupted, weighed down by historical accumulation’.<sup>35</sup> Yet she is also of the opinion that the attack on language is often conducted by means of language: ‘Even if the artist’s medium is words,

26 *Ibid.*, Section II.

27 *Ibid.*, Section IV.

28 *Ibid.*, Section IX.

29 *Ibid.*, Section X.

30 *Ibid.*, Section XIII.

31 Sontag, ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’, Section VII.

32 John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (London: Marion Boyars, 2009), p. 16.

33 Sontag, ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’, Section VII.

34 Wouter Davidts and Kim Paice, eds., *The Fall of the Studio: Artists at Work* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2009), p. 109.

35 Sontag, ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’, Section VIII.

he can share in this task, language can be employed to check language, to express muteness.<sup>36</sup> In any case, and as Laura U. Marks comments, ‘When verbal and visual representation is saturated, meaning seeps into the bodily and other dense seemingly silent registers.’<sup>37</sup> Janet Harbord says something similar in her book on Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*; according to her, both spoken and written words insert a linearity into our experience of time, which in Marker’s case is moveable, and it is when the spoken narrative momentarily falls away that the language of human gestures take over.<sup>38</sup>

And so, following on from Nauman’s performative dimension of his work, what Sontag’s essays seems to further reinforce for me is the difference (even if thin) between silence and muteness. A difference which manifested itself precisely when I recognised what is absent from her writing – for in her entire essay, only on one occasion does Sontag make use of the word ‘body’: ‘Everyone has experienced how, when punctuated by long silences, words weigh more; they become almost palpable. Or how, when one talks less, one starts feeling more fully one’s physical presence in a given space. Silence undermines “bad” speech, by which I mean dissociated speech – speech dissociated from the body.’<sup>39</sup> In Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966), for example, a film Sontag mentions very briefly, the woman who speaks is undone by the woman who refuses to speak. Bergman confesses that, contrary to appearance, the actress is neither sick nor mad; she is mute because she refuses to lie.<sup>40</sup> Drawing a correspondence between speaking and lying, Bergman helps to explain Sontag’s statement, as I am led to consider the discrepancy between speech – in particular, the speech of authority as truth – and that which I experience/sense on a daily basis. Furthermore, in the film, as we watch the mute actress watching with horror a body of a man turning into ashes on the television screen, we are forced to recognise that certain events can only leave one speechless, powerless. The actress cannot respond (talk), she can only react, and she reacts to violence with silence; her non-response becomes a form of action; silence converts into power. So a ‘bad’ speech would be that which ignores the body, one that doesn’t conceive of the other’s pain and pleasure.

Although Sontag addresses the non-separation between speech and body, she nevertheless seems to be indifferent to the use of the body as medium. I also find it remarkable that before using the word ‘body’, at the very end of the paragraph, Sontag makes use of words such as ‘space’, ‘physical’, ‘palpable’ and ‘weight’, emphasising the idea that muteness, unlike silence, entails an inseparability from the body.

## MUTE FIGURES: THE MADMAN, THE ANIMAL, THE WOMAN

(Derrida, Foucault, Rivers, Barthes, Trinh, Irigaray, Lorde)

In chapter two of *Writing and Difference* (1967), ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’, Jacques Derrida reflects on Michel Foucault’s book *History of Madness*, originally published in 1961. Citing Foucault, Derrida argues that the purpose of the book consisted

36 *Ibid.*, Section VII

37 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 5.

38 Harbord, *Chris Marker: La Jetée*, p. 80.

39 Sontag, ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’, Section XIII.

40 Ingmar Bergman, *Images: My Life in Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), pp. 58–60.

of writing a history ‘in its most vibrant state, before being captured by knowledge’.<sup>41</sup> That is, a history of madness capable of escaping the language of psychiatry, which, in Foucault’s words, was nothing but ‘a monologue by reason about madness’.<sup>42</sup> By avoiding this type of discourse, established on the basis of the other’s silence, Foucault was attempting to write instead the history of the archaeology of that silence.

For Derrida, the archaeology of silence was also another way of asking an important question about history itself – or the meaning of ‘archia’: a topic to which Derrida paid special attention in his book *Archive Fever* (1995). The madman who has a lack of reason, and thus no authority, seen often as ‘the other’, has been consigned to the ‘margins’ of society and is therefore partially erased from history. For Derrida, the possibility of history itself rests on the basis of the great division between reason (as the measure of truth) and unreason. Hence, he tells us: ‘the structure of exclusion is the fundamental structure of historicity’.<sup>43</sup>

First of all, is it possible for there to be a history of silence? Derrida knew – as Foucault probably did as well – that, despite all appearances to the contrary, the archaeology ‘against’ reason quite simply cannot be written, because history could only be articulated within reason, that is, within a certain rational structure of language. ‘Total disengagement from the totality of the historical language responsible for the exile of madness, liberation from this language in order to write the archaeology of silence, would be possible in only two ways. (...) Either do not mention a certain silence (a certain silence which, again, can be determined only within language and order that will preserve this silence from contamination by any given muteness), or follow the madman down the road of his exile.’<sup>44</sup>

This is not a matter of romanticising either silence or madness. Silence is rather seen here as an opportunity for others to be heard and to speak. Yet how to free oneself from ‘this language’, how to excavate while preventing the contamination? And what could this different ‘language and order’ Derrida is speaking of be? Here, one is dealing less with impasse than with impossibility. For, literally, I will never be able to put myself in the place of another; his voice will never be my own. A discourse of silence is above all a discourse of probabilities; consisting more of formulating questions and less of giving answers. But that also means that there can only be an approximation: the madman’s silence can only be imagined, fictionalised.

Although I never had an ambition to write a history of silence, either national or universal, up to a certain level I see these two hypotheses, as described by Derrida, operating in my work. I will try to explain:

On the back of the booklet for his exhibition *Earth Needs More Magicians* at Camden Arts Centre in 2015, citing Trinh T. Minh-ha, artist Ben Rivers claims: ‘I do not intend to speak about, just speak nearby.’<sup>45</sup> He continues: ‘I think there is too much overdetermined explanation in our world, everything apparently needs to be defined at the press of a button, while I want people to use their own power of connection, to topple the tyranny of exposition, and to reinvigorate unpopular words like mystery and magic.’<sup>46</sup> Maybe to

41 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p. 40.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

44 *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.

45 Trinh T. Minh-ha cited by Ben Rivers in File Note 99, *Earth Needs More Magicians* (London: Camden Arts Centre, 26 September–29 November 2015)

46 Ben Rivers in File Note 99, *Earth Needs More Magicians* (London: Camden Arts Centre, 26 September–29 November 2015)

‘speak nearby’ and to use a type of language that might ‘preserve silence from contamination’ are similar approaches to a common problem: how to escape the tyranny of the narrative, descriptive, rational and, so often, subjective? More specifically, Trinh, who in her book *Woman, Native, Other* examines the post-colonial process of displacement, has taught us that a conversation in which the other is neither silenced nor reduced to otherness is a conversation built on silence. The reality of the other can never be reproduced or explained completely. I insist: one will never be able to put oneself in the place of another: therefore, as she writes, ‘one can only approach things indirectly’.<sup>47</sup> For Trinh, working with silence is about drawing new associations, privileging fluidity precisely in order to avoid static and dominant models of creation. Stories, she says, are bound to circulate.<sup>48</sup> ‘Silences, pauses, pacing – and working with intervals means working with relationship in the wider sense of the term. Relationships between one word, one sentence, one idea and another; between one’s voice and other women’s voice; in short, between oneself and the other’.<sup>49</sup> Stemming from my family history, archival material, and casual encounters with people that I have met during these last seven years, such as a night worker with two missing fingers with whom I chatted on a bus journey in London; my neighbour who committed suicide in 2018; a woman I met in a small village in the north of Portugal, sitting barefoot under a tree, that reminded me of my grandmother – this research involves a complex choreography between associations from experiences, materials, artworks, and films.<sup>50</sup> I came to recognise that the threads uniting both these life stories and my research were linked with poverty. The notion of poverty is particularly important not only because it relates to my own roots and the Portuguese fascist dictatorship, but because silence weaves through the daily lives of the poor. Very few legacies have as much impact as poverty on the lives and on the bodies of those who experience it. Besides, poverty is also often an image of resilience. However, even though poverty has a considerable impact on my work, in the chapters of this thesis I remain largely silent on the subject. As such, the man who has lost two fingers, or the bare feet of the woman who figures in my writing, operating at the level of signs, denote an adverse social condition, without poverty (or madness) being stated. It is in this sense that ‘I speak nearby’. Like Trinh, I choose to address things indirectly, so that the reader is called upon to draw their own associations.

As Barthes puts it: ‘In such a “semiology” of worldly morality, silence has in fact a “speakerly” or “speechly” substance: it is always at the level of implicit (...) formidable: in

47 Trinh, *Cinema Intervals* (New York, London: Routledge, 2012), p. 33.

48 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 133.

49 Trinh, *Cinema Intervals*, p. 38.

50 Hence ‘speaking nearby’ is also revealing in terms of a working methodology that makes use of silence. For instance, the structure of this thesis, characterised by repetition and changes in terminology (muteness as weight, muteness as invisibility and muteness as mobility) shares some similarities with Trinh’s approach to writing: working on the same subject but taking the subject anew by each time changing her point of departure. This ‘re-departure’ is a practice that seeks difference via repetition to avoid dictating a unique path or solution, and by this means escaping a position of authority. So, contrary to what António Salazar proclaims, there is no need to ‘stick to the truth’ – the challenge instead is to trigger multiple questions. As I said, a discourse of silence is above all a discourse of approximations. ‘Speaking nearby’ is a form of communication that suspends affirmation and resists closure. My visual practice resonates with Trinh’s approach, as well, in relation to the non-fixed quality of the work, and in the way I often return to the same elements and materials again and again, repeating them differently or using them in a different context. Coming back to ideas and materials entails a sense of mobility and resilience. (Trinh, *Cinema Intervals*, p. 40).



fact, in every “totalitarian” or “totalising” society, the implicit is a crime, because the implicit is a thought that escapes power.<sup>51</sup>

All this, I believe, mirrors the importance of silence as a strategy, which also enables me to consider the potential of the fragment and the fragmentary to entail forms of outcome that are not explicit. There’s a walking around, a wandering around, but no resolution, no closure.

The second path offered by Derrida is perhaps more extreme. For, somehow, to follow the madman down to the road of his exile would mean being doomed like him to the invisibility of his exile. It would be like writing a letter knowing it will have no reader, like beginning a sentence while knowing one will never finish it. Hence I feel that this second path touches upon the problematic of the disappearance of the author (or the *death of the author*<sup>52</sup>), which also raises a question about the absence of work itself. It seems to involve a kind of self-destructive method (or, as Sontag puts it, silence as self-negation and ‘self-punishment’). So I ask: can, in some way, the use of the provisional and the fragmentary also be considered a form of withdrawal?

Furthermore, the idea that on the one hand silence as such is ‘vibrant’, escaping rational language, and, on the other, that the ‘given’ silence is imposed, led me to reflect also on the difference between muteness and making mute, that is, between silence and silencing. Through Foucault, Derrida is, then, indirectly questioning the mechanisms of power and its institutions, which often promote a discourse of exclusion and are therefore responsible for a ‘division’ of society essentially based on silencing.

In his book *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2006), Derrida, almost forty years after writing *Writing and Difference*, starts by questioning the boundaries between man and animal, and the possibility of man thinking and seeing (being in) the world free from any relation to utility, to go on further into the question of death. Yet death here doesn’t necessarily mean dying, but is aligned with Maurice Blanchot’s thoughts (in *The Space of Literature*) concerning ‘when he frees himself from himself’.<sup>53</sup> Which perhaps here comes down to ‘nakedness’: ‘I am naked under the gaze of what they call “animal.”’<sup>54</sup> Both naked, he and his cat; Derrida then starts from (and speaks of) a fundamental condition of equality. Being undressed makes the veiled seem suddenly exposed. Yet the naked man is not merely ashamed – somehow, he is freer. Nakedness and death imply, here, a form of liberation from cultural, social and political constraints. I want to argue that both death and nakedness involve questions about legacies and roots, but also about the blurring of static boundaries and divisions. This doesn’t mean I must renounce or forget who I am in order to become someone else; however, where I come from is a question that is no longer relevant when I encounter the animal (or death). Undressed as unmasked, and as uprooted.

For Derrida the animal deprived of speech is ‘the absolute other’. The animal, ‘condemned to muteness’ like the madman, has neither logos nor reason. And yet Derrida insists that in order for him to hear what his cat might be saying to him, he needs to become sensitive to ‘a language of mute traces’,<sup>55</sup> for that is the language that is proper to animals.

51 Barthes, *The Neutral*, p. 24.

52 Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 142.

53 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 175.

54 Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 13.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Another passage from the same book states: 'I am saying they, what they call an animal (...) to indicate that my whole history, the whole genealogy of my questions, in truth everything I am, follow, think, write, trace, erase even, seems to be born from that exceptionalism. As if I were the secret elect of what they call animals.'<sup>56</sup> What interests me here is that by assertively placing himself on the 'animot' site, he is displacing himself from the centre. Through this decentralising movement, Derrida is critically bringing to our attention a certain way of thinking, a certain ethical and political style of discourse that still places humankind in a privileged position of mastery, authority and dominance over all other living creatures. Besides, I feel he is also questioning whether man is able to break free of the classical dualistic interpretation of the world.

At stake is an attempt to deconstruct and mobilise thought, bringing into question dominant, authoritarian and narcissistic modes of relating to the world and to ourselves (which obviously also includes modes of relating to language). As I see it, this original and specific mode of relating denotes a gesture of stepping back: pause takes place: 'spacing'. It is crucial not to look at things only from our own perspective, and to relate to others as they are, without imposing our subjective vision.

We tend to regard muteness as something negative, a condition of defect, passivity and a lack of power: the absence of words and work: death. But my interpretation, following Barthes', Derrida's and Trinh's writings, is that this feeling links to a more primitive fear, which comes from the impossibility of fully anticipating (controlling, manipulating, domesticating) the other. For the 'other' always seems to entail some form of muteness. To accept the other's silence is a great challenge, because often this means interrogating our own thinking habits and fixed ideas. In stepping back I am also stepping forward, since the relationship with others rests on this ability to situate ourselves both individually and collectively. This idea is not new, and relates back to the problem of how to undermine the assumed binaries of reason and unreason, a theme that has occupied the attention of many female writers, including Luce Irigaray and Audre Lorde. Hence, a potential history of silence would necessarily need to consider woman's silence, and the recognition of subjectivity as an important element of knowledge that detaches from power. As Trinh puts it, 'between knowledge and power, there is room for knowledge-without-power'.<sup>57</sup> This 'room' that Trinh speaks of, and which has been largely developed by women, is a space which promotes a fundamental movement that brings together speech and silence, speaking and hearing. Instead of cultivating the dualisms that set private and public, body and mind, and passive and active in opposition to each other, and the hierarchies implied in such divisions, women often prefer to work between the two, promoting by this means a discourse that moves closer to the body and further away from the relation with ownership and utility.

At this point one can expand Derrida's definition of 'nakedness' to include the idea of being 'naked' as self-revelation and as the sharing of silence; but, asks Audre Lorde, 'how do I share it?'<sup>58</sup> If to articulate someone else's silence involves a certain degree of muteness in approaching our own inner silence, a different challenge is involved. Lorde responds by discussing, without excluding either speech or silence, 'the transformation of silence into language and action'. Hence, following Lorde's approach, another valid

56 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

57 Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, p. 40.

58 Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), p. 87.

strategy ‘to prevent silence from contamination by any given silence’ would be to transform it, for this this is perhaps the only way to share it.

A no less significant aspect to draw from the discourse of these three female authors is the recognition of debt to our mothers. For it was precisely from her mother that Audre Lorde learned ‘the important value of nonverbal communication’, and how to acquire vital and protective information without words.<sup>59</sup> This movement towards maternal ancestry (and its mute legacy) seems to represent a cultural and social transformation: the invention of a new language that brings us back closer to the body and the senses as a legacy of muteness.

I found myself deeply engaged with the thinking of Lorde, Trinh and Derrida . My claim is that these texts embody a relationship with silence (and other forms of lack, such as blindness and madness, but not in terms of a lacuna – that is, not in negative terms) that prompts a whole set of questions about power and authority in relation to discourse. Furthermore, the animal, the madman and the woman share an invisibility that is proper to muteness, and they are important to understanding how different notions of muteness – weight, invisibility and mobility – operate as forms of resilience.

## FILMMAKING: MUTENESS AS A MODE OF LISTENING

(Rancière, Deleuze, Artaud, Bergman, Tarr, Costa, Kiarostami, Herzog, Bing, Rivers, Varda)

In *The Intervals of Cinema* (2014), Jacques Rancière says that his relationship with cinema is that of an amateur: ‘a play of encounters and distances’<sup>60</sup> between cinema and art, cinema and politics, cinema and theory. Like Rancière, I retain memories of films and discourses on cinema to investigate further the functions of muteness, looking into the relationship between legacies, the use of silence and the theme of the body beyond cinema.

The focus on cinema has to do with two fundamental aspects. The first of these essentially concerns a more general idea linked to the nature of cinema itself: that is, its mechanisms as much as ‘its’ concepts: how film is constructed, the motion of cinema, and ideas related to montage, temporality and fragmentation. Gilles Deleuze is an inevitable reference. As he pointed out in the preface to his book, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983), the modern cinema has initiated ‘fundamental changes from the cerebral point of view’.<sup>61</sup> In the chapter ‘Supernumerary Art’ within his book *Abbas Kiarostami: The Evidence of Film* (2001), Nancy also claims that the cinema and its naming as ‘the seventh art’ has created an opening in the system, which instigates a process of mutation in art, meaning: “‘art’ has lost its presumed unity’.<sup>62</sup> And it is precisely this Deleuzian way of thinking – closer to an open system, arranged according to a non-chronological and non-hierarchical order – outlined in Deleuze’s collaborative work with Félix Guattari, which is, according to Foucault, a key ‘introduction to the Non-Fascist Life’.<sup>63</sup> A way of thinking without fixed models: discontinuous, flexible, and therefore fragmentary and mobile, different in every way from dogmatic thought.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

60 Jacques Rancière, *The Intervals of Cinema* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 1.

61 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. XII.

62 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Evidence of Film: Abbas Kiarostami* (Brussels: Yves Gavaert Éditeur, 2001), p. 22.

63 Michel Foucault, cited in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. xiii.



But there are other aspects that I recognise in cinema – as in prints – that explain my interest in film. Cinema is by definition, or in principle, less elitist. An art of the masses that holds within it a constellation of ideas, such as: circulation, accessibility, immateriality, a sense of sharing. To experience the painting *A Burial at Ornans* (1849–50) by Gustave Courbet, for example, I need to travel to Paris, yet to see Ingmar Bergman’s film *Persona* (1966) I only need to turn on the television or the computer. When people come from a humble background, with a history of poverty and illiteracy, film, like music, often assumes a more central position. Thus, the accessibility/value of film has a triple dimension: technical, aesthetic and political. Films (or some specific films) seem to both escape and challenge a prevailing and historical logic that ties the arts (the visual arts in particular) to the structures/mechanisms of power and ideas of commodity, which, in turn, radically brings into question the division between everyday ‘truth’ and the ‘truth’ of aesthetic, artistic, philosophical and political discourse. Moreover, there’s something about film not being unique – there is a ‘low’ value attached to it – relevant to mass movements that seems to connect to and the utilisation of muteness as a form of protest.

The second reason<sup>64</sup> why I have chosen to draw on film studies revolves around the relationship between muteness, the discontinuity of discourse (the problem of language as identified by Sontag) and the presence (absence) of bodies. My interest lies in a specific ‘type’ of cinema that resists definition, resolution, unity and linear narrative. This involves, again, the questioning of how – regardless of the medium – methodology and subject matter intersect. Particularly influential for this PhD project are chapter seven (‘Thought and Cinema’) and chapter eight (‘Cinema, Body and Brain, Thought’) in Gilles Deleuze’s book *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1986). In both chapters, Deleuze draws upon the work of Antonin Artaud, Maurice Blanchot and others to pose the fundamental question that troubled Artaud throughout his life: the inseparability of body and thought. How strangely clear and important Artaud’s writings<sup>65</sup> still seem. For wasn’t he a pioneer in terms of thinking about the inseparability of modes of visibility – that is, ways of making in artistic practices and ways of thinking? In short, I feel the correspondence between body failure (disorder), thought and the fragmentation of writing in Artaud’s work goes far beyond his madness (so often romanticised). Deleuze considers Artaud to be of crucial importance: for Deleuze, Artaud detected ‘the real object-subject of cinema’ – much more important than dream – that is: ‘this difficulty of being, this powerlessness at the heart of thought’.<sup>66</sup> As such, the essence of cinema no longer seeks to form and reaffirm a totality through montage. The idea of an organic fixed totality has collapsed: with a ‘dissociative force’ the higher purpose of the cinematic image is to introduce ‘the inpower [*impouvoir*] of thought’, or what Deleuze calls the presence of an unthinkable in thought. Deleuze’s conception of cinema argues ‘powerlessness’ not as a lack or inferiority but as part of thought, for he claims that one should not aim to restore the whole power of thought. This invites me to consider, once again, powerlessness, and vulnerability as a form of resilience: so that weakness becomes strength.

I take mainly the work of Ingmar Bergman, Abbas Kiarostami, Béla Tarr and Pedro Costa (but also Werner Herzog, Wang Bing and Ben Rivers) as references. In spite of their differences – in terms of backgrounds and generations – I plait them together to rediscover mutual

64 It might be important to clarify that when I refer to a first and second aspect, I’m not claiming a more technical approach in opposition to a more theoretical one; instead, this second reason functions as a close-up in relation to the first one.

65 Susan Sontag, ed., *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1976)

66 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 171.

concerns and working dynamics. For instance, I identify qualities of thickness in both Tarr's and Costa's work. An emphasis is placed on depth, the materiality of the medium, the density and the weighing of bodies – tied to a deep urge to reshape the cinematic experience through the deconstruction of narrative and the extension of time. And it is via the exploration of mute figures that these filmmakers address ethical and socio-political concerns. I use the term 'thickness' here also to undo the notion of cinema as the theatre of shadows, as pure entertainment. For all the filmmakers I look at, directly or indirectly, address the opacity and abstraction of discourse measured against the evidence of images/bodies. Images that trigger thoughts: films that resist explanation, closure.

Some of these ideas are developed in Ingmar Bergman's book *Images: My Life in Film* (1994), containing fragments from his workbooks. Reconsidering a note from 1960, about *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), Bergman writes: 'it's going to have a story that moves vertically, not horizontally. How the hell do you do that? (...) even if it was strangely, I understood exactly what I meant: a film that went into an untested dimension of depth.'<sup>67</sup> And later, in relation to *Autumn Sonata* (1978), he writes: 'I am drilling, and either the drill breaks or else I don't dare drill deeply enough.' Bergman then suggests that this cinematographic deepness (thickness) would be related to a desire to achieve an outcome where 'finally, all forms of storytelling are dissolved.'<sup>68</sup>

I find this correspondence between cinematographic activity and the act of drilling fascinating. The notion of drilling as excavation leads me back to Derrida's reflections on 'the archaeology of silence'. Furthermore, drilling also comprises a form of dismantling (fragmentation) here, since both film and writing proceed in motion, providing an inevitable rhythmic sense. And this is why I think none of these concepts – excavation, collapse, drilling, or even Nancy's concepts of spacing and extension – are contradictory, but instead essentially complementary.

Similarly, Portuguese director Pedro Costa – unique in exposing the legacy of Salazar's Estado Novo and the problems of colonisation – also favours a cinematic method of construction that breaks with the linear narrative model. Proud of his very small crew, Costa developed a radical methodology where the script is written by the (nonprofessional) actors. This also means it is no longer possible to establish rigid rules and approaches. The filmmaker's 'silence', his intentional lack of authority, becomes a key aspect of his methodology.

Although one could claim that in general, despite the differences between working with non-actors and working with professional actors, the division between filmmaker and actors (whether anonymous or not) remains intact. Both the non-actor and the professional actor have little agency regarding the final form the work might take. It is the filmmaker who chooses what and how much of what has been recorded will be shown. However, my argument is that the use of non-actors is linked to some extent to the use of mute figures. When real characters play themselves, one begins to feel the rhythm of their voices, to notice the shape of their hands, the colour of their skin, to observe what clothes they wear, what they eat, in what conditions they live – their social awareness. By gathering all these details, loaded with information and energy, I am led back to the question of the relationship between the personal and the political dimension of our

67 Ingmar Bergman, *Four Stories by Ingmar Bergman: The Touch, Cries and Whispers, The Hour of the Wolf, A Passion* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), p. 249.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

everyday lives, because this space, that is created by non-actors, is also often the moment when poverty, class, racism and inequality cease to be pure abstractions. In these precise moments poverty acquires a face, a voice, and an age, sex, skin colour: a corporeal identity. We all know that what is said and seen in a film is not necessarily true; however, there is some truth in what we hear and see – or what we see and hear offers us some partial truth.

The filmmaker may not be able to eliminate the major divisions that separate them from all the participants, yet by engaging in the daily lives of common people they are, to some extent, breaking down the conventional hierarchy between artist and viewer, artist and participant. And in most cases it is possible to speak of a mutual transformation that occurs in the correspondence between filmmakers and non-actors.

This relationship between self and society, and the mutual transformation between filmmakers and non-actors, is clearly articulated, for example, in the work of Agnès Varda. In one scene from *The Gleaners and I* (2000) Varda shows us postcard reproductions of Rembrandt's self-portrait, and then a close-up of her own hand: 'This is my project – to film with one hand my other hand', she says. Is she telling us that, by picking up all these life stories marginalised by society, she is a gleaner herself? Indeed, gleaning, like filmmaking, involves a process of collecting and combining, but in Varda's case it also involves an important process of listening. Through storytelling, consecutive encounters and dialogues, Varda undertakes critical thinking that challenges conventional perceptions, reiterating the idea that working with the non-actor can also represent a challenge in terms of the idea of linear narrative.

On the occasion of the 2018 exhibition dedicated to Costa's work at the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art in Porto, one could read: 'Each film is a letter<sup>69</sup> written by a thousand hands.' In a sense, Costa is shifting from the responsibility to speak (to write) to the responsibility to listen (to look). This idea is important to me, and I feel Costa is perhaps one of the most radical filmmakers in terms of promoting this shift towards an opening. But can listening/looking constitute a mode of questioning? To consider this is to suppose that the ears have become as tactile as the palms of the hands. However, unlike some such psychoanalyst, Costa (the artist) does not wish to establish any diagnosis, he does not wish to find any answer (or cure). The filmmaker's approach to silence takes on a completely different value. Muteness becomes a form of listening. Because listening here does not consist of being 'passive' but rather of being receptive and mindful. Silence as art-practice, and as resilience. <sup>69</sup>

69 American art historian Grant H. Kester argues for a 'dialogical' aesthetics in which both the artist and the participants are challenged through a process of collaboration. This form of aesthetics indicates a significant shift: emphasis is located less on the physical object and more on the communicative process of exchange that happens during artistic creation. The artwork is then the result of a process of interaction. In this way, writes Kester, 'both the artist and his or her collaborators will have their existing perceptions challenged; [...]. What emerges is a new set of insights, generated at the intersection of both perspectives and catalysed through the collaborative production of a given project'. Despite the many aspects that the artists analysed by Kester and those mentioned in this project have in common, such as the special attention they pay to social and political issues, a commitment to duration and to the process of listening, for the majority of the artists discussed in this thesis the physical object is not of secondary importance, and most (if not all) of the works presented here do not result from a process of collaboration. I want, nevertheless, to highlight that even though Kester's dialogical aesthetics does not focus on cinema, it is possible to draw an interesting parallel between the use of non-actors in cinema and the idea of a collaborative art practice as new forms of resistance and social criticism. Dialogical practices may therefore expand our understanding of the political dimension of our private lives and offer new awareness of how our geographical and cultural environment (and how we interact with it) can play a crucial role in our work. Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Conversation in Modern Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2013) p.95.

In an interview for *Fireflies* magazine, while discussing the importance and potential of digital filmmaking, Costa says: 'I use digital for a reason: again, there was no real script; it was a film that had to be invented. Find the film, find myself in that place. (...) We knew it would take time. I used to say it was a film to lose time.'<sup>70</sup> Costa then moves from the idea of 'boycotting' the script to that of freedom, and justice<sup>71</sup>: 'I cannot deny it, the idea with *In Vanda's Room* was always to make the most beautiful film with a girl in a room ever. (...) Another word for beautiful could be that I wanted to do justice to a girl in a room in those conditions. These films should create some justice for these people. So, beautiful means justice. (...) And then cinema – at least for me – has always been connected to justice.'<sup>72</sup>

It is these methods (these thoughts) that bring Costa close to Abbas Kiarostami, but also to the films of Wang Bing, for example. At the UK premiere of his recent film *Dead Souls* (2018), at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, Wang Bing – answering a question about his general working methodology in relation to the film's running time of more than eight hours – said: 'This is actually Part 1, we are working on Part 2 and 3. The material that we use is digital, it is cheap and more accessible. Under these circumstances you can realise a project in a much more liberal and complete way.'

The 'time wasted', extended or fragmented, and the interest in out-takes or zigzag paths, are not just aesthetic and technical options. What happens with Bing's, Costa's and Kiarostami's work (perhaps in a more subtle way) is a socio-political claim attached to the use of a specific visual language, which then only seems to reaffirm the role of contemporary cinema in terms of questioning the mechanisms of power. The simple fact that *Dead Souls*, mostly composed of interviews, exceeds eight hours in duration (that, according to the filmmaker, will be extended) suggests an attempt to destabilise a series of fixed rules in the film industry, which leads me to think that the resilience of human existence can neither be reduced to a single viewpoint nor fit any static system.

Furthermore, the fact that Costa and Bing in particular (but also Kiarostami and Werner Herzog, for example) have chosen to work with non-professional actors, exploring the hybrid space between fiction and documentary, already indicates an opening to the banality of the everyday: an opening to unexpected encounters and events. I want, therefore, to demonstrate that in reality these aesthetic, technical and thematic options go beyond the discipline of cinema and also beyond any theory of the fragment traditionally linked with montage. Note that, in these cases, it is not only the storytelling that is dissolved/suspended but also the power of the filmmaker. The deliberate lack of control by the artist suggests a form of silence very similar to the one formulated by Sontag, which ties the 'arresting (slow time)' to the desire to 'transcend the frustrating selectivity of attention'. The 'non-active' time of the filmmaker, his lack of interference and authority, his muteness, resonate with a significant number of approaches that currently prevail in the visual arts and are associated with minor interventions, found

70 Pedro Costa, in Gianni Marchini Camia, 'Pedro Costa/Ben Rivers', *Fireflies*, No. 4 (October 2016), p. 58.

71 The concept of 'justice' has also been explored by Jean-Luc Nancy in relation to Abbas Kiarostami's work. Nancy uses the term 'right distance' to distinguish distancing from distanciation. Spacing is the production of space; it is to genuinely look at things, and spend time with them; it means caring and attention. So 'right distance' is a particular way of looking without finality and authority. Therefore justice is, according to Nancy, that particular undefined distance that is 'right' precisely because it allows the relations to take place and to open to continuity. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Evidence of Film: Abbas Kiarostami*, pp. 70–72.

72 Pedro Costa, in *Fireflies*, No. 4, pp. 61–62.

and discarded materials, precariousness, the accidental or, for example, the overlooked. It is not so surprising, then, that our attention tends to shift towards the non-verbal (and non-visual) aspects of the works.

## FRAGMENTED LITERATURE: MUTENESS IN WRITING

(Barreto, da Costa, Horta, Nancy, Barthes, Pessoa, Blanchot)

Like a ‘mosaic’ of written words, merging the shared personal experiences of three female authors, *New Portuguese Letters* (1975) was written in secret and then banned and confiscated by the Portuguese fascist government shortly after its publication in the year 1971. It is known that, even under police interrogation, the three authors never revealed who wrote what in the book, reinforcing the importance of the collective and fragmentary essence of the work: in a sense, confirming the importance of what is said but also left unsaid (mute) in the text.

Their first letter opens with the following statement: ‘All literature is a long letter to an invisible other, a present, a possible, or a future passion that we rid ourselves of, feed, or seek. We have also agreed that what is of interest is not so much the object of our passion, which is a mere pretext, but passion itself; to which I add that what is of interest is not so much passion itself, which is mere pretext, but its exercise.’<sup>73</sup> The emphasis on the ‘exercise’ of writing and on how it is put into practice is clear. In the authors’ own words, ‘WHAT is in the book cannot be dissociated from HOW it evolved.’<sup>74</sup>

Composed of 120 texts, the book incorporates dated (but unsigned) letters they exchanged with each other, punctuated by poems, essays, and short stories. The whole book appears to underline the potentialities of the fragment to add rhythm and movement to the writing. Being composed of short elements, and having at its starting point five letters (the ‘Letters of a Portuguese Nun’, written in the 17th century by a young novice to her lover) the book makes me feel touched by something intimate and secret.

And here again the work is characterised by a fundamental attention to the body. For the ‘three Marias’ knew well that the body could not be thought outside the structures of power – it was the place where power realised most of its tyrannies and manipulations. Hence, the body, which is a private domain, became, through writing, a privileged space of resistance. On many levels, this work – proposing a dismantling of patriarchy, hierarchy, Catholicism, fascism – conveys Nancy’s understanding that ‘the fragmentation of writing, wherever it occurs, responds to the ongoing protest of bodies in – against – writing.’<sup>75</sup> In my opinion, this mode of writing is akin to Pedro Costa’s cinematic approach,

73 Maria Isabel Barreto, Maria Velho da Costa and Maria Teresa Horta, *New Portuguese Letters: The Three Marias* (Frogmore: Paladin, 1975), p. 13.

74 Ibid., p. 7.

75 Another important argument that I draw from Nancy’s *Corpus* is that by reflecting on the body I am inevitably engaging with the fragment as process. ‘Fifty-eight indices on the Body’ – comprising in fact fifty-nine numbered paragraphs on the body – written in 2004 for the Portuguese magazine *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens*, and later on also published in *Corpus*, is a special case. The text constitutes an extraordinary example of the idea that certain topics, such as the body, have a dimension that cannot be reduced to a single definition or description, but necessarily require a fragmented and expanded approach. Nancy invokes a bond between the topic of the body and a particular mode of writing, making one aware of a link between concepts and practices, thinking and making, but also between body and thought. Nancy, *Corpus*, pp. 21, 150–160.



since it exposes without imposing directions (pedagogies or ideologies), which for me also means putting things on view in a mute or implicit way.

In *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1981), Roland Barthes claims to have explored a new mode of arbitrariness. However, the book is also composed of fragments – or, as Barthes puts it, ‘figures’ – and is not structured according to a complete randomness, but is ‘subjugated to a pair of arbitrary factors: that of nomination and that of alphabet.’<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, despite the alphabetical order (like the chronological order followed in *New Portuguese Letters*), the book maintains a crucial playful dimension. For the word ‘figures’ here should not be understood ‘in its rhetorical sense, but rather in its gymnastic or choreographic acceptance.’<sup>77</sup> The use of the terms ‘gymnastic’ and ‘choreographic’ seems to have a clear function here: the two terms immediately appear to put language and body in contact. Barthes is arguing for a fluctuation and a rhythm in writing similar to that of a body in movement.

What *A Lover's Discourse* thereby presupposes is that it is impossible for meaning to keep still, to fossilise, which in turn seems to suspend any possibility of totalisation and categorisation. Instead of a story, each ‘figure’ offers me something ‘minor’: insignificant details and their nuances (perhaps demanding, as Sontag suggested, more than a look, a stare). In Barthes’s words: ‘It is the very principle of this discourse (and of the text which represents it) that its figures cannot be classified: organised, hierarchised, arranged with a view to an end (a settlement): there are no first figures, no last figures.’<sup>78</sup>

This idea is closely related to his own theory of the Neutral. I recall that the Neutral implies a refusal to be literal, and to take things for granted. The figure of the Neutral is ‘fugitive’; the Neutral is what diverges, alters. ‘Neither one nor the other’: Barthes wants us to wonder about that which goes without saying. Besides, in Barthes’s opinion, when one engages in an irrelevant repertoire or occupation, this counts as silence.<sup>79</sup>

Another variant of fragmented writing is exemplified by Fernando Pessoa’s work. *The Book of Disquiet*, first published in 1982, 47 years after Pessoa’s death, and signed under his semi-heteronym, Bernardo Soares, assumes a key role in this context. Richard Zenith, editor and translator of the book, wrote that this work ‘isn’t a book but its subversion and negation: the ingredients for a book whose recipe is to keep sifting, the mutant germ of a book and its weirdly lush ramifications, the rooms and windows to build a book but no floor plan and no floor, a compendium of many potential books and many others already in ruins.’<sup>80</sup>

And there is nothing romantic here, because ‘ruins’ signifies rather a refusal to stick to one rule, translating a kind of state of chronic interrogation.<sup>81</sup> Thus, silence appears in Pessoa’s work always in excess: that is, like lacuna, disorder, anxiety, uncertainty, inertia,

76 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), p. 8.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

79 Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, p. 109.

80 Richard Zenith, in his introduction to *The Book of Disquiet* by Fernando Pessoa (London: Penguin Classics, 2015), p. IX.

81 Richard Zenith’s description of Pessoa’s writing resembles Jacques Derrida’s definition of the ruin. For Derrida, ruin, rather than being a theme, is an experience; ruin illustrates, or rather figures, memory and the nature of the gaze – never static, and often fragmented, whose evidence always comprises a blind spot. Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 69. But Zenith’s description of Pessoa’s work is also particularly close to the idea of book as rhizome, like that developed by Deleuze and Guattari. The book as assemblage, like a kind of shifting structure. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, pp. 23–24.

fatigue, sickness (all words used by Pessoa). According to Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* was a ‘pathological production’. Note that Pessoa himself has remained silently hidden behind his multiple heteronyms.

These are my confessions, he says, ‘and if then I say nothing, it’s because I have nothing to say. (...) Needlework of things ... Intervals ... Nothing ... Yes, crochet...’<sup>82</sup>

Writing, like crochet, becomes this space where apparently nothing important is said or done ... just the exercise of writing.

In the equally fragmented publication *The Writing of the Disaster* (1995), Maurice Blanchot says something similar: he claims that writing only changes when it touches upon insignificance: ‘when to write, or not to write makes no difference.’<sup>83</sup>

The question concerning the relation to writing, the trivial and the insignificant – like the repetitive activity of crochet – offers me again the possibility of thinking silence and its complex relation to time and method: the wasted time; the waiting time; the non-active and non-productive time; in short, the space-time of nonresponses.<sup>84</sup> And to this extent, the problem of language, the problems of attention and of value, are also interwoven here.

Let me emphasise on Bruce Nauman’s idea of an art that would not quite look like art, for one could claim that this is a literature that doesn’t quite look like literature. What does this literature look like then? Like letters or notes? ‘Sketches, studies, preparations or rejected versions of what is not yet a work’?<sup>85</sup>

Fragments: ‘For fragments, destined partly to the blank that separates them, find in this gap not what ends them, but what prolongs them, or what makes them await their prolongation.’<sup>86</sup>

And the intervals between texts are also visual: a breathing space that animates the writing; a rest; a long parenthesis [ ], making silence a kind of speech. While, at the same time, writing itself – composed of different pieces, units, aspects, and thus formed by different lengths (speeds, voices) – can turn into an interval; that is, when a text becomes a gap between two texts. This is an essential point when it comes to my own practice of writing. In order to be able to move between texts (aspects, notes, spaces), and in light of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s ideas – which focus on the ‘splendour of short-term ideas, and short-term memory’ – I also seek to establish the logic of the AND.<sup>87</sup> So, in a sense, the main function of muteness in writing is to prevent the crystallisation of speech.

82 Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, pp. 21–22.

83 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), pp. 11–12.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

86 *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

87 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 27.

## SILENCES, PORTUGUESE PERSPECTIVES: PRACTICES & METHODS

(Bunga; Kilomba; César)

In my first year of research, I collected old containers of face powder<sup>88</sup> in different shades from friends and family to produce a series of medium-sized lithographs (*Shades*) which I then placed side by side to explore the minor nuances of the image. The process of drawing and printing was demanding and time consuming. Printing with a transparent ink and adding the powder at the end meant I was unable to control the process and the quality of the image entirely. For the drawing was kept invisible during much of the print process until the moment when the face powder was spread over the surface of the paper, allowing the image to reappear once again. Each image is therefore different, even when the same tone of make-up is used. This is a common strategy: I repeat to produce difference. But a no less important aspect of *Shades* is its non-fixed quality and the fact that this goes unnoticed, as it is instead being presented as fixed and stable. Hence, the questions raised by these prints do not differ significantly from those inherent in other works developed more recently with a clearer temporal and performative dimension. In general, characterised by the use of affordable, found, unstable and impermanent materials, this PhD project has involved working with a certain degree of unpredictability. The decision to work with processes and materials which are potentially unstable relates to a desire to create a space in which I can abdicate from a position of power and control to become in turn spectator (and listener).<sup>89</sup>

I want to clarify that although at first sight ‘spectator’ here might suggest a detached approach to process, it can in fact be regarded as something inherent to the process of making. For instance, if we consider printmaking – made in steps, discontinuous moments and intermediary operations – we realise that the nature of activity itself is intermittent and fractured, encouraging us to step away from the work (even in the process of making). Besides, the idea that the work continues to happen (change, transform) after it was made/installed also reinforces the space of not-making and the lack of control.

In a constantly provisional state, the work speaks about the different aesthetic possibilities of methods and materials, encouraging us to consider the ethical questions they may raise. What I wish to underline here is the potential for a social/personal motivation and concern to offer an original point of departure, often determining not only the subject matter of investigation but also the materials, mediums and methods one chooses to work with. On a general level there has been significant debate on the politics of methods and materials, but I want to be more specific in addressing the Portuguese context and the relevance of the notion of silence (and silencing) for the production of visual art in my native country.

88 The use of face-powder may appear quite disconnected from the main topic of this research. Make-up is often equated with forms of beautifying – questions of femininity and artificiality; it can therefore be linked with the superfluous. My grandmother never used make-up, peasants often don't. For me the light pink colour of *Shades* echoes with religious representations of beauty and virtue – idealised images that decorate many Portuguese houses, and that can be seen in the interiors of hundreds of churches across the country – which differ so radically from the common body. Yet, unlike these figure of perfection (and youth), *Shades* will not endure but fade.

89 I have spoken about this idea before in relation to John Cage's unconventional approach to printmaking, and how this links with the importance of silence in his art practice.



My argument is that ideas around silence (likened to a kind of historical muteness) generate a particular visual inquiry, which often involves non-fixed and non-linear approaches. In other words, muteness engenders provisional and fragmented methodologies. It is not accidental that, for example, Portuguese artist Carlos Bunga shares with me an interest in process and impermanent and affordable materials. Often producing large-scale temporary installations, Bunga works mostly with cardboard to explore ideas of home and nomadism. Cardboard is a product of our capitalist society, and Bunga has been drawn to work with it as a ‘poor’, mass-produced material. Bunga’s wall-mounted work, in particular, bears much resemblance to Oiticica’s *Tropicália* (1966-67) or Robert Rauschenberg’s cardboard series made in the early ’70s, yet at the heart of Bunga’s project there is a strong personal motivation. The focus on disposable structures and materials is an indirect way of alluding to his Angolan roots and his experience of growing up in social housing. The medium then becomes a means by which the artist can address important social and political issues, pointing both to the precariousness of the urban infrastructure and to the vulnerability of the body.<sup>90</sup>

As the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy remarks, ‘politics begins and ends with bodies’,<sup>91</sup> for ‘equality is a condition of bodies.’<sup>92</sup> *Shades* touches on these thoughts too: placed side by side the prints function as a display of equivalences and differences.

In a sense, it was his own experience of precariousness, displacement and social inequality that led Carlos Bunga to explore ideas of impermanence, clearly contributing to his approach to the creative process.<sup>93</sup> With no fixed plan, Bunga enjoys the direct confrontation with ‘the temporal, emotional and intuitive aspect of space’<sup>94</sup> that then also impacts on how his work readapts and develops according to the specificity of each space and place he encounters, suggesting that nothing should be permanent, but should instead be mobile/flexible. This non-fixed approach, or the absence of a strict plan, also poses, in this case, a problem in terms of categorisation and classification, which can be linked back to silence as a strategy to avoid and challenge control. The nature of the work is hybrid: sometimes it is closer to painting, sometimes to sculptural installation, and at other times to performance. Bunga often invites us to activate the work – without, however, offering any instruction about how to interact with the work. The artist comments on his floor piece *Occupy* (2020), for instance: ‘the work does not

90 An interesting perspective on the politics of mediums and method is offered by Andrea Büttner; she is interested in poverty in relation to the Italian art movement Arte Povera, and in relation to monastic movements that pursue lives of simplicity. Büttner then uses elementary techniques such as woodcut to explore the notion of poverty in relation to shame. As she explains: ‘I am using ‘poor’, reusable materials. I am not trying to recreate an atmosphere. I am just trying to articulate diverse social connotations or possibilities.’ Andrea Büttner, *Andrea Büttner: The Poverty of Riches. Max Mara Art Prize for Women 2009-2011* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), p.19.

91 Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 73.

92 Ibid., p. 49.

93 It seems to me that we cannot really speak of inequality without addressing class and poverty. And being poor often means having no voice, but it can also be associated with lack of space, precarious and poor housing conditions. COVID-19, for instance, has amplified many of these questions, since it was proven to impact more on those living in poorer areas. And in a period of time like the one we are currently living in, where everybody’s mobility has been drastically reduced, the lockdown measures can paradoxically be seen as a privilege by those who have no other option but to leave their homes to go to work because they cannot afford to lose income. So, without naming class or poverty, when Bunga speaks of nomadism and home he is already entering into a dialogue with these concepts. Moreover, poor people leave very little in terms of material goods to the next generations. In Portugal there is a saying that when one is poor one accumulates nothing but dust and dirt. The title *Mute Legacies* addresses, therefore, a kind of immaterial (and invisible) legacy, encompassing in this way an important question of value.

94 Carlos Bunga at Art Toronto 2019’ [YouTube video], Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto Canada, 20 November 2019. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-NtBDe3HgU>> [accessed 20 December 2020]

have any specific direction, you choose where you go, you choose if you want to go inside or not. It's very democratic. It's very open. You can make your own decisions.<sup>95</sup> This set of questions should also be taken into account in relation to my own visual practice, and *Shades* provides a good example once more. I remember a particular episode during a research class where it was suggested to me by a colleague – surprised after accidentally erasing part of the image with his hands – that I should change programme, since in his opinion what I was doing was more compatible with the performance pathway within the school than with printmaking.<sup>96</sup> Impermanence is not a characteristic that is expected from a lithographic image. And although it is true that each medium has its own system of representation, what my colleague's comment seems to confirm is the conventional necessity to ascribe work (and people) to delimited categories or groups. On the other hand, silence as a strategy seems to invalidate this need to divide, frame or instruct, functioning rather as a mode of resilience. Hence, I argue that the provisional as a condition of silence is tied to the potential of silence to change and transform.

The work of Portuguese interdisciplinary artist and writer Grada Kilomba is a relevant case in this context, insofar as it articulates silence in an urgent and diverse mode. Kilomba seems less concerned with process and materials, adopting a much more direct approach to her topics of interest. And although it is verbal language that she privileges most as a tool to engage with in discourse around gender, race and history of colonialism, it is still the potentiality of what is manifested outside speech, and how this points our attention back to the body (as both vulnerable and resilient) that I found particularly useful in her work.

Drawing on her own everyday experience of racism and taking inspiration from the figure of a slave, Anastacia, wearing a punishment mask covering her mouth,<sup>97</sup> the artist not only condemns a certain romantic and heroic way of looking at colonial history but also teaches us not to underestimate the power of silence to transform. Audre Lorde speaks about this ability to change and transform anger, fear, exclusion, oppression and pain into something useful.<sup>98</sup> By 'useful' Lorde also means 'effective'. We are returning again to the problem of method/HOW: what creative tools to use and how to use them in order to convert weakness into strength. In Lorde's words, we have to be aware that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'.<sup>99</sup> In this particular context, I want to highlight the importance that sound has within Kilomba's visual practice. Sound as a way of occupying spaces when the body is physically absent is a key idea for Kilomba. As she explains, black people always had the power to express themselves through music, because sound cannot be contained (or censored, in the way that body or speech

95 Carlos Bunga, 'Interview with artist Carlos Bunga' [YouTube video], Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit – MOCAD, 15 June 2020. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2BxAyjQYuU>> [accessed 20 December 2020]

96 What led me to printmaking in the first place was its inherent capacity to infiltrate different territories, often occupying a hybrid space within contemporary art practice. Furthermore, printmaking is still largely seen as an obsolete, old-fashioned and 'poor' discipline within the arts, thereby occupying a marginal position within it. I like the fact that printmaking is often considered a minor discipline.

97 This type of punishment, apparently more commonly used on women, was not only a practice to forbid women to speak – it was used to intimidate and instil into others the fear of speaking. Although the focus of my project is not on colonialism and issues of race, it is important, however, to remember that colonialism played a vital role in the ideology of the Portuguese fascist regime, and is still very much alive in Portuguese culture and society. As such, the fear of speaking has been instilled in Portuguese society for a long time, and is not limited to the Portuguese African community.

98 Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), p. 120.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

can). You can prevent someone from entering a place, yet music enables the transgression of places.<sup>100</sup> Paradoxically, this idea invokes a kind of material quality in sound: sound as voice – and as body, that also weighs. But it speaks as well about mobility and invisibility as a source of power associated with sound. This form of communication, that takes place without words (silently), and that therefore knows no fixed boundaries, is essential to this PhD project. My own video work, shown on small screens, has a minor presence in the space as images; on the other hand, its sound (like particles of dust that quickly propagate, contaminating a space) circulates without being seen and contained, gaining, therefore, an unexpected weight.

A second aspect which I want to address in Kilomba's practice is her use of storytelling – writing that she converts into moving images, installations and performances – as a way of bringing to life the story of the black people who have been forgotten, silenced and oppressed throughout history. Following a non-linear approach, her work becomes the site where different realities/voices come together to empower the subject (the body).

Kilomba has collaborated with several authors, among them the contemporary artist and filmmaker Filipa César. Together they worked on *Conakry* (2012), a film directed by César that focuses on the Bissau-Guinean revolutionary leader Amílcar Cabral, who led the armed resistance against Portuguese colonialism in Guinea-Bissau. César worked intensively on recovering footage from the Guinea National Film Archive. Drawing on the essay film form of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983), her work explores the hybrid space between documentary and personal reflection. César's work is introduced here as it offers me the possibility of expanding the discussion of silence and the use of fragmented methodologies in relation to archival research, illustrating my own set of concerns about *mute legacies* and what these signify. For me, storytelling is relevant precisely because it often deals with the subjective experience; but the archival seems to imply another complexity of relations in which the various dimensions of the personal and impersonal touch. The archive then becomes the space in which the process of storytelling is reanimated. Moreover, I believe it is essential to recognise that working with archival materials not only comes to redefine our research questions, but also tends to inform the way we work.

In relation to her film *Spell Reel* (2017), César said: 'I didn't direct anything; what I did was assembling'.<sup>101</sup> In affirming this she is addressing the process of making films, and the potential of working with fragments, a creative method that in her case goes beyond the framework of filmmaking. This was, for example, particularly noticeable in her exhibition 'Op-Film: An Archaeology of Optics' (2017) at Gasworks in London, made in collaboration with the artist Louis Henderson. Displaying a wide range of artefacts, images, fragments of texts and other elements arranged in three vitrines, the artists exhibited an assemblage of materials to invite the viewers to read between the gaps while navigating from one table to another, one text to another, and so on. But the truly

100 Grada Kilomba, 'Grada Kilomba em antevisão às exposições e conversas em Lisboa' [YouTube video], Arquivo Teatro Maria Matos, 26 October 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9xhyouAirA>> [accessed 10 September 2020]

101 Filipa César, 'Lecture—Film Discussion: Spell Reel, with Director Filipa César' [YouTube video], Harvard Art Museums, 15 May 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsQICxiPS1c>> [accessed 28 December 2020]

interesting point in César's affirmation is that she is indirectly unravelling what is implied when one works with archives. For archival research involves articulating pre-existing material and working with fragments in a constant dialogue with the past. Hence, a possible interpretation would be that she didn't direct anything, because she works with something which has been given to her, something that has already been done and said (but hasn't yet been seen and heard), and that eventually needs reconsideration. It is as if César was not making the film from scratch. A parallel can also be drawn between working with archival material and using found materials. For the line dividing what one searches for and what one finds is tenuous here.

Another significant aspect of engaging with artworks that involve archival research is the recognition of repetition as an inherent process of making, already expressed in the use of words such as reanimation and reconsideration. 'Making' understood as remaking: re-writing; re-printing. In other words, an image that reappears, that returns, that is reactivated and therefore keeps on changing. I have addressed repetition before to speak of fragmented and provisional methodology in relation to my own visual practice and Trinh's notion of 're-departure'. Note that in visiting the Guinea National Film Archive, César (like Kilomba) is also looking into legacies that are mute and that lie dormant in Portuguese society. My claim is that when you recall something, you are bringing something to life. In this case it is muteness that is being reanimated.

And finally, it seems to me that by saying 'I didn't direct anything – what I did was assembling', César is rejecting (and eventually contesting) the place of authority of the filmmaker. Bound to materials, mediums and methods that I cannot and do not wish to control completely, my practice resonates with Filipa César's statement. The reason why I have chosen to begin this text with *Shades* and printmaking was precisely to introduce this gesture that situates the artist's position in relation to marginality. In my case, I wanted to embrace minor imperfections and unpredictability and explore impermanence while upsetting the traditional pre-established order of things by touching on other domains beyond printmaking. I therefore occupy a marginal position within a territory that is commonly associated with technical accuracy and precision. The term 'marginality' brings us back to the questioning of power, classification and categorisation through art practices that are hybrid. As a filmmaker who doesn't direct, César also positions herself on the borderline between filmmaking, visual arts and research.<sup>102</sup>

This deliberate lack of control might suggest the absence of skills or the lack of in-depth/specialised knowledge. This idea, however, appears to denote an inability to think of knowledge as outside of power, and the difficulty of recognising a place without authority as something positive. Common logic seems to dictate that accomplishing standards of excellence equals achieving a central/superior position in relation to others. Without authority or influence over others we run the risk of not being seen and heard. Hence to engage in non-linear processes can be regarded as limited, because the logic that often prevails in these cases is that of re-distribution and dispersion. In other words,

102 Working on the borderline between filmmaking and what it no longer is; operating at the intersections between disciplines and cultures, Filipa César's work makes me think of *intercultural cinema*, as defined by Laura U. Marks. As Marks writes: 'what generally characterizes intercultural cinema (...) is that it uses experimental means to arouse collective memories.' (U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p.62). Intercultural cinema she says 'implies a confrontation with silence.' U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 21.

when the voice of authority disappears, giving space to a multiplicity of voices (or elements) without fixed boundaries, this might prompt confusion. Without a centre point or unifying theme, rather than clarity we might experience incomplete, random and vague insights. I dealt with this question before to address the negative attributes of silence or, as Susan Sontag put it, ‘the opaqueness of silence’. Indeed, when what is being conveyed in the work does not become completely understood, due to the fragmented, intermittent or discontinuous nature of the work, this can result in frustration for both the artist and the viewer.

However, I want to argue that many of the limitations associated with non-linear or fragmented methodologies are tactical and relate to the notion of silence as ‘fugitive’ and as a potential site of resilience and resistance. Portugal is a particularly interesting case because – following a long history of colonialism and a long period of dictatorship – its history is necessarily marked by the existence of parallel narratives that operated silently and invisibly on the margins of the institutional power.<sup>103</sup> Hence, these stories inspire something else about sharing and making in silence, and about the potential of silence to unpack collective memory. ‘My past in Vietnam doesn’t just belong to me’, writes Trinh.<sup>104</sup> The idea of a past that is at once singular and plural, a shared past that crosses generations, feels particularly true when I think about my own country.

Allow me recall here a second personal episode where I was apparently known among a small group of postgraduate students as ‘the woman without a penny’, which I then relate to yet another occasion on which I was asked why I was here (doing research at the RCA) if I didn’t have the money.<sup>105</sup> Although these two situations may vaguely illustrate the financial difficulties I went through to complete this PhD, they say in fact very little about myself. It is nevertheless fascinating to hear about myself as being ‘poor’, because surprisingly it brings to life some phantoms from my past that connect the prevailing fascist ideology with the stories of my mother and my grandmother (both were prevented from studying because they were women and poor). All this leads me to think that first, since meaning is multiple, notions of ‘race’, ‘class’ or ‘poverty’ can actually resonate differently between one context and another; and second, although our lives and mentalities tend to change over time, and as we confront different realities, we too often fail to succeed in minimising the burden we carry (of a family history, of a particular community, a nationality). This episode is fascinating because it places me again in the margins. Twice I am reminded that I am not quite in the right place. This subtle sense of displacement is important because it accentuates the dynamics between questions around methods and the question of location and positioning. My argument is that the perceptions we have about ourselves, how we position ourselves (and others) and the different socio-cultural contexts in which we operate have strong implications for our practices. Perhaps that is why Carlos Bunga puts ‘home’ and ‘nomadism’ together: for him *impermanence* becomes a matter of survival, of necessity: an ethical question. This also implies a commitment to the idea that the artist (and researcher) should adopt a

103 It is interesting to observe that Portugal, traditionally a country of emigrants, with a weak economy and a small population, occupies both geographically and politically the margins of Europe.

104 Trinh, *Cinema Intervals*, p. 211.

105 What immediately disturbs me here is the idea of research (and education) understood as a privileged place for those who have money, instead of a place where different classes, races, cultures meet. There is obviously something wrong about this idea of education as a space reserved for the elite: knowledge and power, power and money become interlocked again.



position that is essentially flexible. 'You could be nomad in the way you think', Bunga explains.<sup>106</sup> The point I want to make is that practices and methods are not just (aesthetic and technical) choices. Sometimes the tools we use are a complex combination of what we look for, what we find, and what is given to us (or is accessible to us). We can nonetheless choose to question the places we inhabit and the delimitations imposed upon us. To dare to challenge and cross these boundaries and divisions is still, I believe, a fundamental task of the arts. 'Why do I write? Because I have to', says Grada Kilomba.<sup>107</sup> It is as if the relationship with mediums and materials was not chosen but forced upon her from the moment she enters into dialogue with her own story, demanding, therefore, a particular kind of creative approach.<sup>108</sup> It becomes, she claims, a matter of urgency.

106 Carlos Bunga, 'Conversas com Serralves: Palavra de Artista: Carlos Bunga' [YouTube video], Fundação de Serralves, 12 March 2021. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKV0uY9wDZQ>> [accessed 12 March 2021]

107 Grada Kilomba, 'While I write by Grada Kilomba' [YouTube video], 11 May 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKUaOwfmA9w>> [accessed 10 September 2020]

108 This set of issues to do with the personal, political and emotional dimension of the mediums and materials used, and the effect of class and economic differences on these choices, was also articulated by Audre Lorde, who writes: 'even the form our creativity takes is often a class issue. Of all the forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labour, the least material, and the one which can be done between shits, in the hospital pantry, on the subway.' Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, p.97.

# Chapter 1

## Muteness (as weight)





A boy scans, more with the ears than with the eyes, the faintly illuminated figure of an old peasant woman that seats not so far away from the place where he stands. It is mid-November already she is outside, seated alone on a little bench beneath an orange tree wearing an old black apron over a dark green blouse with a floral pattern and a long loose brown skirt, no shoes; she grabs a piece of bread in her left hand while using the right hand to alternately scratch her neck and stroke the cat. She has a beautiful face, and yet just from the sound of her movements it's possible to tell that her skin is dry and her hands are dusty. He is amazed, for he can hardly distinguish where her bare feet finish and the soil she steps in begins. Someone told him once that she had never learned how to read and write; when she was called upon to sign her name, she could only leave in its place a fingerprint. The shape of a fingerprint – coming from her index finger pressed directly against the horizontal surface of a sheet of paper, right at the place where her name should be: he thought of that as impossible. But it is true that she remains still and silent most of the time, and when she talks she whispers a few disconnected words, apparently only addressed to herself. In fact, the silence of this scene is almost tangible and he can nearly sense the weight of her body. Everything around her seems to be made of stone, concentrated ground; perhaps that doesn't really matter as he is convinced that she can't tell the difference any longer.

This was long before the young boy could understand why the woman was gradually turning into stone. At a time when certain things still didn't exist for him, it was the ordinary occurrences of his everyday life (a whole set of signs which appeared to radiate from this and other figures alike, and their ordinary surroundings) which triggered his imagination. And these are not signs of art – the highest kind of signs – but rather material signs: *the signs of life*.<sup>109</sup> Thus, like Marcel Proust's narrator who chooses to focus his attention on the 'quality and the intensity of charm' of M. Swann's laced boots over a Rubens painting<sup>110</sup>, the boy feels fascinated by such insignificant material and corporeal traces.

109 Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* (New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 42.

110 Marcel Proust, *Em Busca do Tempo Perdido, À Sombra das Raparigas em Flor*, Vol. II (Lisboa: Relógio D'Água, 2003), pp. 76, 77.

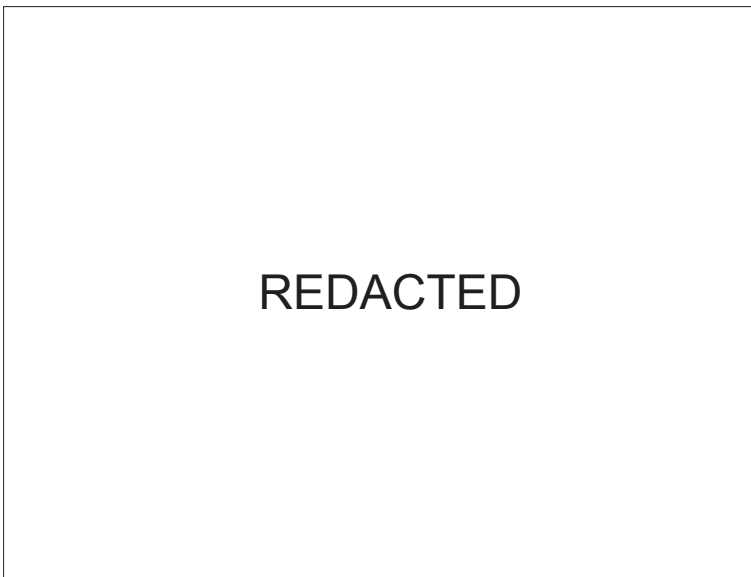


Fig. 1 – Béla Tarr, *Damnation* [still], 1988

## ANOTHER SOUND (ANOTHER SENSE), A SOUND THAT WEIGHS

The rain falls and I can clearly hear its drops running down the wall and touching the floor. A close-up of a wall occupies the entire screen, followed by a group of figures semi-paralysed, all silently turned in my direction without meeting my gaze. Without interruption, I'm taken slowly from one face to the next. Wall and figures alternate three times. Each 'section', each surface and texture, seems to intertwine, and it is the sound of the rain, together with the music playing in the background, that appears to merge bodies and stones together, in an overall effect of contagion.

In a sense, the rain not only sets the tone and the rhythm of this sequence in particular in Hungarian director Béla Tarr's film *Damnation* (1988); the density and gravity of each drop of rain seem to mark the tone of the entire film. Jacques Rancière speaks of a 'cosmological pressure'<sup>111</sup> – the pressure of rain, of fog, and of mud, which assimilate both bodies and time. 'With *Damnation*, the rain installs itself in Béla Tarr's universe. It is the very stuff of which the film seems to be woven, the environment from which the characters emerge, the material cause of all that happens to them.'<sup>112</sup>

Indeed, there are times when not only the characters and their surroundings, but also the film (the image) itself, appear almost to soak, like one of those compressed sponges which, when one adds water to it, quadruples in size and weight. Movement is made difficult; weight makes them lower their eyes and heads. Yet this weight does not only allow itself to be translated through visual situations. In the cinema of Béla Tarr, the sense of weight is largely experienced through sound. Words may be lacking, since dialogue is often reduced to a minimum, but sound is not. Sound is a fundamental aspect of his films, bringing to attention the presence of bodies even – or especially – when they are not visible on the screen.

The breathing sound, the sound of the footsteps on the roads without pavements, the dragging of a chair, even the slight buzzing of a fly, is made audible. All these 'sounds we don't intend'<sup>113</sup>: like the sound produced by the old man as he sat next to me in the *Underground* – who lets himself fall or is pulled down by the gravitational force of his body – reports a presence that I hear *before* seeing, a sonorous experience that is almost tangible, almost haptic. I wonder then if the sense of weight is more sonorous than it is visual or tactile. I haven't measured this weight – I couldn't – but I hear it and nonetheless it affects me: this weight is of fatigue, of legacy.

As Artaud writes, the body literally weighs on us, it is 'a fatigue as old as the world, the sense of having to carry one's body around, a feeling of incredible fragility which becomes a shattering pain, a state of painful numbness, a kind of numbness localised in the skin which does not inhibit any movement but which changes the internal sensation of the limb and gives the simple act of standing up straight the value of the victorious effort.'<sup>114</sup>

111 Jacques Rancière, *Béla Tarr: The Time After* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 34.

112 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

113 John Cage, *Every Day Is a Good Day: The Visual Art of John Cage* (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2010), p. 50.

114 Antonin Artaud, in *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, ed. by Susan Sontag (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1976), p. 65.

This is neither necessarily a matter of age or size, nor is it really only a matter of sound. It is, I believe, above all a matter of weight: a silence that carries a gravitational pull, and ‘which puts all the weight of the past into the body’.<sup>115</sup>

I’m thinking of little Estike’s famous walk in Tarr’s film *Sátántangó* (1994), with a soaked crochet blanket covering her shoulders, the dripping white fabric standing out from the grey, which seems to condense on itself a heaviness, a slowness, intensified by the regular swing of her marching as the rain falls and the wind blows. Hence it is the sense of weight here that seems to intensify every silence (every sound) and appearance. The footsteps of little Estike feel like those of a giant. Walking becomes almost painful, sound hurts, and suddenly it is as if the white crochet blanket weighs on me, I carry it too. But can I truly say that it weighs on me? What is this *sense* of gravity? What secret is yielded in silence when we ‘listen’ to a weight? And if the weight itself is mute, can one grasp it?

Sometimes I think Tarr’s films weigh more on me than on others, for they call to mind familiar landscapes and stories: of a ten-year-old boy who every day takes a shorter cut through the cornfields on his way to work instead of following the path that would lead him to school; of an old peasant man who lost his left leg while working in the fields; of a drunk woman who sneaks up during the night to join the cows in their sleep, the same barefoot woman who often strokes the cat with her right hand while she finishes her meal with her left. And so it is as if Tarr’s universe is addressed to me.

However, if these figures seem at first to be a metaphor of an art of miserable and vulnerable silhouettes, serving ideological wars, what they truly attest to in silence (or through silence) is their power of resilience. The inertia of things is, therefore, only apparent, for nothing seems to prevent the little girl in *Sátántangó* from walking. Beneath their grotesque appearances and their expressions of defeat lies an extraordinary capacity of persistence.

It is important to pay attention to silence, I claim. Perhaps to act like a child, like Estike – or like the young Stravinsky, who was fascinated by the ordinary sounds produced by the movement of the arms of a mute peasant that later on he tried to recreate – in order to scrutinise and engage with these apparently ‘minor’ aspects of everyday life. I learned from Jean-Luc Nancy that this is a matter of listening. Listening as distinct from hearing: for to hear is the will to understand what is being said in its literal sense; on the other hand, to listen is to pay attention to what goes without saying. Listening implies a diversion towards other senses, or else it is this desire to understand ‘what can arise from silence’.<sup>116</sup> To listen, says Nancy, is to strain toward a possible meaning, it is to look for ‘a different voice, one more or less vocal than the one that comes from the mouth; another sound for another sense than the one that is spoken.’<sup>117</sup> In one way or another, listening involves attention, concern. It takes time to recognise the layers of depth within things. Only this ‘listening’ in time enables us to make emotional bonds, to go beyond the surface of things, and partake in them.

115 Deleuze writes these words in relation to what he defines as ‘a cinema of the body’. A cinema that gives words back to the body – gestures, sounds or grains are all, according to Deleuze, categories of the body. Hence, the problem consists more in what signifies its absence, and it is precisely the missing people (subjugated, exploited, colonised, oppressed) who are, according to Deleuze, the central subject of the new political cinema. Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, p. 211.

116 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 6.

117 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

As soon as one becomes someone who speaks aloud – I, she, he, they who have facial expressions, gesticulating hands, open mouths, particular voices – the ‘someone’ who I see and hear collides with the order of discourse. As soon as one starts putting out words in the form of the particular, half of it evaporates, slowly, transforming into ‘something else’: gesticulating hands, open mouths, sounds, faces. I believe this incident, for which I cannot yet find a reasonable cause, and which may appear incomprehensible, is at the core of impasse.

I am struck by the unspoken: the physical.

From the original narrative often only microscopic, and perhaps insignificant, details remain; only tiny parts are attained. I get carried away by ‘peripheral’ information. Thus I listen without hearing, I see without seeing. My thoughts leave me without any previous sign or warning. And if I am thinking, for sure it is already about ‘something else’.

The mad, the animal or the child within me involuntarily closes his eyes.  
I keep closing my eyes.

The day before yesterday, for instance, I lay down on my bed, and when I was already asleep I was disturbed by a distant but disturbing sound. Morning: the clock hits three-twenty. And a woman’s voice – with a tone that seems to come with just the same intensity both from the soul and from the nose – grows gradually louder and louder. I couldn’t see her, yet I could guess she was agitated, as I felt her walking up and down. In a moment of despair, she shouts:

‘I cannot change my voice!’  
‘I cannot change my voice!’  
‘I cannot change my voice!’

118 My intention here, and throughout this thesis, with the incorporation of notes, and long quotations that punctuate my analysis of films and artworks, is to introduce an interruption – ‘spacing’, ‘disorder’ – between texts and, in this way, bring together a multiplicity of voices. As a starting point for the writing I often use a series of notes made on my mobile phone, inspired by people I encounter (listen to) in my everyday life, which I then combine with other ‘fictional’ elements. In this particular case, Juliette was ‘real’; she was my downstairs neighbour. In this text I incorporate some of her own words. The repetition of her speech – coming directly from her (non-visible) body – accentuates her struggle, and the idea of an unbearable weight upon her (alcohol, drugs, poverty); somehow her voice makes her body present (her pain visible), it makes her body speak. This text was written and submitted in March 2016; and in November 2018, two years later, Juliette committed suicide. In an unexpected way, real life intertwines with fiction, and it is as if Juliette’s fate was already there (anticipated) in my writing. There is, therefore, an invisible link between Juliette and Estike (the girl in Béla Tarr’s film *Sátántangó*), because, as with Juliette, Estike’s walk also ended in suicide.

Until her voice engraves itself on my brain.  
'...and this voice isn't language'<sup>119</sup>

Meanwhile, a man's voice, which I detected only later on, was unclear. His reply to her, incomprehensible to me, was a mere weak echo running intermittently in the background. I tried an emphasis on each sound he uttered; but every word was lost.

## NOTES ON VISUAL PRACTICE, 1

Fig. 2, 33

### *Bristol*

That entire week before travelling to Bristol, I carried with me two tiny photographs of Maria's house that my mum gave me a couple of years ago. Belém was her surname; she was our neighbour, and although I know very little of her, I remember I used to love watching her while she devoted her time to cooking. Her white house, humble from the outside, had heavy furniture inside; there were no paintings or faded photographs; it was filled instead with small objects and trophies from the former colonies. The interiors were all various shades of white apart from the kitchen, which was half blue. In reality, like the two photographs, everything is black and white in my mind now, except that kitchen wall, whose music is like the light blue wind of the sky.

The aim was to present a visual response to the site of the gallery and its use: space mainly dedicated to the discussion and promotion of photography. In the studio, as I tried to make sense of this, I convinced myself that I would display the photographs on the gallery wall in order to bring Maria's kitchen wall into the gallery space. Yet my initial plan had a fatal flaw, for what I did not at first understand was that some images can only reach one's ears, or indeed one rarely seems to listen to the exact same music twice. I recall Steve Reich's words at the Barbican. 'Every creature has a song', he said.<sup>120</sup> But what does the word 'creature' mean, for only living things (mortal things) are included here? Animals are for sure. But is this also valid for objects/places/images? I am held captive by this thought: images as creatures, and creatures as images: images as songs.

I arrived in Bristol and my ideas shifted every hour. The exhibition space was problematic, the whole environment was depressing, and I struggled to connect. So I placed the photographs between the pages of my notebook and concentrated my activity on drawing on the gallery wall instead. In the end, after two days of drawing on the wall, I stepped back, looked at the work and found myself talking in silence: I am not particularly happy with what I see. In the process, however, I realised that the way that the dust from the blue chalk sticks fell unevenly and spread, aggregating on the window sills and on the floor around the corners of the wall, made much more sense (made much more 'sound') than the two black-and-white photographs. And to some extent, I think, there is something about this gesture of leaving things closed between pages, of not saying and not showing, that ties in more with the essence of the two photographs.

119 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 115.

120 Steven Reich, *Steve Reich at 80*, 6 November 2016, Barbican Hall, London





Fig. 2 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Some details are lacking, others are suspect, the whole is rather blurred*  
[detail], 2015

## ANOTHER TIME

According to the French film and video theorist Raymond Bellour, the experiments with the freeze-frame that invaded modern cinema at the beginning of the 1960s – bringing film closer to photography – produced a sense of discontinuity that functioned, and still functions, as a way of searching for another time. Furthermore, this stillness also seems to involve the development of a new image, a new physicality, via the exploration of the ‘photographic’. The work with freeze-frame, he says, ‘gives rise to a space that encourages both free and controlled associations; in short, it shifts cinema’s hysteria by producing what one could call (...) a pensive spectator. But perhaps, above all, it is because these instants possess a quality of abstraction and of irreality that seems to introduce a kind of paralysis – comparable to one that strikes (in) painting – into film.’<sup>121</sup>

Famous for his black-and-white long shots, Tarr doesn’t really work with freeze-frame, at least not in the way that François Truffaut or Chris Marker did, for example. Even if it’s nearly imperceptible, there is always something moving: either a fly or an eye blinking. And yet through his long-take aesthetic Tarr encourages me to stop, to take time (to waste time) and appreciate: the muddy roads, the heavy rain, the wind and the fog; the density of the bodies on the screen.

The link with painting is real. Tarr himself has long declared his interest in painting and the influence it has had on his work. In *The Turin Horse* (2011), for example, one is reminded of Vincent van Gogh’s *The Potato Eaters* (1885): a group of grotesque figures sitting at the table eating the same raw meal. Hence, the resemblances between the painting and the film can be found, at once, in the choice of their subject matter: poverty, the commonplace of those who have little. One knows that painting and film do not share the same methodological principals, yet somehow they seem to convey here a thickness, as if similarly immersed – canvas and screen – in a dense layer of mud to address the condition of privation of their characters.<sup>122</sup>

Hélène Cixous wrote that ‘Van Gogh wants to paint with the earth. To mould.’<sup>123</sup> Does Tarr also want to work with the earth? Indeed, his work gives me back the sense of physicality, a tactile and almost visceral impression, which probably explains why, when questioned about his film *Damnation* (1988), he answers: ‘*Damnation* was an experience of touching time’<sup>124</sup>. But is it actually possible to touch time?

We might not be able to literally touch time, but maybe one can be touched by it, marked by it: time as legacy and as burden. A time *before* our own, prior to our own existence, that often is passed down in silence. Thus, there is *first* of all the weight of a tradition. To sense, in this case, is also to feel the weight of history.

121 Raymond Bellour, *Between-the-Images*, (Zurich: JRP|Ringier Press, 2012), p. 140.

122 Reference should be made to Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of ‘Acinema’. Lyotard speaks of an ‘abstract cinema’, a writing with movements, like the abstract painting of Rothko and Pollock, that he defines as ‘Acinema’. ‘Acinema’ indicates a distinction between mainstream and experimental filmmaking. Situated at two paradoxical poles: extreme mobilisation and extreme immobilisation, between agitation and fascinating paralysis, ‘Acinema’ marks an ethical position against narrative-representative commercial cinema and consumption in cinema. The link between painting and cinema makes Lyotard’s thoughts on cinema close to those offered by Raymond Bellour. Graham Jones and Ashley Woodward, eds., *Acinemas: Lyotard’s Philosophy of Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 35–42.

123 Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 7.

124 Béla Tarr, ‘Béla Tarr: Regis Dialogue with Howard Feinstein’ [YouTube video], 22 December 2008 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K104Srbj7h0>> [accessed 18 December 2014]

The Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky explained that: ‘the virtue of cinema is that it appropriates time, complete with that material reality to which it is indissolubly bound, and which surrounds us day by day and hour by hour. (...) for cinema, like no other art, widens, enhances and concentrates a person’s experience – and not only enhances it but makes it longer, significantly longer.’<sup>125</sup>

Marcel Proust, on the other hand, speaks of ‘elastic time’.<sup>126</sup> According to Roger Shattuck, one of the great achievements of *À la recherche du temps perdu* was the development of a ‘temporal depth’<sup>127</sup> never before reached; this means an emphasis not merely on the length, but also on the thickness, of time.<sup>128</sup> Time unfolds through layers, like a tree, and its cross-section uncovers one by one the rings of time, both horizontally and vertically. This notion of elastic time is also fascinating because it articulates the possibility of thinking time beyond as fixed, with an unchangeable circularity, suggesting time as something intermittent and palpable. It is then possible to envision a series of parallel temporalities: different durations, rhythms, multiple heartbeats and weights coexisting and intersecting.

Indeed, like the body itself and its organs, for the time of the stomach might not be the time of the lungs, of the brain or of the heart. In fact, ‘searching for another time’ encompasses already – as the word ‘another’ suggests – the existence of multiple temporalities.<sup>129</sup>

In Tarr’s case, the search for another time seems to engender neither more nor less than a sense of ‘real’ time: the boredom and insignificance of daily routines, where nothing substantial seems to happen. With little movement and limited dialogue, his

125 Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1989), p. 63.

126 Proust, *Em Busca do Tempo Perdido*, Vol. II (Lisboa: Relógio D’Água, 2003), p. 123.

127 Roger Shattuck, ‘Proust’s Binoculars, 1964’, in Ian Farr, ed., *Memory* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2012), pp. 32–33.

128 Laura U. Marks, based on her reading of Deleuze’s time-image cinema, describes ‘thin’ images ‘which call on the viewer to search for their hidden history’. (U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p.42). ‘The works I propose to call haptic’, she says, ‘invites a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realizes what she or he is beholding.’ (U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, pp.162-163). My response to Deleuze contrasts with Marks’ viewpoint on the ‘thinness of the optical image.’ (U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p.47). Thinness indicates a transparent and incorporeal quality. Yet if we examine Deleuze’s thoughts carefully it is possible to formulate a very different sense of the image that relates ‘thicknesses’ and not ‘thinness’ to notions of time and memory. For example, his analysis of the work of Alain Resnais points to an idea of memory composed of different layers and levels. This ‘world-memory’, in which multiple temporalities coexist, evokes visual images that cannot be thin. Further on, in relation to Jean-Marie Straub’s and Danièle Huillet’s work, he writes: ‘The visual image, in Straub, is the rock.’ (Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, p.251). ‘In Straub’s: people talk in an empty space, and, whilst speech rises, the space is sunk into the ground, and does not let us see it, but makes its archaeological burials, its stratigraphic thicknesses readable (...). History is inseparable from the earth [terre], struggle is underground [sous terre], and, if we want to grasp an event, we must not show it, we must not pass along the event, but plunge into it, go through all the geological layers that are its internal history (and not simply a more or less distant past). (...) To grasp and event is to connect it to the silent layers of earth which make up its true continuity, or which inscribe it in the class struggle. There is something peasant in history. It is therefore now the visual image, the stratigraphic landscape, which in turn resist the speech-act and opposes it with a silent piling-up. (Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, p.261). Hence, the quality of ‘thickness’ mentioned throughout this thesis is an indirect reference to the relationship between time, memory (the silent layers of history) and the body. Trinh, for example, describes the necessity to reinscribe history while apprehending it, in its density, its hybrid dynamics and its ‘multilayered thickness.’ (Trinh, *Cinema Intervals*, p.23). Derrida also supports the idea of a memory (a history) imprinted and traced directly on the body: an ‘impression’ which leaves a mark at the surface or in the thickness of substrate.’ (Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p.26). ‘Thickness’ as body, time, history, memory, and now, following Deleuze, ‘thickness’ also as class struggle.

129 This is very reminiscent of Agamben’s proposition, following Jakob Von Uexküll, that all animals exist within their own time. A time that is true for them. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 40.

cinematic images are embedded within a brutal simplicity that can be compared to that of an eroded stone or a raw potato.

A time that weighs becomes, too, a 'wasted' time, a waiting time: a stare or a rest, a non-productive and a non-active time. And, as Tarr also explained, the signs here are frequently of social anger. Because: 'Béla is no mystic. He's a de-mystifier, an anti-mystic. Driven by this heartbeat...'<sup>130</sup> But what does it mean to be driven by our heartbeat? What does it mean to follow the pace and vibration of our own heart?

Over and over again, I return to a scene from another film, this time in an attempt to think through a single sentence: the notion of silence in relation to time. It is a sentence from a scene in Werner Herzog's documentary film *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010). For in this scene, too, a man speaks of heartbeats.

Beneath the ground, inside the Chauvet cave, as a group of specialists gaze at the images, painted about twenty-five thousand years ago on the uneven surface of the rock wall, a scientist, rather than offering them a speech that could provide a glimpse into the past, asks them for silence:

'Silence, please, please don't move, we are going to listen to the silence in the cave, and perhaps we can even hear our own heartbeats!'

What kind of scientific method is this, that seems to require neither action (making) nor language (thinking)? What kind of scientific knowledge is this that apparently cannot be verified?

In a singular gesture, the scientist ignores the past in order to evoke the present: that is, the exact timing of our heartbeats, each individual presence, and my own as well. In other words, he invites us to seek (and gain access to) the past through the depth, silence and hidden spaces of our hearts. Searching, precisely like Jean-Luc Nancy, for 'what can arise from silence': a signal, a sign, and 'another sense' from the one that comes from the mouth.<sup>131</sup>

I suppose the scientist knew well that nothing he might have said would facilitate access to the truth of the paintings, since clearly any deeper understanding of Chauvet exceeds the images on the wall and any discourse associated with them. What Chauvet demands, therefore, is silence, for only in a perfect condition of silence can one listen to one's own breath. But why is silence such a crucial demand?

There is in fact no reason to speak there, and I believe that this was what the scientist was saying to us. For Lascaux is a matter of absence, and of (time) distances, its sense is there in the absence both of the 'artists' and of the spoken word. Yet those who painted the wall breathed, and so there is a voice, a rhythm, a language prior to any speech there.

To study the Lascaux paintings, or just admire them, also implies a 'searching for another time', but one that is too far away, too distant, to be reached. Hence, in the absence of those who lived at least twenty-five thousand years ago, what could possibly reduce our distances if not materiality itself? As Tarkovsky emphasised, the sense of time cannot really be detached from the material, concrete reality that surrounds and

130 Michael Guarneri, 'Fade to Black: Béla Tarr, the Anti-Mystic' in 'Abbas Kiarostami/Béla Tarr', *Fireflies*, No. 2 (May 2015), p. 22.

131 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, pp. 6–7.

characterises us. So if silence may play a significant role in bringing us back to our silent origins, its role in this case is not really about offering us an insight into the origins of silence, but more about facilitating for us the possibility of closely experiencing/sensing those material traces on the wall; making silence tangible. Everybody agrees that the Chauvet cave cannot truly speak, for rocks and stones do not talk, yet when it reveals something it reveals it mainly through layers, by way of analogy with the tree or the printing press. In the end, what we have at our disposal are vestiges, traces, partial indications of time.

Georges Bataille writes of Lascaux as follows:

‘Making our way into the grotto, we have the feeling that, under unusual circumstances, we have slipped far below the earth’s surface, are wandering à la *recherche du temps perdu*. A vain search, true enough; nothing will ever enable us to relive this past, irretrievably sunk in the night. And vain in the sense that human desire is never wholly satisfied, since it is forever a straining towards a fugitive goal.’<sup>132</sup>

The search for the truth, both in Lascaux and in Chauvet, is an impossible task, and indeed this is not really a secret. The past is lost, and we know that we cannot really reconstruct the past. The only way to understand it is in an indirect way.

Hence, by dismissing any discourse about the paintings, the scientist, silent and still, is acknowledging, too, the necessity of listening and in that way making the paintings live again in us. By remaining in silence, the scientist is allowing the others to manifest themselves, or to let the paintings live in themselves. These thoughts might sound romantic and melodramatic, but my claim here (and I’m guessing the scientist would agree with me) is: whether artist or scientist, we cannot escape the time and place of our own bodies (our caves); that is, our own subjective vision and perspective. Meaning is neither personal nor common; meaning is always multiple, fugitive, open. Therefore there is no truth, only possible meanings hidden beneath the multiple layers of time such as the ones forming the wall of the cave.

In a singular gesture, then, the scientist asks for silence, not so much to evoke the present as to evoke the body and its cultural, social, political, religious weights. Because the body, says Deleuze, ‘is never in the present, it contains the before and the after, tiredness and waiting.’<sup>133</sup>

132 Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, p. 50.

133 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 189.



At about half past four, Istanbul in August, looking at a city map, a boy approached me to offer me guidance and quickly his father drove me to the exact place I was searching for. At the site, the church warden opened the door for me, and as soon as we entered he kindly offered me a cup of tea and left me all alone. I had never felt so strongly the presence of God as in that moment. I was filled with senses which words fail to explain: I no longer knew where I was, nor how much time I spent there. Sometimes when I close my eyes I am there, as if I had never left that place: I stare at him, right from the ground to the top over the doorway. There he is, yet neither quite there or here, but always floating, out of reach, in his infinite dimension.

For 'bodies must touch the ground'.<sup>135</sup>

It is not him that I feel or see, then. No-body (nothing) besides my own body, the silent affirmation of my sole presence: my breathing body, the sound of my footsteps, the weight of my legs, my flesh and bones in contact with the cold of the stones that cannot really make any sound. And yet I'm overwhelmed by a sense of time; it is nothingness, maybe: the nothing that I was and am, me and many others who have stepped through that place before me. Facing his son, I sense silence and its endless depths, which weigh strangely on me. I realise that time can only be human time, for there is not God's time. And so it is I will die, as others before me and others too after me – disappearing bodies – while that image will remain perfectly intact, perhaps, as it is today.

I realise at Chora that whatever this sense of time might be – which this man-made thing appeals to – it isn't nothingness. What it rather awakens in me is friendship: the distinctive marking in the boy's green eyes, and the long brown hands of the churchwarden, who kindly offered me tea and left me in silence. I understood then that I was not with God, although I was not alone either.<sup>136</sup>

134 The Chora Church, also known as The Chora Museum, was originally built outside the walls of Constantinople, and today is one of the most important medieval Byzantine Greek Orthodox buildings of Istanbul. It is unique among other Byzantine churches because of its rich, and almost intact, interior mosaic decoration.

135 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 9.

136 Here, I indirectly allude to the legacy of Christianity (or, more precisely, of Catholicism), deeply embedded in Portuguese tradition and culture, and its link with the Portuguese fascist regime. It is known that the Roman Catholic Church in Portugal was both accomplice and beneficiary of the power of the state. Besides, in a more general sense, I think, religion continues to have an active role in the silencing of the body. Note that, even though different authors have meditated on the vacuum left by the silence and absence of God – namely Artaud, Nietzsche, Lyotard, Derrida, Blanchot, Nancy, Ingmar Bergman, José Saramago and others – I do not want to enter into debates over ideas of void, nothingness, emptiness and negativity in the arts. In fact, what is central here is neither the withdrawal of God nor the power of the Church; this is a matter of thinking the body (and its absence) in relation to time. I want to emphasise its weight, its space and its fragility because, as Artaud writes, only God 'consented to live without a body'. Nobody exists, therefore, without weight (body). Antonin Artaud, in Susan Sontag, ed, *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, p. 562.

*The body* (by Maria Isabel Barreto, Maria Velho da Costa, and Maria Teresa Horta)

*The body lay there asleep, nestled in its repose, in its rest, so tranquil, so present in the yellowish light, defining itself by its weight and by that state of quiet, all bathed in light, with no outline separating the body and the light, the sloth muscles beneath the skin, so languid in their silent presence, almost dissolving, the nest of their own repose, almost an extension of the rumpled sheets and their drooping folds, and the warm hollow of the mattress, and the light as soft and thick as a yellow skin laid over the other one, filling the room to the ceiling, from wall to wall, enfolding like friendly bodies within its slumber the lamp and the night table and the books and the clothes, turning the entire room into concentric circles of light and varied substances surrounding the centre, a nucleus of very soft breathing, communicating to everything round about this single, very gentle movement, the golden skin stretching a little across the chest with its swelling curve and its almost pink nipples, and the ribs also moving with the same smooth, steady, gentle ebb and flow of calm water, the broad, well-formed back tapering to the waist with the clean-cut lines of hewn stone, but stretching out from arm to arm in a high, gently rounded curve, with a sharp hollow in the middle like the bed of a river, and the delicate angular hip bone still moving, abandoning its usual discreetness and jutting out now from this body lying on its side and leaning over slightly, a little hollow thus forming at the waist, hiding the belly and the dense softness of the warm hairs, and a little bit of the genitals, emphasising the roundness – though it remains a severe, chiselled roundness – of the two narrow buttocks, the sex organ then appearing between the two legs that open, one of them stretched out on the bed and the other one slightly flexed, the thigh of the raised haunch resting on one knee on the bed almost disappearing, and the lower leg sprawling out on the sheet almost crushing it with its weight, and between the thighs, being reborn of the shadow of the hidden belly stretching out like a burning plain, trapping within itself the yellow of the light, in the nascent curve of the buttocks, in the thighs, in the legs, between the things, the genitals, the two little apples whose firmness is outlined beneath the soft skin and the folded corolla of his sleeping penis.*

18/5/71<sup>137</sup>

137 Maria Isabel Barreto, Maria Velho da Costa and Maria Teresa Horta, *New Portuguese Letters: The Three Marias* (Frogmore: Paladin, 1975), p. 188.



## ANIMAL BODIES: SPEECH AND WEIGHT

Why animals? Why should I speak of animals? I cannot really speak to an animal, but I can be with an animal. An animal never leaves me indifferent. Animals occupy an important place in my writing because they bring to light the relationships of power that operate implicitly when we (humans) are with animals. Starting from this premise, which positions the animal body as an important site where speech and silence are contested, I go on further to focus on weight as that which is common, as something we share with other animals.

Returning to Tarr's *Sátántangó* (1994), in which everyone appears to walk in circles, a girl named Estike – perhaps brought face to face with the absurdity of life – chooses a straight line. This is a long straight path under the rain, with a soaked crochet blanket covering her shoulders, and she is carrying a dead cat under her left arm. Earlier, the girl starts by caressing the cat; she then tortures him, until she poisons him. Estike, however, never leaves him behind; she carries the dead animal around like an extension of her own body until the very end. The bond that she establishes with the cat is complex and unsettling. But what is it in those silent scenes that is so unsettling? And then I wonder: what is the point of using such morbid and violent images in a film?

Marking a kind of moment of revelation by announcing what is yet to come, the cat seems to function as a sign or signal, for the cat's fate is ultimately also the girl's fate.

In *The Turin Horse* (2011), Tarr also uses an animal with a seemingly similar purpose. All hope seems to be placed on this third character, a horse – the only means of subsistence of an old man and his daughter – even though we are told at the very beginning of the film that this is not an ordinary animal, but perhaps the same horse that Nietzsche encountered in Turin. In fact, the title of the film already evokes that unfortunate moment famous for having triggered a walk that, like the girl's walk, had no return for Nietzsche.

As Rancière notes, in Tarr's universe the figure of the animal represents a moment in which humans experience their limits.<sup>138</sup> Animals are a constant presence in his films; and the limit here is, as it often is in other films, death and madness. Besides the cat and the horse, there are dogs, like the dog that Karres, on his knees and with his hands on the ground, barks at in *Damnation*; but there is also the slow pace of the cows in *Sátántangó*, and the monstrous body of the whale in *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000).

These human-animal encounters run, however, beyond cinema: Francis Alÿs's dog attack, in the four-minute piece *El Gringo* (2003); Rebecca Horn's dialogue with a cockatoo, *Berlin Exercises in 9 Parts: Exercise 2: Twinkling* (1974–5); or Joseph Beuys' one-week performance with a coyote, *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1975), which the artist referred to as a social sculpture. But after all, and considering that the animals essentially operate as signs (of death and madness), what could all these animals possibly represent? What could they possibly be announcing to us? Are they replacements for man himself (a disguised double) or, on the contrary, for otherness? Perhaps all of this and nothing of this – or, as Jean-François Lyotard puts it, 'It announces nothing, it is in itself the annunciation.'<sup>139</sup>

138 Jacques Rancière, *Béla Tarr: The Time After* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 77.

139 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 79.

A message without words cannot reveal any secret (cannot teach anything clearly). It attests instead to the simple fact of being there in mute presence with multiple layers of interpretation. Here it is: the cat, the cockatoo, the coyote, the cow, the dog, the whale, the horse! So if the animal is a sign, it signifies above all the fact that it exists like us (with us), yet unlike us in that it lacks words.

In some cases they are there – represented and transfigured in the film or the painting, or carved on the walls of the church – to remind us that ‘we’, unlike animals, are rational. They are there for the sole purpose of embodying this other zone, allegedly distinct from ours, where, for instance, evil, sin or pleasure rules. They are there to make perceptible the gap, underlining the abyss that separates humans from animals. The encounter with animals implies therefore a play of oppositions, contrasts and weights.

The question raised by the animal appearing (and disappearing) is thus indirectly related to language, or to the lack of language, and a set of general topics regarding control, hierarchy and categorisation. For in truth the animal deprived of language – and, consequently, of knowledge – has less power and less value than humans. For this reason, perhaps, animals have little or no weight in ‘our’ decisions. In principle, they are not decision-makers, since often one only takes in consideration those who can offer us an answer. The most elementary hierarchy tends to be based, then, on the fundamental distinction between beings that can utter words clearly and beings that cannot. I suppose this is also why the universe of madness is usually linked with the animal, because what is lacking in the madman is the ability to articulate words with clarity. In a sense, the madman and the animal share a similar weakness, a similar ‘defect’. Hence, ‘the experience of the limit’, the absolute abyss, for man is the irrecoverable loss of language; that is to say, his loss of consciousness: a mad-animal experience. Not surprisingly, then, in Ingmar Bergman’s film *The Passion of Anna* (1969), extreme violence against animals is allegedly the work of a madman (‘that never speaks’), who cuts the throats of sheep and sets horses on fire (one should recall here other – human – bodies on fire, first in *Persona* (1966) and later on in *Fanny and Alexander* (1982). Although in my opinion Bergman’s images are far more violent than those of Tarr, the tension they awaken is identical. In fact, on its own – and as Jonathan Burt has pointed out in his book *Animals in Film* – ‘the animal image is a form of rupture in the field of representation.’<sup>140</sup> So in spite of their irreparable lack – just by being-present-here, taking up space there in silence, in their sole bodily presence – animals have the power to break a certain sense of continuity (by interrupting our paths, suspending our thoughts). But can this tension be summed up in our frustration at being left unanswered? Or does it rather address a general human inability to communicate in silence – that is, when words are not really needed, when speech has no weight – marking in turn a certain human incapacity to understand and respect the silence of (human or non-human) others? For nobody seems to doubt that one of the greatest acts of violence that can be committed against humans consists in restricting their freedom to speak; on the other hand, the restriction of freedom to remain silent, and be silent, as an identical form of violence, seems to be a less consensual opinion.

All of a sudden, the question of the animal is no longer properly an animal question – it is a human problem; it has always been about a human point of view. In a way, what takes

place when a human encounters an animal (alive, tortured or dead) is a form of self-awareness. The use of violence forces us to confront not only the animals' fragility and the violence to which they have been subjected, but our own fragility and the violence 'we' commit against ourselves. Moreover, this violence suggests not so much that we have returned to a primitive, infantile or inhuman stage, with no roles and responsibilities, mainly because words lack, or are no longer enough or have been emptied of all meaning and content, but that another hypothesis needs to be articulated: that humans have not progressed as far as they think. Humans and animals still inhabit the same ground, still walk alongside each other. This seems to allow one to believe that neither the dead cat carried under the girl's arms in *Sátántangó* nor the burned horse dragged across the floor in *The Passion of Anna* is an apocalyptic scene representing the alienation and destruction of humanity; instead, these scenes expose a radical vision of a world without divisions, a surface of contact between animals and humans. Considered in this way, the so-called human being is still an animal, possibly not yet a human.

Hence, the figure of the animal may also embody a discrepancy between what humans are, what they say they are and what they think they are, calling into question their sentiment of distinction and superiority in relation to animals that for centuries has been linked to their muteness as a negative and inferior condition, and which in turn seems to have justified all sorts of atrocities against animals. This perhaps ties into an inability to think of silence as anything other than consequence or defect, and as the opposite of speech.

I insist: a message without words cannot reveal any secret; there is therefore nothing to decipher, no truth to announce. Yet this nothingness of muteness that the animal presence attests to is not thin, frail and transparent like a blank sheet of paper, but thick and dense, encompassing a diversity of silences and senses beyond human understanding and authority. Animals speak to us, in truth, all the time of their condition of muteness and its corporeal dimension. Put in other terms, the notion of muteness is defined by a sort of concrete, corporeal space. And if animal muteness has a meaning, it would then be that of having a weight, of having a body that, like ours, is irreplaceable. Maybe that is why Estike never leaves the cat behind.

And it is not by chance, I believe, that Ingmar Bergman more than once shows us bodies on fire on screen. The burned horse from *The Passion of Anna* and the burned men from *Persona* are like mirror images of absolute violence. Note that this is still a question about humans, or 'humanism', for horses cannot set men on fire, nor can cats poison children. Nonetheless, vulnerability is something we share with other animals.

What is violence, then, if not this gravity, this weight we share; that is, also the extreme lack of weight, or the gravity we lose? I'm guessing that's also why in *Werckmeister Harmonies* the sudden appearance of a naked old man in the middle of chaos is as alien as the dead whale in the middle of the square, becoming almost as violent as the image of a man turning into ashes in *Persona*. The exposure and fragility of the nude body alone reminds us of the concrete condition of life: death.

*Dancing Grains*

I first came across Francis Alÿs's work in 2005, at his exhibition *Walking Distance from the Studio*, at MACBA in Barcelona. Ten years earlier, in the winter of 1995, I had encountered, in another Spanish city, the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Both artists seem to me to have made similar moves in their work towards an economy of means, the affordable and the precarious. In the two exhibitions there was an exciting sense of transition, sometimes relating to the work, at other times to the artist or to both at once. Yet I was fascinated by what I felt was an essential paradox: the matter made immaterial and the immaterial made matter; an emphasis on the material marked by its dematerialisation, which suddenly felt like a pretext to speak of the body: its space and movements, its weight.

What intrigued me most then was the theme of weight, density and gravity which has the lightness of a grain of sand or a sheet of paper:

- A 1500-foot section of a hill moved about four inches (*When Faith Moves Mountains*, Lima 2002);
- A pile of sweets spread across the floor or congregating in the corner of the room: 90 kilos, the ideal weight that was also the weight of Marcel Brient's body - *Untitled (Portrait of Marcel Brient)*, 1992.

Made with the support of Moving Image Studios at the Royal College of Art, *Dancing Grains* (2015) was inspired by Alÿs's animation piece *Song for Lupita* (1998), which illustrates a woman pouring water from one glass into another. The title, *Dancing Grains* ('which are not made to be seen'<sup>141</sup>), is drawn from a text in which Gilles Deleuze - describing the work of French filmmaker Philippe Garrel - points to the importance of a different mode of presence in modern cinema. A cinema, writes, Deleuze, in which 'the problem is not that of a presence of bodies, but that of a belief which is capable of restoring the world and the body to us on the basis of what signifies their absence.'<sup>142</sup>

My focus on dust relates not only to invisibility and mobility, but also to weight: the materiality of dust. A snowflake, a seed or a grain, a minor and insignificant detail: which is also the soil engraved in the bare feet of the old peasant woman, or 'the seed which splits open the paving-stones.'<sup>143</sup> As Hélène Cixous suggested: to make art with the earth.<sup>144</sup>

141 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 174.

142 *Ibid.*, p. 208.

143 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

144 Cixous, *Stigmata*, p. 7.

In *Dancing Grains*, the glass is half filled with approximately 250 grams of flour. Things are never merely visual, and in this case the sound itself is charged with weight. I remembered that among all that is said in Wang Bing's *Death Souls* (2018), what strikes me most was the 250-gram ration per person, per day, at the camp: the exact weight that placed men on the side of death.

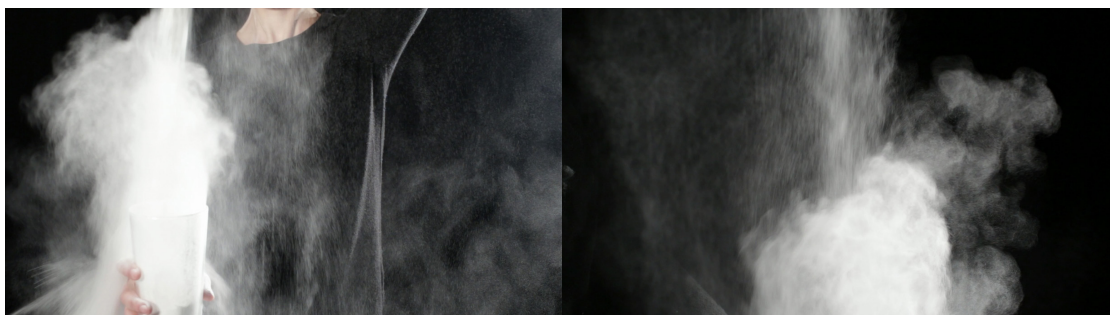


Fig. 3, 4 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Dancing Grains* [stills], 2015

## THE WEIGHT OF FILMS

‘The human skin of things, the epidermis of reality: this is the primary raw material of cinema. Cinema exalts matter and reveals it to us in its profound spirituality, in its relation with the spirit from which it has emerged. Images are born, are derived from one another purely as images, (...). But out of this pure play of appearances, out of this so to speak transubstantiation of elements is born an inorganic language that moves the mind by osmosis and without any kind of transposition in words. And because it works with matter itself, cinema creates situations that arise from the mere collision of objects, forms, repulsions, attractions. It does not detach itself from life but rediscovers the original order of things.’<sup>145</sup>

‘Cinema is an art of the sensible, not simply of the visible’<sup>146</sup>

I am haunted by films, really. Films – watched on a square television screen, through two channels, and without remote control – were for a long time the only art form accessible to me, and were therefore the art I knew best until I was in my twenties. What makes me constantly return to films, though, is never really the film’s story, but something that makes me stop, like a ‘punctum’, a hidden question that disarms and unsettles me. Among many film passages, one in particular has haunted me since childhood: the final scene in *The Elephant Man* (1980), where the central character presses his deformed and fatigued body against the horizontal surface of his bed; for what ultimately seems to emerge from this body posture, from this death position, is no more than a remembering of his human existence.

Sometimes these film sections interweave with objects I have, words I’ve read, places I’ve seen – and also with faces that I see or meet; with sounds that I have heard or I’m now listening to; merging, as in this precise moment of writing, the Portuguese guitar of Carlos Paredes with Nefertiti’s face illustrated in *Treasure of Ancient Cultures* in my dad’s small book collection. These images, figures – these components of thought – follow no aesthetic affinity, no chronological order, they obey no social hierarchy or economic tendency; and, as if holding a secret, they never reveal themselves completely.

But film touches me, above all, when it redirects me to the sense of the body. In that instant, for instance, when two things touch (making contact or coming together): flesh, skin impression and imprint: like the index finger of a woman pressed against the flat surface of a sheet of paper, or the bare foot of a man sinking into the ground.

Hence my interest in film has to do neither with dreaming, nor, as Eisenstein argued, with the figure of a whole thinkable through montage.<sup>147</sup> On the contrary, following Deleuze’s thoughts, it relates to the extraordinary capacity of film to produce a blankness, a fissure, a

145 Antonin Artaud in Susan Sontag, ed., *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 151–152.

146 Jacques Rancière, *Béla Tarr: The Time After* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 5

147 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 167.



crack in the middle of thought, forcing us to think only ‘one thing: the fact that we are not yet thinking, the powerlessness to think the whole and to think oneself.’<sup>148</sup>

Nancy would have said that it interests him when ‘something weighs on me’: ‘this means at once: something that weighs me down, that pushes me towards the earth, that bends me, tires me, and something that troubles me, that concerns me. To think, or to want to think, is heavy (...) One speaks as well of a weighty silence. This said, we all carry this weight. Or, rather, we do not carry it: we are this weight.’<sup>149</sup> In the same way, that instant when two things touch, when something or someone makes contact or comes together, is also the moment when someone is *touched by* someone/something else: the act of thinking (weighing), an instance of pause. It is the desire *to touch*, to understand.

There are no criteria or formulas here, yet it is, above all else, through the hands that one engages with the materiality of things.

And so it is with Bergman’s playing of hands: a shot of a boy’s hand tracing the surface of the screen (*Persona*, 1966): the same gesture as that repeated in another opening scene (*Fanny and Alexander*, 1982) ...the close-up of a hand, the flat hand of Alexander on the glass, touching the surface of the window, a scene that has been played before in *Silence* (1963), when the boy sits by the train window pressing his right hand against the glass. And then the sliding gesture of Ismael’s hand on Alexander’s face (*Fanny and Alexander*) and Elisabet’s hand on Alma’s face in the opposite direction (*Persona*). And it is precisely with her hand that Karen (*Through a Glass Darkly*, 1961) reaches the wall first – she who, just like the boys, kept her right hand pressed onto the surface of the wall.

I want, therefore, to understand: What do these ‘wandering hands’ wonder? ‘Can one see by the skin?’<sup>150</sup> Can one learn through its wounds, its cracks and its fissures? It seems to me we do not carry the same weight; we are different weights.

The repetitive gesture of this hand touching the glass or the screen leads me to reflect on the materiality of film, its thickness; which makes me think at once of the very thickness of reality. One is asked to look further away beyond the frame, outside representation, off-screen. Reality is indeed often mediated by a lens, and by screens. But something else happens through the use of the hands as they meet the porosity of the material; it makes perceptible, I claim, the gap that separates inside from outside, failure from triumph, the personal from political, life from death, reality from the imaginary. More importantly, perhaps, it interrogates the distance between us.

In any case, an emphasis on flesh, on hands and heads; all these naked extremities. My head, my hands and flesh too, as there is no other way of thinking the body than in relation to my living body first: my breathing body, which is never simply ‘mine’ but exists in relation to ‘others’. For there’s no narcissist claim here, only the awareness of the impossibility of escaping oneself (one’s weight). And so the Elephant Man’s posture and condition gave me signs, and they give me signs still. His body talks to me; he is talking to and through my body.

148 *Ibid.*, p. 167.

149 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravity Of Thought* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1997), p. 2.

150 Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 100–101.



# Chapter 2

## Muteness (as invisibility)



Outside, seated alone on a little bench beneath an orange tree, quietly grasping a piece of bread in his right hand, a boy directs his sweet melancholic gaze towards the void, in no specific direction. A cold wind blows on his back, and he can feel the bittersweet fragrance of grapes coming from the vineyard just behind him. He wears a pale blue streaked shirt with a small pocket on the left side, and brown dusty trousers. Some say he is beautiful – deep brown eyes, silky hair and skin, light rose cheeks – although not particularly clever.

With his head still and his eyes travelling around he spots an invisible presence just next to his feet. Something minor, a detail, suddenly becomes the focus of his attention. He bends over to monitor it more closely. It's a line of ants which he enthusiastically decides to interrupt by dropping some breadcrumbs in the middle of their path. Meanwhile, as the young boy chases the ants, indifferent to the sound of dogs barking and of voices coming from much further away, he is disturbed by a third figure situated not far away from the place where he sits: It's an old peasant woman, leaning back on a chair against an ochre background. And suddenly it is the woman's muteness intensified by the subtle involuntary trembling of her body (nearly matching the invisible movement of the ants), which unsettles him deeply. Even though she is agitated, she is oddly passive, almost semi-absent. Indeed, he cannot tell whether she was there already, in front of him, long before he had gone outside to play. Quite possibly she wasn't; as a matter of fact, he is more inclined to assume that she has been teleported there.

A look was enough for him to form (not one but) a series of colourful yet ‘nocturnal’ portraits of this moment, a sequence of aspects carefully framed, zooming in and out: the woman has long grey hair, all pulled back; a dark green blouse with a floral pattern and a long brown skirt with a black apron on top; no shoes. The boy notices, however, a pair of gold earrings, but he is too far away to make out their shape in detail. Stained, dusty old clothes, oddly loose on her body: she looks as if she has come on stage to perform wearing by mistake a costume that belonged to another actor, without having the slightest awareness of her own appearance. The day gleams, but she is all in shadow, with only one ray of afternoon sun partially lighting up her exposed face.

These portraits are peculiar, because their gloomy atmosphere does not seem to emanate from the woman’s figure – instead it is as if their ‘darkness’ emerges around her bare feet, so dirty and cracked that they no longer seem to be part of her body.

Bits, parts, pieces, like a grain in the sand or an ant between ants; he looks at her without knowing if he can really see her. Thus he starts to wonder whether she has become invisible, and perhaps nobody sees her besides himself. He feels compelled to sit by her side, yet in the end, a fear has stopped him. One should not look for immediate or rational explanation. Truly, I am led to believe that invisibility was one of his greatest fears. He senses the danger of becoming ‘blind’, for he was afraid that somehow, as if by magic, something that he does not wish to know – a secret, or some sort of unbearable truth – might have been exposed to him if they had sat side by side, if he had truly looked at her, and in that way he would have lost his vision forever. Or perhaps, even worse, it occurred to him that in some way he would be teleported to her place of origin (left unknown) from whence he would never be able to return.

## RUINS AND SOME OTHER (INVISIBLE) ASPECTS

In truth, I am not sure what proximity allows me to *see*, regarding either people or things: sometimes it happens that even when they are right before my eyes they are somehow eclipsed. To fix their whole outlines in my mind is like playing with a puzzle where some pieces are missing or others have been switched from another box: regardless of the effort, and in spite of all the combinations, it feels I will never get to know the complete picture. To put it in other words, a world discovered in ruins.

‘Ruin’ is a concept I borrow from Derrida, and so it has in this context no other meaning than that defined by Derrida himself:

‘The ruin is not in front of us; it is neither a spectacle nor a love object. It is experience itself: neither the abandoned yet still monumental fragment of a totality, nor as Benjamin thought, simply a theme of a baroque culture. It is precisely not a theme, for it ruins the theme, the position, the presentation or representation of anything and everything. Ruin is, rather, this memory<sup>151</sup> open like an eye, or like the hole in a bone socket that lets you see without showing you anything at all, anything of the all.’<sup>152</sup>

Developed within the theme of drawing and the self-portrait, Derrida’s notion of the ruin encompasses all figures, all masks, all portraits; anything and everything, he claims, as ‘ruin is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze.’<sup>153</sup>

Unlike the Romantics, fascinated with the ancient world, Derrida neither seeks a grain of truth and wisdom embedded in the fragments of the ruins, nor does he seek in them for inspiration. Derrida’s notion of ruin is beyond ruin, it exceeds ruin (and vision) since it does not really concern those historical sites that one tends to contemplate with fascination. Eventually the only truth exposed to view (made visible), the only certainty to be drawn from looking at actual ruins, is their fragmented nature. Indeed only bits, parts, pieces, like a grain in the sand or an ant between ants; for there are still those other aspects of truth (dispersed, buried or lost) that remain untranslatable, invisible. Yet the formula here is not merely negative, like a mathematical operation with a minus sign: this is an equation containing unknown variables. And the unknown is not negative, either: on the contrary, not-knowing or knowing that one does not know becomes central to the work of knowledge (and the work of art). The notion of the ruin therefore opens a field of enquiry into the very nature of vision and its relationship to knowledge. What Derrida seems to do here is to call into question the privilege of the optical dimension in comparison to the other senses. He is addressing other instances of knowledge in order to challenge the common assumption ‘I know it because I have seen it’.

There is sense beyond vision, and that is ruin, a place where not-knowing has its place. There is always more to *see* than I actually *see*: all the things that exceed my vision,

151 It may be worth noting that ruin is also about legacies and inheritances, factual and fictional memories, points of view, haunting so many stories.

152 Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 69.

153 *Ibid.*, P. 68.



my knowledge, my sense. What happens here, as anywhere else in fact, is not something that happens to vision: ruin exposes rather what vision itself is.

The invisible is, then, also that which I have in front of me, that which I can look at and touch (smell, hear, taste), but nonetheless it is outside my senses. This means that invisibility is not only a problem of distance, of that which is either too close (proximity) or too far away (distance). Invisibility is also a matter of silence; that is, the silence of the visible that fades before my eyes. The notion of the ruin as experience seems to entail therefore at least two distinct forms of silence: that which one fails to see (listen to) because it remains literally out of sight (the invisibility of the hidden, the absent and the secret: of that which lies elsewhere or beneath the surface); and the invisibility of that which one is unable to grasp/understand even though it stands right in front of us or, as the saying goes, 'is hidden in plain sight'. This last one, I claim, involves yet another important form of silence in the context of this research: all those other aspects one avoids or refuses to look at (listen to, pay attention to). It involves the neglected and the overlooked.

Not so surprisingly, then, the notion of blindness enters into play. Both ruin and blindness address what seems to be a more accurate definition of the eye: a 'hole in a bone socket that lets you see without showing anything *at all*, anything *of the all*'.<sup>154</sup> Hence it is as if the only eye capable of seeing is the blind eye; to put it in Nancy's terms, the one that provides 'views without vision'.<sup>155</sup>

A concept therefore sets in motion the question of its opposite, for the momentary loss of sight (and its darkness) becomes a form of evidence (of clarity), in the same way that the fragment addresses what is there and what is not there, what one knows and what one does not know.<sup>156</sup>

Our experiences are fragmented neither by virtue of romanticism, nor because of contemporaneity, the arrival of the internet and the dematerialisation, discontinuity and acceleration of our everyday 'reality'. Following Derrida's notion of ruin, fragmentation is neither an old nor a new condition. It is rather, perhaps, a matter of acknowledging and embracing silence, the unknown: in short, the other. This is knowledge without truth (vision). Ruin retains, therefore, an important sense of uncertainty and openness.

The relation with the invisible, the unknown, as silence also calls into question what one considers as different: the idea that we see, above all, what we were told to see, what we learnt to see. As Felix Gonzalez-Torres notes, we have come to realise that 'just looking is not just looking but that looking is invested with identity: gender, socioeconomic status, race, sexual orientation.'<sup>157</sup> The reality of our vision, rooted in a particular culture and society, does not hold the key to unfolding all the other possible points of view: that is, the ones that are different from ours. Hence, I want to argue, as Blanchot did, that we must relate to what is beyond our reach and horizon.<sup>158</sup> For 'the unknown' (the invisible)

154 Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, p. 69.

155 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 94.

156 Gilles Deleuze's 'Thought and Cinema', in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, also refers to knowledge as being obscure. Deleuze writes: '(The Angels do not know, for all true knowledge is obscure...). We must believe in the body but as in the germs of life, the seed which slips open the paving-stones, which has been preserved and lives on in the holy shroud or the mummy's bandages, and which bears witness to life, in this world as it is.' Deleuze, p. 178.

157 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, in Julie Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York, Göttingen: Steidl Publishers, 2016), p. 74.

158 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 127.

can be known (visible) only by way of this openness. To speak to, listen to or look at someone is to recognise and accept them as other (different) without neglecting the fact that we will never be able to grasp them completely and embrace the totality of their aspect.

## Notes for 'you'

I see the vastness of the world, and yet I realise I can only touch on some aspects of it, for sometimes I do not even know myself. Not knowing who I am concerns above all the innermost part of me that is 'you', which I only seem to access a little bit at a time. For what 'I' is largely depends on/of the 'you.' 'I' learn from and with 'you'.

'I' is also between: two is the minimum number for a message to be written. And yet when I write, it is not because I want to speak with or about 'you', but to or for 'you' (as a gift). One might even say: speaking with is an impossibility, since 'you' and 'I' cannot coincide – by this I mean there is no possible simultaneity: 'you and I' are not simultaneously in the place where I write, where you read, where I speak, where you listen. [...] I can't speak from where you listen, and you can't hear from where I speak.<sup>159</sup> In any case, a pair is needed to make this spacing visible.<sup>160</sup>

But why do I still feel one must insist on the 'I' when, in fact, the 'I' can only be itself *between* others? In a paradoxical way, the insistence on the 'I' is to avoid narcissistic visions and resist any position of mastery. Therefore when I say 'I' – I write 'me' and 'myself' – that's only because I do not wish to take your turn, to speak right in your place. To put it differently: I do not wish to own you, control you. I'm neither measuring you, nor questioning you.

'You' remains mostly mute.

I look at your bare feet, your unchangeable voice, your dark brown eyes, your dusty hands, and all those *aspects* of 'you' that grasp my attention, holding me captive. But when I write it is not in order to make myself heard or seen. I say 'I' because 'you' is all in secret. 'You' will always be this secret other which I gaze at, love, despise, desire, admire, hate, and which undoes me. It is all *for* you, like a love letter *to* 'you'. After all, one necessarily comes to recognise that the one who writes always writes without seeing. And perhaps that's when to write is to approach a 'state of self-dissolution'.<sup>161</sup> To some

159 Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 57.

160 Here, Nancy's thinking is particularly close to that of Blanchot's idea of 'plural speech'. As Blanchot explains: 'When two people speak together, they speak not together, but each in turn (...). The fact that speech needs to pass from one interlocutor to another in order to be confirmed, contradicted, or developed shows the necessity of interval. We end up by confining someone who speaks without pause. (Let us recall Hitler's terrible monologues. And every head of state participates in the same violence of this *dictare*, the repetition of an imperious monologue, when he enjoys the power of being the only one to speak and, rejoicing in possession of his high solitary word, imposes it without restraint as a superior and supreme speech upon others.)' Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 75.

161 Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 62.

extent, then, my 'blindness'<sup>162</sup> resembles my death; that is, the death of the 'I'  
or 'the death of the author.'<sup>163</sup>

Although 'you' (as 'I') is endlessly shifting, your invisibility is neither a process (like that of a metamorphosis) nor a crisis, such as there you are and suddenly there you are not: your inaccessibility is consistent.

'You' is often elsewhere and absent.

I can look at you, love you, despise you, desire you, admire you, hate you – but I can never truly know you. I tremble, then, before you. Indeed, such impossibility is essential, since nothing seems to be more powerful and magical than the concrete invisible presence of the other, here, standing by my side or in front of me, between us.

162 Starting his book with a quote from Diderot's *Letter to Sophie Valland*, Derrida's reflections on blindness are not restricted to the phenomenon of vision: blindness gradually imposes itself as a condition for seeing (the blind-man as the visionary). 'Blindness is often the price to pay for anyone who finally opens some eyes, his own or another's'; 'hands that see; tears that see', he says. (Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, p. 102). And yet to see (anything close to the totality), to approach this central point would be, as Blanchot notices, to reach a 'mortal point': death or madness. (Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 54).

163 'The Death of the Author', first published in 1967, in *Aspen* magazine No. 5+6, Roland Barthes pursues the idea that the author should simply not be visible in the work, so that somehow the reader may become the author of the text. In this sense, the invisibility of the author may give rise to the visibility of the reader.

*Enough* (by Roni Horn)

*Making Being Here Enough – I don't want to read. I don't want to write. I don't want to do anything but be here. Doing something will take me away from being here. I want to make being here enough. Maybe it's already enough. I won't have to invent enough. I'll be here and I won't do anything and this place will be here, but I won't do anything to it. I'll just let it be here.*

(...)

*I set up camp early for the night. It's a beautiful, unlikely evening after a long, rainy day. I put my tent down in an El Greco landscape: the velvet greens, the mottled purples, the rocky stubble.*

*But El Greco changes here, he makes being here not enough. I am here, and I can't be here without El Greco. I just can't leave here alone.<sup>164</sup>*

RH, 1990<sup>165</sup>

<sup>164</sup> At the heart of 'enough' there is a paradox (contradiction) that gives rise to a fundamental question: what has changed? What made 'being here not enough'? El Greco changes the way the artist sees the landscape (that, she told us); however, fundamentally nothing has really changed, or at least nothing visible has changed. El Greco is not there. Whatever the difference might be, it is imperceptible. Here, change operates silently and invisibly. Roni Horn's writing takes me back to Gonzalez-Torres's comment on 'looking', for it allows me to think of looking as a process that forms a dialogue with the 'invisible'. Looking is not merely visual; it is also an emotional and intellectual experience. 'Looking', like memory, is never really still. In this way, 'enough' hints at Roni Horn's own process of working and her interest in 'fluidity', identity and difference. The landscape changed, it became double, plural. Hence, 'enough' also implies her own desire for invisibility (for silence); she wants to be there, but she does not wish to leave any mark of her presence in that place.

<sup>165</sup> Roni Horn, in *Roni Horn aka Roni Horn* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), pp. 55–56.

*Paired staples*

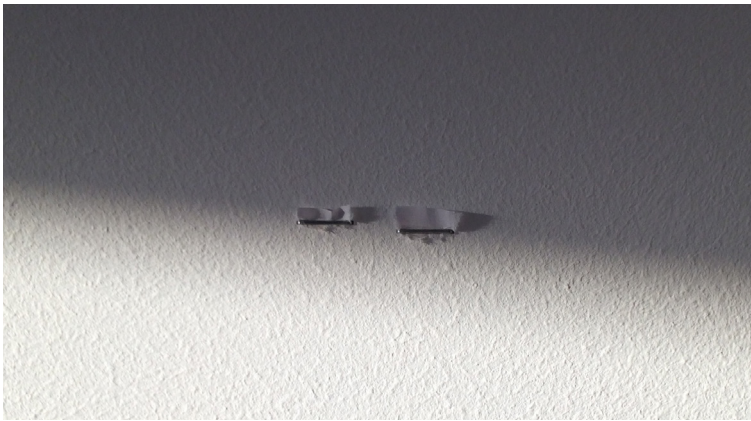
In the last few months in the studio, while working on the writing, my gaze has been constantly directed towards two tiny pieces of paper stapled to the wall. It is the way the paper slightly folds, and how it seems to change depending on how the light strikes, that catches my attention.

*Before and After the National Archive* (2019)<sup>166</sup> was there already, right before me, when I moved to Ransome's Dock, the studios provided for research students at the RCA. The work became about the invisibility of the work, about the possibility of exhibiting a work without producing any work. Following Bruce Nauman's approach, it became about a work that does 'not quite look like' a work. Indeed, not having (not possessing) works has always been an aspect of my art practice.<sup>167</sup>

I had photographed the studio wall in September 2018. In October, by the time I visited the National Archive in Lisbon, the thought of the two invisible staples attached to my studio wall returned to my mind. The encounter with the archival material (in its diversity of sizes, colours, thicknesses and textures) marked by time, made me think that some images (documents) are also sculptural, in the sense that they stand in for the body, silently exposing the vulnerability of our own material existence.

<sup>166</sup> *Before and After the National Archive* consists of a fragment of my studio wall, which was exhibited at the RCA Research Exhibition 'There's Something Lurking in the Shadows' at the RCA's Dyson Gallery in 2019.

<sup>167</sup> Bruce Nauman's work seems to entail the productive time of unfruitfulness, which relates back to ideas around economy of means, action and/or materials: 'when I had a studio, I was working very little [and] I didn't know what to do with all that time (...) there was nothing in the studio because I didn't have much money for materials. So I was forced to examine myself and what I was doing there, I was drinking a lot of coffee, that's what I was doing.' Perhaps not so surprising, then, is the fact that many of Nauman's early works in the late 1960s were body-related, including a vast number of ordinary activities such as standing, walking and sitting that he recorded with a video camera. One might interpret this approach as a result of his exploration of the 'very little' and his uncertainty about what to do in the studio. In any case, his minimal interventions (his alleged lack of decision) culminated in a clear strategy to avoid rigid aesthetic points of view... so that any work or activity becomes a valid artwork and activity. Bruce Nauman, in Wouter Davidts and Kim Paice, eds., *The Fall of the Studio: Artists at Work*, p. 104.



**Fig. 5 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Before and After the National Archive*, 2019**



*A letter to Gininha*

*Portraits of Aunt Gininha* (2018)<sup>168</sup> had as its point of departure a letter dated December 1969, from a nephew to his aunt, found in an abandoned house near my hometown. There was something about this letter that at first I couldn't quite identify that prompted in me a peculiar sadness. But why did those words that were never meant for my eyes and ears seem to address me, nonetheless?

'...a piano offered for girls to play', writes the nephew.

It was the two red horizontal lines highlighting the words 'offered' and 'girls' – sharing visual similarities with the two staples in my studio wall – which felt like a wound.

Here again, the letter – that is both a text and an image – seems to speak of what the writing perhaps conceals. In a sense, the letter is also a gesture. But what is the meaning of this gesture, in particular? For the nephew the two red lines appear to have been his way of showing indignation; for me it feels like an aggression, violence: evidence perhaps. He hides nothing, instead quite openly he exposes these red lines to be read.

<sup>168</sup> *Portraits of Aunt Gininha* is a floor piece I produced for 'Specularis: Look Through', an exhibition that took place at the Museum Alberto Sampaio in Guimarães, Portugal.

The material analysed at the National Archive of the Torre do Tombo represents almost five decades of dictatorship in my native country, Portugal – 48 years, to be precise, between 1926 and April 25, 1974. Yet this legacy is not only collective: it is also personal, and it is not merely socio-political, it is also cultural, aesthetic and emotional. As soon I was authorised to access the online database, the complexity of the structure of the regime became immediately evident. In the online database I could choose to look at four types of documents. Two were particularly appealing to me: the PIDE/DGS (International and State Defence Police) and the SNI (Department of National Information). Both PIDE and SNI documents were divided into more than 21 sections.<sup>169</sup>

I focused on No. 20: ‘Supplementary Processes’ (containing more than 500 files) which targeted the press only. (‘Supplementary Processes’ was a ramification or a subdivision of about 46 sections into which ‘The Censorship Services’ were divided in the archive. The Censorship Services was then part of the SNI (Department of National Information) that included areas such as cinema, literature, radio, television and theatre.

From the 500 files available, I looked at Nos. 5, 30, 65, 57, 75, 92, 94, 282 and 453. These files included disciplinary processes for disobedience related to unauthorised materials, and were numbered according to each magazine or newspaper. They contained: committee reports; detailed records of the cuts applied; newspaper proofs with the cuts made by the services; receipts (since a fee was often applied); suspension processes; correspondence, etc.

At the archive I was searching in particular for ‘evidences’ of the body, and the visit to the National Archive of the Torre do Tombo allowed me to confirm that it was precisely the body that was largely suppressed. Yet not only was the leftist, the ‘immoral’ or ‘indecent’ body targeted – which stands counter to certain Catholic conservative ideologies – but also a vast spectrum of other bodies.

Examining these documents, which went through the ‘Prior Examination’ of the Censorship Committee, offered me the possibility of rethinking a whole set of ideas around silence and invisibility.

169 What initially led me to the National Archive was my interest in private correspondence. I wanted to look at what was intimate and secretive and had been silenced/censored by the regime. Furthermore, at that time I was studying the films of Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa, and how his cinematic approach was closely linked to the idea of the letter (and with both mobility and invisibility). Yet I realized that access to private documentation – such as personal photographs and correspondence confiscated by the police during the dictatorship – is restricted and only granted with special permission from the families. Offering free and relatively easy access is the press (censored articles in magazines and newspapers); I then decided to focus mainly on the printed image. I also look briefly at censored cinema and literature.

File No. 75 reveals, for instance, that, due to a blank space left on the newspaper page, a penalty fee was applied and the newspaper confiscated. For me this is quite a powerful example, because silencing is made evident by means of silence, for not a single word against the regime has been published here, yet the image of the blank space, like parentheses, works as a (mute) tactic to disrupt authority. Paradoxically, the white rectangle left on the printed page, instead of generating invisibility, drew attention to itself, activating itself within a mode of visibility.

## EVIDENCING THE INVISIBLE: THE ARTWORK AS GIFT

Thinking back to the white dust fluctuating in the air (*Dancing Grains II*) and accumulating across the floor shortly *after* recording the piece *Dancing Grains*. I was prompted almost instinctively, but perhaps not unexpectedly, to consider the appearance of other images. Artworks, from a range of different artists, speak to/in me<sup>170</sup> of invisibility. These images (with no weight, or body) are instead mute or empty, since almost everything and everyone seems to have withdrawn from our sight, and even though only very little is given for us to see (and read), they nevertheless offer themselves to us as evidence.

Artworks that speak in silence (about silence).

My list of images is vast, but among the most significant is a photograph by the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres. The work, from 1993, is called *Untitled (A Walk in the Snow)* and consists of a black-and-white close-up photograph that shows a series of footprints in the snow.

But what am I looking at? What is the artist sharing, what is he offering me? Perhaps these are the footprints left by someone *after* a first night of snow. But was this a walk taken by someone in his private garden or in the middle of a square? It is winter for sure, yet we will never be able to know with exactitude when and where the footprints were made. In fact, we do not even know who took the photograph. The only certainty, because the artist says so, is that it is 'a walk', a passage: perhaps at issue are time and movement in the spacing and the duration of each step.

Like the drop of water that slowly drips and evaporates on my window, those marks left on the snow will soon become invisible; in fact, they have already disappeared.

Those steps left no mark – they are trajectories without history: portraits without face ("*Untitled*" (*Double Portrait*), 1991). *A Walk in the Snow*, like the white stacks of blank pieces of paper placed on the floor against the wall ("*Untitled*" (*Passport*), 1991), belongs to a category of images/objects with neither name (title) nor history. By naming the works as 'Untitled', often followed by parenthetical subtitles, the artist seems to engage in a strange paradox: that of saying without saying, suggesting a kind of refusal to name or to speak, providing clues instead. To say something in parentheses is to say something extra. In a piece of writing, for instance, what is indicated in parentheses has a mute or silent presence; it can be easily omitted or ignored, since it is often seen as something which runs aside from the main point. Thus, it brings about an awareness of subjects that are left aside, unspoken, such as those of racial, sexual and ethnic stereotypes. 'Untitled', allowing a multitude of possible interpretations, entails a sense of openness and freedom.<sup>171</sup> In a sense, Gonzalez-Torres's blankness resembles those spaces intentionally left blank on the newspaper page, during the period of dictatorship, forming an image of resistance and contestation.

One might also say that *A Walk in the Snow* speaks about the essence of photography itself. While capturing and framing a particular moment in time, it addresses the actual impossibility of fixing time, because that particular walk can never be repeated. Whatever

170 According to Roland Barthes, what *speaks in us* is always a problem of silence, of inner speech (Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 28.

171 I recall that in his book on Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida explains that 'the parenthesis is the link between the spacing motif and an unusual thinking of freedom'. This, I think, ties in with the idea of the 'parenthesis' as used by Gonzalez-Torres. Jacques Derrida, *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 20.



Fig. 6 – Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 'Untitled' (*A walk in the snow*), 1993

the photograph shows us, it is now and today already something different; that is, it shows us something that has already changed, someone who has aged or died. Furthermore, whatever it shows us, it's not much more than an *aspect* of what it is/was. Photography is trace. As Roland Barthes tells us: 'Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.'<sup>172</sup> Photography evidences, therefore, how little we can see, and how much we do not know.

Nevertheless *A Walk in the Snow* is a particular type of photograph, which looks at the ordinary and the beauty of the everyday. Indeed, it is a matter of looking, one that resists being reduced to a vision (a particular face, place and time).

In effect, Gonzalez-Torres looks down towards the floor (framing the world through the lens of the photographic camera) but he doesn't look away; rather, he looks at the invisible. And if the artist avoids any direct gaze, he does it precisely in order not to risk leaving in the shadows everything he would inevitably exclude through his own subjective vision. Looking down (or, as elsewhere, up towards the sky) functions therefore as an opening. By neither dictating nor privileging one vision, one story or one identity over another, he offers us a way of looking that is multiple and inclusive.<sup>173</sup>

The 'here and now' of Gonzalez-Torres's footprints could come from anyone, anywhere and anytime, either from today or 20 years ago. In reality, it doesn't really matter if what we look at is the footsteps of his boyfriend, Ross, or that of a stranger. They might be those of a man or a woman, perhaps Mexican or Chinese, young or old. 'A

172 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), p. 6.

173 At the very beginning of *Woman, Native, Other*, Trinh describes a gathering in a remote village at which people discuss matters of capital importance without, however, coming to the heart of the subject: 'There is no catching, no pushing, no direction, no breaking through, no need for linear progression which gives the comforting illusion that one knows where one goes.' This is a story, she says, built of differences in timbre and in silence; this story 'circulates like a gift; an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity.' (Trinh, pp.1-2). Through this narrative – where different voices and personal stories intersect – Trinh invites us to consider the importance of reading between the lines, of that which is passed on (and preserved) yet which circulates invisibly. This gift, building on differences, is not intended to be seen, but rather felt. Like Gonzalez-Torres, Trinh offers us a way of looking (reading/writing) that is both multiple and inclusive.

Walk in the Snow' can also be a two-person walk, walking together, perhaps young *and* old. In this case, the artist places a pair side by side, like two clocks ("*Untitled*" (*Perfect Lovers*), 1991) or two mirrors ("*Untitled*" (*Orpheus, Twice*), 1991), but also like Roni Horn's two sheets of gold foil, one on top of the other (*Paired Gold Mats, for Ross and Felix*, 1995).

Gonzalez-Torres speaks of how seeing a related work by Horn, *Gold Field* (1980–82) changed him, how he was touched by the fragility of the work: a single sheet of thin gold foil, thinner than a human hair, lying unprotected on the museum floor.<sup>174</sup>

But *Paired Gold Mats, for Ross and Felix* is not only a homage by Roni Horn to Gonzalez-Torres. More than reconfiguring *Gold Field*, Horn's emotionally charged gesture makes *Paired Gold Mats* into a gift<sup>175</sup> to all of us. An offer in the form of evidence, reminding us – through its thin, fragile and horizontal presence – of the vulnerability of our own human condition. We all know we are subject to disappearance; *Paired Gold Mats*, however, emphasises an aspect that goes beyond death; it speaks of the impossibility of being here without the Other, expressing the possibility (necessity) of being-together (life). 'There is sweet in between',<sup>176</sup> she said: perhaps love, death, life in between.<sup>177</sup>

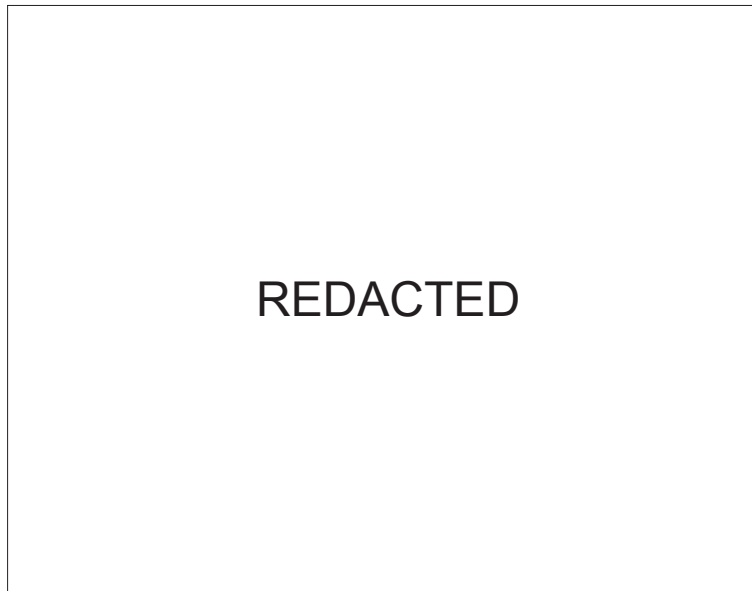


Fig. 7 – Roni Horn, *Paired Gold Mats, for Ross and Felix*, 1995

174 Roni Horn, in *Roni Horn aka Roni Horn* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), p. 60.

175 In 1993, in response to Roni Horn's *Gold Field*, Felix Gonzalez-Torres produced "*Untitled*" (*Placebo – Landscape-for Roni*). The work was made shortly after his boyfriend's death. Gonzalez-Torres describes the work as a gift in response to another gift, for when he had first seen Horn's work, in a difficult time of his life, her work touched him so deeply that he received it as an offer, a gesture of affection.

176 Roni Horn, cited by Felix Gonzalez-Torres in Julie Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York, Göttingen: Steidl Publishers, 2016), p. 151.

177 This idea that emphasises the importance of what is (or what happens) in between is one of the themes of Deleuze and Guattari. According to them: 'It's not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it, you'll see that everything changes. It's not easy to see the grass in things and in words.' Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p. 24.

The body has lost its weight, and its thickness: the body has disappeared. On the river (*Another Water*, 2000), for instance, the body does not sink, but rather fluctuates. Actual bodies don't take place (in the work); they are displaced, hidden or, finally, absent. This is why Roni Horn also looks upon the world of the invisible, and although one sees neither bodies nor words, there is a body language here. As she puts it: the work 'reveals the physical reality of what had become an abstraction.'<sup>178</sup> In effect, there is a desire to keep silence. A silence that is less about the body, but more precisely one that offers a (blank) space for the body to reappear in an unexpected way. For me, this desire (this demand) resembles Roland Barthes's desire for the Neutral. In Barthes's words: 'The Neutral is this irreducible *No*: a *No* so to speak suspended'.<sup>179</sup> Assuming a complex temporality, this suspended '*No*' already affirms something – we don't really know what it is or what it will be: it suspends the affirmation, the answer. This '*No*', I claim, is like blankness, an image suspended.

'I insert blanks', says Barthes: 'what I think + what I do or do not say + what the other receives (because my "silence" is not necessarily received as "silence"!):'<sup>180</sup> Like the silent presence of the artwork, the *Neutral* '*No*' is mysterious. And so I find myself again confronted with the same questions: what am I looking at? What is the artist sharing, what is he/she offering me? Because meaning is obscure, my response can only take the form of a non-response. In reality (like Barthes), the artist wants us to wonder about that which goes without saying/showing; and that is how the (absent) body is rendered present and is made manifest. In the end, the common thread might be a desire, an effort, to make and think without being caught in the structures of one's thought. So, like Roland Barthes, the artist avoids imposing any direction: neither this nor that, but the possibility of including this *and* that. Postulating the right to be silent, Horn's and Gonzalez-Torres's *Neutral* conveys a certain fluidity, but also an essential plurality that escapes control.

178 Roni Horn in *Roni Horn aka Roni Horn*, p. 60.

179 Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 14.

180 *Ibid.*, p. 24.



**Letter to Marieluise** (By Felix Gonzalez-Torres)

*The description, or subtexts depicting the photographs, is one of many readings. So that is o.k. with me. But this work is also about including the viewer into a visual process that includes beauty as a form of contestation, a work that is politically charged, even illegal in our country. It is also about the history of pain, and the forced invisibility on certain types of love “that dare not speak its name.” Well this work speaks its name, its beauty, its fragility, its universality, and the pain of losing it. Pain, as so many things in our culture, is a political act when a pain that is supposed to be hidden suddenly gets exposed in the “public” arena. This work is deceiving: it has the look of a beautiful photograph in order to attract a wide segment of the public without regard to their politics, gender, or sexual orientation and to immerse them in contemplating it and then realising that what they are actually seeing is something else, something universal, positive, constructive. Love. These photographs are about pleasure and the possibility of transcendence through an act of creation, it is about giving back, and sharing with the viewer some experiences that are so common, so universal. This work is about building a condition of understanding, acceptance, and difference.*

February 8, 1994, NYC<sup>181</sup>

181 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, in Julie Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, p. 173.

In 2007, when I started a drawing and printmaking course, among many other tasks students were asked to develop small exercises using different printmaking techniques. The first one was an etching exercise. I chose a small copper plate that took me a couple of hours to prepare. That afternoon, I couldn't decide what to make out of it and so I took the plate home. For about two years – throughout the duration of the course – I returned to the plate many times with the same question: how could I make an etching out of it and preserve the material singularity of the copper plate?

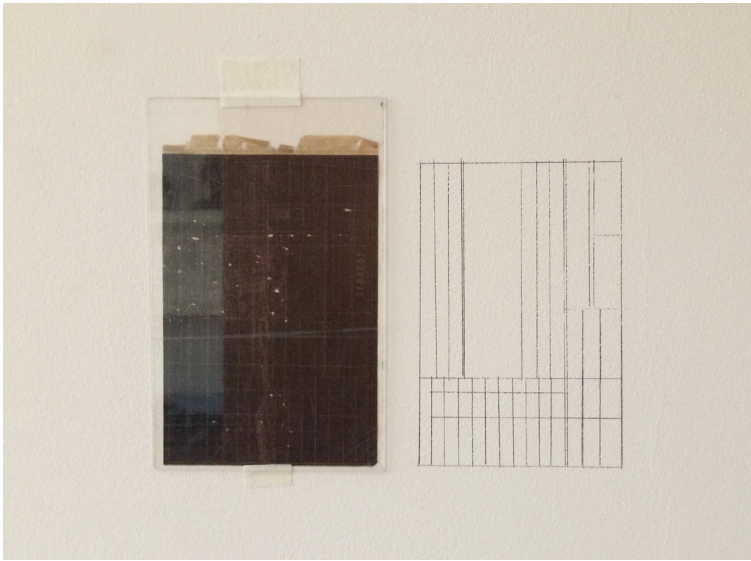
In the end I chose not to work on the plate: I have never produced any etchings, and the copper plate stands to this day next to a series of other small ordinary items I store at home on my studio shelf. Perhaps all this would be irrelevant if I did not feel it now suddenly resonating with the pile of small black carbon papers which I store on that same shelf, and that, precisely like the golden plate, they were originally meant to stay invisible, in-between things, and then eventually discarded after being used.

Today I think that my indecisiveness about what image to produce on the plate came from my interest in materiality rather than in pictures, for the plate is beautiful (enough) as it is. But it's not merely that: I have always been fascinated by things which seem to be 'designed' to not really be seen, that have no great use or value (that are fragile, affordable, discarded).

At that time, from the reflections on the copper material no work was produced, yet the absence of work gave rise to a question that still persists today: why the impulse to intervene very little or, ultimately, to leave things intact?

I recognise in myself a certain inability to decide (that is, to privilege one thing over another). It is indeed true that I often prefer not to give affirmative answers, avoiding making permanent marks as a strategy to delay the moment of conclusion. Yet the decision to make no work (to say no words) is in any case already a form of decision: a form of action, inaction that is in fact an action (invisible, indeed) which I claim has a performative dimension.

Every time I set myself the task of starting a new project, I feel, without really knowing why, that I want to create more work by doing and saying less each time. This desire contains a paradox, which I recently identified as crucial for the understanding of this project. I no longer attempt to separate methodology from the subject matter of the research: the two overlap and combine.



**Fig. 8 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Model 1636814 for a Portrait*, 2018**



Fig. 9 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Dancing Grains II* [still], 2015

## INTO SCALE: SPACE OF CHILDHOOD

*Dust* (by Roni Horn)

*As a child I observed the persistent presence of dust on everything at my steadily rising eye-level. Dust was especially visible on hard and reflective surfaces. I liked the way it mottled and muted reflection. When I sat on upholstered furnishings, I knew the dust was there even though I couldn't see it. I imagined it a neat filling, topping off each threadwork intersection. The soft things in the house were softer under dust and the hard things were as well. Dust reserved its most exotic forms and prolific expression for the more secret, unused places in the house. Under my bed, in my closets dust clustered – fluffy constellations of matter spawned and crowded. Through this youthful and intimate exposure, I learned that dust never mingled. Even down among the long fibres of my mother's rugs, dust was always on top.*

*Now, as I sit in the evening light watching dusk settle around me, a fly, noisy and casual, alights on the arm of my chair. Gross characteristics of the buzz are few. It's constant with only a beginning and an end; it starts instantaneously, with no prelude; it comes to you – to you personally. And though I can't remember my first experience of buzz, a familiar quality attaches itself to the sound the moment I hear it.*

*It's hard to get near a buzz, though a buzz can come to you. In the past I may have followed one or two out the door. The smack of the screen ushered the buzz from earshot; the fly was gone.*

*As a child I associated the sound with a bit of aerial punctuation, a period perhaps – on the move, an end note. As a teenager I learned that a fly defecates twenty to thirty times an hour. The instant a fly would land I thought to myself: that fly is shitting on my table, my apple, on me! Sometimes later, when I lived briefly in a log cabin upstate, I would share the living room on a seasonal basis with a large population of flies that settled on the windows. When I let the room temperature drop, the flies would fall to the sills in a thick stupor leaving the glass mottled in a fog of translucent compost.*

*I was lying on my mother's sofa reading when I heard a fly die. It was a rainy summer, hot and humid. Drops of water falling from the eaves softly thudded the glass. On the inside the dotlike body of a fly damp air compressing slightly each time the fly hit the glass. At length the buzz stopped. The black dot dropped from the air, hitting the sill with the soft, crisp sound.'*

RH, 1994<sup>182</sup>

182 Roni Horn, in *Roni Horn aka Roni Horn*, pp. 49–50.

## Notes on *missing limbs*

A few days before Easter, late at night, as I was about to leave the bus, a man stands out from the crowd. He is wearing his green work uniform, and he was visibly tired; however, what struck me as distinctive was not his dirty clothes, which I barely remember, nor his face, which, to tell the truth, I have already forgotten. A detail, something minor that in fact was not even present, became the focus of my attention. I set myself to ignore it, but as hard as I tried, I could not take my eyes off it. Concentrating my gaze on his left hand, which rested motionless on his knee, the lack of two fingers had become the subject of my fixation.

And with my eyes fixed upon this image, my thought shifted instinctively; for this image was not entirely new to me. A *déjà vu* sensation: I have felt it before! Thus another figure coming from my childhood immediately takes shape in its place: I am haunted by lobsters encapsulated in glass boxes at the entrance to restaurants. Among the combination of long floating bodies, and five pairs of legs multiplied, there is always one, at least one leg, missing. And in this way two images which seem different in every way gradually flow one into the other, forming an invisible or impossible chain of connection.

And what can I say, perhaps, besides the fact that sometimes one is all fingers, legs, feet, hands or voice. But what is made of these fingers that one is, or of these voices that one has, but that always come out too loud or too low? Or what has the lack of these fingers made of us? If there is any sense to find here, it is not a truth about them in particular, but perhaps some sort of sense – which I cannot decipher at the moment – that seems to come out of them, about all of us.

*I was beginning to sink into poverty. Slowly, it was drawing circles around me; the first seemed to leave me everything, the last would leave me only myself. One day, I found myself in the city; travelling was no more than a fantasy. I could not get through on the telephone. My clothes were wearing out. I was suffering from the cold; springtime, quick. I went to libraries. I had become friends with someone who worked in one, and he took me down to the overheated basement. In order to be useful to him I blissfully galloped along tiny gangways and brought him books which he then sent on to the gloomy spirit of reading. But that spirit hurled against me words that were not very kind; I shrank before its eyes; it saw me for what I was, an insect, a creature with mandibles who had come up from the dark regions of poverty. Who was I? It would have thrown me into great perplexity to answer that question.*<sup>183</sup>

183 Maurice Blanchot, *The Madness of the Day* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1981), p. 10.



There are moments when I wander through my childhood landscape: I see things I've seen and then forgotten, things which I add, perhaps – things that were never there except in my imagination. Aligned with the Catholic moral tradition, the Romanesque and the Baroque imagery, is the rural. A couple of hours spent next to my brother – staring at a hole in the ground – while elaborating schemes to capture a cricket. I see cornfields, fireflies turning light, and rooms long ago. I look at an immaculate picture of a young St Mary Magdalene hanging on my grandmother's bedroom wall, while she recounts to me the story of this sinner who became a saint.

I believe that childhood memories tend to retain a certain clarity. Artaud has described childhood memories as having 'extraordinary enlargements'.<sup>184</sup>

I often think of the silent and the invisible, the repulsive and, at the same time, magical world of insects. I used to amuse myself just by simply looking at these creatures, for I was interested in seeing how they moved, reacted and interacted. At night, in darkness, while we sleep, some species become active. As I turn the lights on, the clump of cockroaches run in silence – and in a flash, while my eyes travel over the kitchen floor, they all disperse at once – slipping between the cracks. Present yet hidden, they hold in reserve (as if in secret, like our organs) the potential to reveal the essence of a silent and unknown world.

In this fascinating space of childhood, time and scale seem to unfold differently, based in the free play of thought and action, and its element of magic. In the eyes of a child (like the eyes of the madman), things became larger than they were and smaller than they would become, possibly becoming indistinguishable and without measure. This is also a matter of close vision and proximity. And writing the word 'proximity' immediately prompts me to think of Roland Barthes's writing in *Camera Lucida*, and his concepts of the photographic *studium* and *punctum*, which seem particularly relevant in this context. For to see something, no matter what it is and how it appears, a first element must exist, and this element is the *studium*: the study, the kind of 'general enthusiastic commitment', the 'inconsequential taste' and 'irresponsible interest' for someone or something. Only after the *studium* happens does the *punctum* occur, and the *punctum*, says Barthes, is that which 'makes one pause', 'nothing extraordinary' though, 'a banality', yet punctuated by 'certain interferences'. For *punctum* means 'break' and also 'discontinuity', and *studium* means 'interest' and 'curiosity'.<sup>185</sup>

But why am I speaking of childhood in relation to *studium* and *punctum*, in relation to muteness, invisibility, insects and so on? And how can I – particularly considering the dialogue with my own childhood – approach this theme and escape the romantic vision that is attached to it? Which is almost the same as asking: how can I address childhood here without making myself look/feel childish?

I started with childhood because the voice of a child is usually without authority and knowledge. The speech of a child is mute.<sup>186</sup> And yet, despite this muteness, despite not having a voice, authority, knowledge or autonomy, children are nevertheless moved by

184 Antonin Artaud, in *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, ed. by Susan Sontag (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1976), p. 123.

185 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, pp. 26–27.

186 As Carol Mavor points out, quoting Richard Howard, 'speechless' is already at the root of the word 'childhood': '(infant: from Latin *infans*; from *in* [not] and *fari* [to speak]: the one who does not speak.)'. Carol Mavor, *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida, La Jetée, Sans Soleil, and Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 2.

intense and ‘genuine’ curiosity (or, to put it in Barthes’s terms, by an ‘irresponsible interest’). And curiosity/interest has no immediate relation either to knowledge or to power. Nonetheless, we can doubtless tell that curiosity is not a quality/characteristic exclusive to the child, since it is not directly related to age, and in fact we can say that curiosity is also present in the animal. But what then characterises and distinguishes children’s curiosity? Maybe its genuineness, its naivety; in any case, I argue that it is not a matter of authenticity, for being or not being authentic has clearly no relevance in this context. My suggestion is that children’s curiosity instead relates to fluctuation and openness: a disturbance or an interruption by means of the free play of thought and action.

If our childhood fascinates us, says Maurice Blanchot, ‘this happens because childhood is the moment of fascination, is itself fascinated (...) whoever is fascinated doesn’t see, properly speaking, what he sees. Rather, it touches him in an immediate proximity’.<sup>187</sup>

I do not speak, thus, with all my clarity, for my thoughts and decisions are compromised. I call therefore upon weakness (muteness, but also blindness), because: ‘What fascinates us robs us of our power to give sense’.<sup>188</sup>

At this moment, as I struggle to articulate some of these thoughts, I begin to realise that I am actually speaking of something else, something that does not strictly refer to childhood, because my question goes beyond childhood. But where does my question go: which direction is it taking?

Artaud doesn’t provide me with the answer, but he certainly leads me closer to a path I’m gradually rediscovering: ‘Childhood knows sudden awakenings of the mind, intense prolongations of thought which are lost with advancing age. In certain panics known to childhood, certain monumental and unreasonable terrors which are haunted by the sense of an extra-human menace, it is incontestable that death appears.’<sup>189</sup>

What Artaud is communicating is an experience that ‘is within certain limits knowable and approachable by a certain sensibility’. The appearance of what he calls ‘death’ should not, therefore, be regarded as a suspension of life, since what he describes – the awakening of the mind, the fear without reason – is a sensation of the living.

Death often leads one to the question: who am I, or who was I? Indeed, in one way or another, childhood always seems to imply this movement towards oneself, looking back towards the past or underneath into one’s roots. On the contrary, death (according to Blanchot) suggests the opposite movement – that of stepping back from oneself, as outside oneself.

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida, without ever mentioning childhood, starts from his own experience of being caught naked by the gaze of his cat to move on to questioning the crossing of borders between man and animal, and the possibility of man thinking and seeing (being in) the world free from any relation to utility; and then he goes on further, precisely as Artaud did, into the question of death.

187 Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 33.

188 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

189 Antonin Artaud, in *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, ed. by Susan Sontag, p. 123.

To relate to the thing such as it is – supposing that it were possible – means apprehending it such as it is, such as it would be if I weren't there. I can die, or simply leave the room; I know that it will be what it is and will remain what it is. That is why death is such an important demarcation line; it is starting from mortality and from the possibility of being dead that one can let things be just as they are, in my absence, in a way, and my presence is there only to reveal what the thing would be in my absence. So can the human do that, purely?<sup>190</sup>

This remarkable passage has the power of expansion (in me) without measure: every time I read it, in silence, and while Derrida speaks – because he is truly speaking – it 'pricks me (but also bruises me)'. In truth, sometimes I find the practice of reading and writing painful. A breath, a breathing space, is needed, which is to say: before I continue, a pause is needed. A provisional pause – 'an interruption that is important to me' – is precisely what takes place here.

To see, to truly look at things (including ourselves), a step back should take place, a pause; *spacing* happens. In order to hear, to listen to or touch (I, she, he, it ...), one has to come closer – as with insects, to avoid injury, to allow those creatures to move freely, one has to keep a distance, 'the good distance', the 'right distance' (which is exactly a distance without measure). However, one must genuinely wish to approach, otherwise one can only pass it by with indifference. How it is therefore possible that all these questions intersect with those raised by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*? 'Death' again is the probable answer; for death – the death of Barthes's mother – is a crucial aspect of the book. And it's certainly also no coincidence that Barthes comes to rediscover his mother precisely in a photograph of her as a child; in a photograph where he can no longer recognise her 'crudest identity, her legal status'<sup>191</sup>; and in a period of time when she is not yet his mother, for in fact nothing of her had yet crystallised. The 'evidence' of that picture, then, goes beyond simple resemblance, because through it he discovers no truth, and learns nothing of her, except her own invisibility. Moreover, according to Barthes, whatever the photograph offers is given *gratuitement*,<sup>192</sup> free of charge; 'an action of thought without thought, an aim without a target'.<sup>193</sup>

Exactly now, when Barthes speaks of 'evidence', I return to the subject of distance to quote Jean-Luc Nancy:

The image is not given, it has to be approached: evidence is not what falls in any way whatever into meaning (*sous le sens*), as they say. Evidence is what presents itself at the right distance, or else, that in front of which one finds the right distance, the proximity that lets the relation take place, and that opens to continuity.<sup>194</sup>

190 Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 160.

191 Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, p. 109.

192 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

193 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

194 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

Thus, the 'right' or 'good' distance is not only the proximity that makes invisibility visible (or evident); the right distance is also that space which remains 'immeasurable'. What fascinates me, therefore, in childhood (fascination) is children's inability to perceive distances; or perhaps I could also say their talent for remaining indifferent to them. Hence, childhood cannot be seen only within a simple logic of lack (of voice, authority, knowledge and power); even though it might be through what is missing, and having powerlessness as a common thread, that one comes to understand more clearly the link between childhood and death.

What interests me here, in the first place, is how childhood links to a series of questions concerning the notion of value. For children often pay attention to minor details that fall outside the adult's consideration; children value worthless things. Like the little boy who focuses his attention on the barely visible movement of the ants, or on the stained dusty clothes of the old peasant woman. The space of childhood brings back to life the importance of insignificance and superfluous gestures – gestures that serve no purpose. Thus, childhood is *the space* where seemingly 'nothing happens'; and, here, 'nothing' designates this place where almost 'everything' is rendered invisible.<sup>195</sup>

Children's activities, like their speech, are stripped of any importance, and yet children's activities are not seen as a waste of time; in a certain way, their activities address a period of time where one learns to give time. And yet they give it without knowing. Art too seems to take up this gesture towards insignificance and the unknown (that will never become truth). As Derrida tells us: 'the act of giving' only happens when one gives 'without knowing, without knowledge or recognition, without thanks'.<sup>196</sup> This resonates, I believe, with the idea of the artwork as gift, for whatever the artwork offers us (as Barthes tells us) is given *gratuitement*.

In summary, childhood disrupts our sense of time and distance, and in so doing it also questions the opposition between visibility and invisibility, low value and high value.

195 This invisible space of childhood, and the attention given to tiny details, leads me to think of *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), a film by the Belgian auteur Chantal Akerman in which, through the use of long takes, the everyday invisible labour of a woman is exposed, allowing the viewer to become aware of aspects and subjects that otherwise would be ignored. As Akerman writes: 'I give space to things which were never, almost never, shown in that way, like the daily gestures of a woman. They are the lowest in the hierarchy of film images'. Chantal Akerman, in Carol Mavor, *Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J.M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D.W. Winnicott*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 421.

196 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death & Literature in Secret* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 113.

# Chapter 3

## Muteness (as mobility)



Alone, wearing an old black apron over a dark green blouse with a floral pattern and a long, loose brown skirt, an old peasant woman sits beneath an orange tree. In the opposite direction a boy looks at her in amazement. He has seen her before, at least twice, he thinks. Yesterday, it was shortly after twelve, next to the door in front of the house in which he stands now. The first time – he cannot exactly identify the year, but he remembers where she was – it was in the humble white house three away from this one.

For him her mobility is paradoxical in relation to what he supposes is her apparently unproductive life, her innate muteness. Sometimes he has the impression that this figure, even when not in his presence, never leaves him. She returns, never, however, looking exactly the same. These barely imperceptible fluctuations, these micro-differences, are so insignificant that they are perhaps invisible to everyone else.

In the room in which he had first met the old peasant, not only did it strike him how silent the woman was, but almost immediately he noticed, high above her, a printed image of St. Mary Magdalene dressed in light blue, with long smooth hair streaming over her shoulders, and a face like that of a child. The disparity between those two figures was remarkable, for that time the old woman's skin was already dry and dusty. She was wearing the same black apron as today; and winter or summer, inside or outside the cottage, she always walks barefoot.

While he stands next to the door, lost in thoughts about the old woman, a cat passes in front of him and he realises he cannot see the woman. He moves a few steps away towards the corner of the street in order to get a better look, but she is not there. She is gone.



## NOTES AND LETTERS: MOBILE NATURE

I sit before a sea of fragments: mostly letters and notes. The letters (perhaps factual, perhaps fictional) were written in the 17th century by the nun Mariana to her lover, inspiring the book *New Portuguese Letters*. Some of the other letters date from the late 1960s and mid-1970s: correspondence between a nun and her sister; Antonin Artaud's letters; Hélio Oiticica's letters (and notes) to Lygia Clark; Felix Gonzalez-Torres's correspondence; Ingmar Bergman's notes; and the letters of Pedro Costa, which feature throughout his films, are some of the many examples.

It's difficult to deny how different they are: the note from the letter. In every case, one has to consider its more or less intimate or personal quality. And, still, I think of their similar scale and mobile nature; not like a painting, a sculpture or a novel but rather informal, like a sketch. Like a sketch insofar as it retains a certain impermanence and movement.

At this point, I think about Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa's work, as I've been thinking for some time about how his latest films are so strongly bound up with the idea of a letter 'written by a thousand hands'. Whence the fragmentation of his films by means of these letters, which seem to dismiss the 'I' of the filmmaker, remaining partially mute in order to allow the other to speak. While shooting *Casa de Lava* (1995) in the former Portuguese colony of Cape Verde, the director became acquainted with some of its residents, who asked him to take letters, among many other things, to their relatives, who were immigrants in Portugal. And so by this means Costa discovered and became close to a world that deeply influenced his art. He began to visit the Fontainhas neighbourhood regularly, gradually pressing with his digital camera deeper into the life of its inhabitants, grasping its secrets: its colours and textures, faces and voices. Eventually, Costa was neither a stranger nor an intruder, to the extent that his experience could no longer be detached from Ventura's, Vanda's or Vitalina's realities.<sup>197</sup> In *The Intervals of Cinema*, Jacques Rancière explains that the letter recited countless times by Ventura in *Colossal Youth* (2006) was an artistic performance, because in fact he had no one to send it to. For it is nothing other than 'the performance of the art of sharing, an art inseparable from the life and experience of the displaced, from their means of making up for an absence and drawing nearer to the beloved being. But as well, it no more belongs to Ventura than it does to this film.'<sup>198</sup>

Ventura's letter was not written by Ventura but by Costa himself, combining two sources: the French Surrealist poet Robert Desnos's letter written during his imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp and a letter from an immigrant worker. These methods of working – these silent chains of connection – that are common in Pedro Costa's work are essential. For being neither quite documentary nor purely fictional, Costa's films use methods of circulation, reconfiguration, reordering. Costa's work activates – and, more importantly, it breaks – our stereotypical perception of reality. Indeed, we contemplate the real (an actual/nonfictional character, an actual place and time); however, the work denies a certain idea of totality, for in essence it is hybrid, and consequently the films remain obscure.

197 Vanda, Ventura and Vitalina are three of the main characters of Costa's films; they are 'real' characters who appear in more than one film.

198 Jacques Rancière, *The Intervals of Cinema* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 135.

The disconcerting discontinuity of Costa's work opens before me, therefore, a fissure. In *Colossal Youth*, Costa transports Ventura to the Gulbenkian Foundation – placing him (entirely silent) as an intruder, like an odd creature, between a Rubens and a Van Dyck – and thereby produces an unsettling sense of displacement, which comes immediately from the confrontation between the mouldy grey-blue walls of Fontainhas and the immaculate space of the museum. But the unsettling quality comes as well, as Rancière notices, from the replacement of the shareable by the 'unshareable'; for Ventura is no different from what we are in the world, and yet we perceive him differently and in a limited way; somehow, he is withdrawn from the continuum that this 'us/we' represents.<sup>199</sup> On the other hand, although nothing could be more foreign to my way of life than that of Ventura – if it were possible to measure this distance separating me from him – I could nevertheless find between us a shared fragility, a shared madness.

And so, as I write, here he is, Ventura, before me; this mute Other, incapable of responding and yet evidencing at once the shareable and the fissure: the *spacing*. How could I remain indifferent to this other individual who trembles before me?<sup>200</sup> Then something surprisingly powerful arises from poverty and madness: it is perhaps his extraordinary capacity of resilience. These intervals, I argue, do not form mere lines of separation; these are spaces of transit and circulation; these are open spaces. Thus, the letter that is used to convey movement can also be seen as a potential agent for change. In reality, Ventura's trembling body resembles his (Desnos's/Costa's) own letter, quite fragmented – floating between him and me, between insanity and sanity, between elsewhere and here. For the letter is no longer a letter; it has become a body in transit, mobile like a song, or a dot of dust dancing in the air: sometimes we catch its presence and sometimes we don't.

Yet there is another particularity in Pedro Costa's work that cannot be put aside here. As Costa emphatically affirmed, he brought the news but he did not know what was written in the letters. Good films, he says, are letters in which you don't know what's written.<sup>201</sup> Each film becomes this letter (this note) that takes us further away, somewhere else; this place is, however, unknown. Hence, the written word, the fundamental element of any letter, loses preponderance; instead of searching for the value attached to words, one is asked to consider the importance of what operates in silence in the film. Indeed, I feel that words 'are chosen' not primarily for their meaning, but rather for their rhythmic effect. In this way, Costa moves his attention away from language to place an emphasis on the body and its gestures, taking us back to the origins of cinema as the art of shadows and movement.<sup>202</sup>

199 "We (with capital W) sometimes include(s), other times exclude(s) me, says Trinh; and in this case the 'we' to which Ventura belongs – as black, as poor, being critically different from the 'we' of the filmmaker, is a 'we' which excludes him. (Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other*, p. 90). Difference in this case causes separation and division, preventing Ventura from having access to equal opportunities, to social justice. Hence, as I previously noted, despite the dialogue between Pedro Costa (the filmmaker) and Ventura (the non-actor) the power relations between them still remain largely intact.

200 Note that the word 'tremble' is not used in a figurative meaning. In the films (both in *Colossal Youth* and *Horse Money*) Ventura rarely speaks; in fact he is mostly silent. However, what makes his presence truly disturbing is not so much his disarticulated speech but the permanent trembling of his body.

201 Pedro Costa, 'Horse Money: Q&A with Pedro Costa hosted by Laura Mulvey' [YouTube video], ICA, 10 December 2015 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygSIKWpOUBo>> [accessed 16 February 2018]

202 Gilles Deleuze says the same thing: 'give words back to the body'. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, p. 178.

To some extent, the metaphor of the (sealed) letter and the space of circulation that every correspondence implies relates to Costa's method of making films without narrative, without script. This presupposes that 'everything' crossing the trajectory of his camera can potentially be included, or is allowed to take part in the work. It is thus also a matter of transforming the accidental and the ordinary into something essential. As John Cage has taught us, we must consider what lies in and outside the work. In other words, we 'must give the closest attention to everything'.<sup>203</sup>

Letters and notes are not exactly equivalents, yet it is perhaps the fragmented nature they share that seems to prompt a recognition of the transitory nature of things.

It is the idea of a work close to an open proposition that resists or suspends any form of resolution that allows me to compare Costa's films to the art of Hélio Oiticica. Like Costa, Oiticica also stitches together everyday materials, placing a particular emphasis on the body to express a dysfunctional social reality. That said, what immediately comes to my mind (comes into presence, side by side with Ventura) is: a boy from the Mangueira community dancing the samba wearing Oiticica's *parangolés*.<sup>204</sup> Indeed, being not quite capes, tents or flags, being not quite clothes, sculptures or performances, the precarious visual structures of Oiticica's *parangolés* echo the importance of the notion of 'notes' for his practice. For Oiticica the notes are more important than the definition (resolution) of ideas. For him notes are at least less rational and more spiritual, full of fire and tension.<sup>205</sup> As he writes: 'The cape is not an object but a searching process, searching for the roots of the objective birth of the work, the direct perceptive moulding of it. This is why its constructive method is popular and primitive, referring to flags, tents, capes, etc. It is not a finished object and its spatial sense is not definite.'<sup>206</sup>

In this sense, Oiticica's capes (*parangolés*) and notes are not in any way a valorisation of incompleteness. Rather, it is a matter of searching, experimenting (with his/our own hands too) with what the notes, capes or *penetrables*, separately and together, can potentially develop.

Visitors to galleries and museums have learned for a long time not to touch works of art. Surveillance cameras, security guards, sound signals and floor lines often mark the frontier dividing the visitor from the work. Oiticica's work is different (in its original purpose): it doesn't need to be watched and protected; on the contrary, it invites participation. True, it does not migrate between public and private, like a film that you can both watch either at the cinema or at home. Moreover, you cannot keep it like a letter (addressed to you only), or like Gonzalez-Torres' candy pieces (developed 30 years later), but in any case, the artist says 'no – you can't buy a piece, because also the idea of a solid work to be bought is fake.' If it can't be bought, it can't be sold either. It has a value in itself that is distinct (autonomous) from its commodity value. Displayed to be touched,

203 John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, p. 16.

204 The *parangolé* is a cape with multiple layers composed of different materials. The word *parangolé* is a Brazilian expression that suggests a messy situation. It is known that Oiticica found inspiration for his work in favela architecture – a type of poor and precarious construction where almost everything is improvised. This model, I argue, shares formal and conceptual characteristics with the idea of a combination of fragments (notes or letters, short thoughts).

205 Hélio Oiticica, 'Museu Vivo: Hélio Oiticica' [YouTube video], 7 February 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ok7Xsj-TwvQ>> [accessed 20 January 2018]

206 Hélio Oiticica, in *Oiticica in London*, ed. by Guy Brett and Luciano Figueiredo (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), p. 112.

it's nobody's property and thus serves no purpose apart from to be shared; the work is to move, to make you move, to move you.<sup>207</sup>

After the famous incident following Oiticica's opening at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, where his friends from the Mangueira community (dancing samba and wearing his *parangolés*) were thrown out of the building, Jean Boghici wrote that: 'Hélio Oiticica is our Flash Gordon. He doesn't fly through the sidereal space. He flies through the layers of our social structure.'<sup>208</sup> Like the 'foreign' body of Ventura in the museum in *Colossal Youth*, the presence of the Mangueira dancers in the gallery space exposes a fissure in the social fabric. Thus, in both cases I would argue that, more than demonstrating the vulnerable condition of the body, the work of Oiticica and Costa prompts a radical question concerning the space of the body: its right to space, to movement. I'm therefore led to believe that for both Costa and Oiticica it was the encounter and dialogue with the marginalised communities that led to an 'irreversible disintegration' (in Oiticica's words) of their works. For it could never be a house in the traditional sense, but is instead, like a construction site, provisional – and mobile like a tent, floating like a letter or a note.

207 Hélio Oiticica, in *Oiticica in London*, ed. by Guy Brett and Luciano Figueiredo, p. 133.

208 Jean Boghici, in Anna Dezeuze, *Almost Nothing: Observations on Precarious Practice in Contemporary Art*, p. 106.

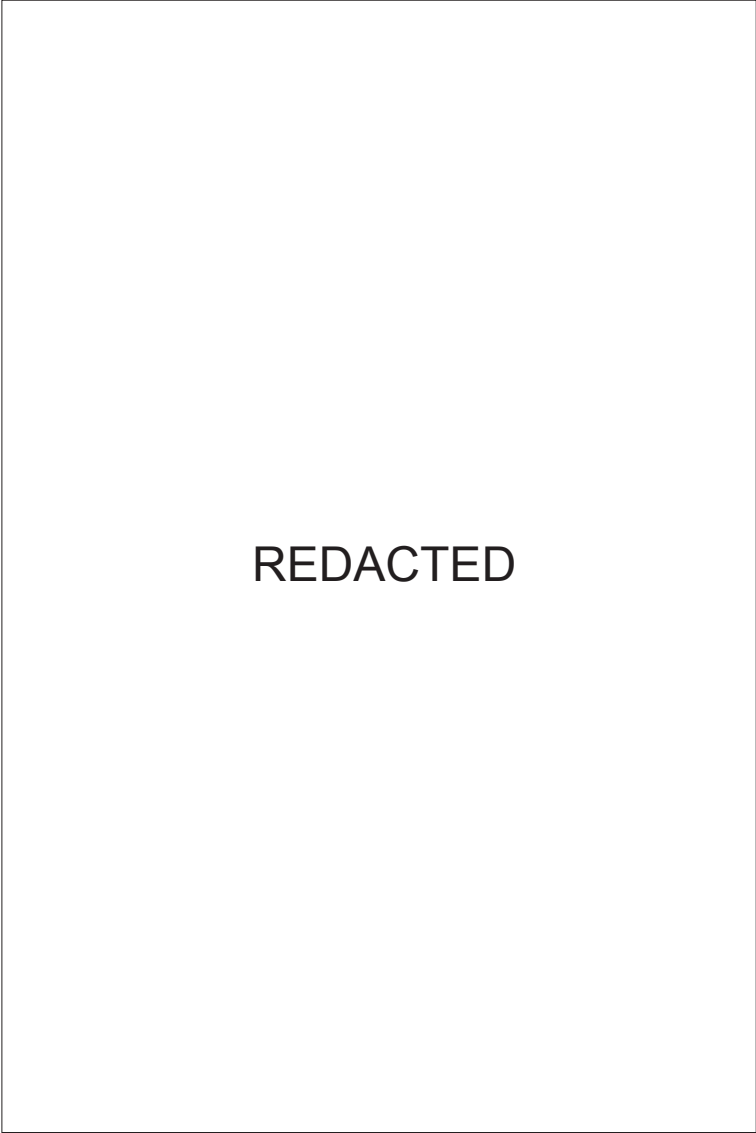


Fig. 10 – Hélio Oiticica, *Nildo of Mangueira with P15 Parangolé Cape 11*  
*'I Embody Revolt'*, 1967



REDACTED

Fig. 11, 12 – Pedro Costa, *Colossal Youth* [stills], 2006

Writing short notes on my phone is a recurrent practice in my research. I register not so much what I think but rather what I listen to (what I sense): for a note feels too short to be considered a thought. I edit them out, add further notes, delete them. In a permanent state of flux, they lack intention and objectivity. Thus it's precisely the non-selective aspect of the notes, often private, that turns them into a form of silence.

Some of these notes are incorporated into my thesis, yet I do not see them as artworks.

Ideally, perhaps, the thesis itself would become a combination of notes, or, to use Fernando Pessoa's term, a 'crochet' of fragments.<sup>209</sup>

*At Least Two Times Darker* (2015) is a video piece that resembles a note. Indeed, I put very little effort into it, since it was not really meant to be exhibited. For me, it is truly a note, or a sequence of notes: on sadness, death, anger. That's why I feel it needs to be shown in such a way that there is a real possibility it might become absent. At first it communicates nothing, except a noise, a background noise. So minor that it is neither a thought nor an image: only a note, a fragment. That being so, it only seems to function alongside and combined with other works.

A few other works share this same sense of mobility. I'm thinking now of the small piece of glass which I used twice over a piece of black carbon paper: first set up vertically taped to the gallery wall (*Model 1636814 for a Portrait*, 2018) and later on displayed outside and arranged horizontally, together with a few other elements (*Portraits of Aunt Gininha*, 2018). Each time it is about a new possibility of reconfiguration, since at any time I feel the small piece of glass might become part of another work.

209 Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, pp. 21–22.





Fig. 13 – Joana Maria Pereira, *At least two times darker*  
[Installation view], 2016

## Notes on *things you take home*

A few days after I moved to London to start this PhD, in the autumn of 2013, I visited Tate Modern with a group of RCA students. Felix Gonzalez-Torres's 'untitled' (*Double Portrait*) was being displayed on the museum floor. The room was crowded, so I looked at it from a distance. I returned to Tate many times after that, but it wasn't until 2016 that I saw *Double Portrait* again. For some reason, that time, as I bent down to take a piece of paper, in the precise moment I touched the work, I was touched by it and I was moved to tears.

People in the room looked at me with admiration, but not because they saw me crying, but quite simply because I had touched the artwork.

No more than 30 minutes after I took the first sheet of paper, the work got thinner.

Tears are difficult to explain. Touching *Double Portrait* felt like being at home: I was returning to a place I knew well, a welcome place. Indeed, *Double Portrait* was a welcome gift. I have carried the work with me for some time now, at least since December 1995 when I encountered the work of Gonzalez-Torres for the first time. I was just a kid and Felix was still alive.

Over the past 25 years I have literally carried it with me. First I attached it to my studio wall and later on I hung it on the wall of my room.

Today I return to it.

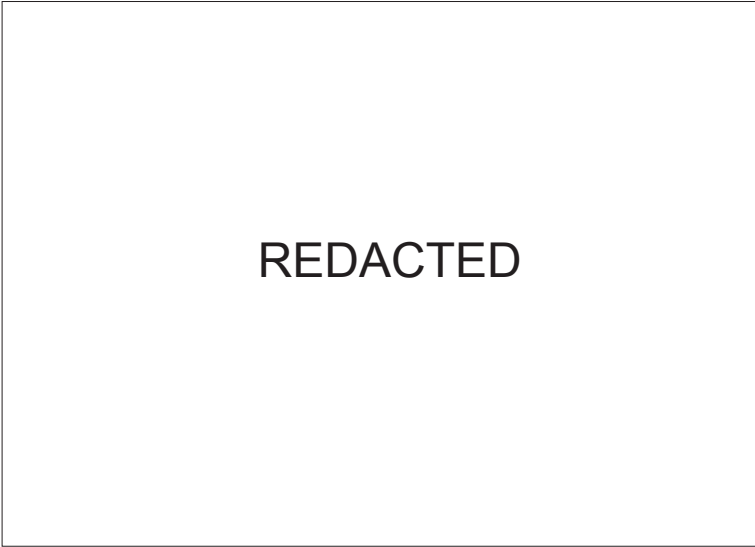


Fig. 14 – Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *'untitled' (Double Portrait)*,  
1991

## MOBILE ROOTS: A POT OF FLOWERS INSTEAD OF A TREE

The word 'mobility' implies a dynamic, a movement, while 'muteness', on the contrary, equates with qualities of stillness.

In *The Neutral*, Barthes recommends silence as a tactic to outplay oppression and intimidation: for Barthes, silence has a 'speechly' substance.<sup>210</sup> Likewise, I can speak while being silent, which means being silent by saying something else and in this way avoiding the taking of a position. As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, these are 'views without vision' maintaining meaning and are therefore as open as possible.

Hence, I would argue this silence involves an opening – a non-closure in the form of an interval (a temporary break), which becomes the very condition of communication and circulation. My silence sets in motion (activates) the other's discourse.

In any case: muteness not as request; not the silence of morality or the sceptic; keeping silence not as obligation.

Silence, here, is not an end but a means of: silence as tactic, as method. Indeed, the word 'tactic' already suggests an action, and in fact a certain tension arises between speaking and being silent linked to what in silence always resists deciphering.

Barthes, in writing about his weariness in relation to the demand for taking a position, mentions his desire to 'float', 'to live in one space without tying oneself to a place'.<sup>211</sup> Thus, one might say that silence does not only have a 'speechly' substance, it also has a mobile ('fugitive') one. Barthes doesn't want to claim a position, he wants instead to be able to situate himself between different positions or, rather, he wants to be able to move between positions. Fundamentally, he wants to circulate, 'to shift places'. As I see it, this 'weariness' is no more conceptual than it is bodily, suggesting an oscillation between moments of rest (immobility) and moments of action (mobility): a passage from one position to another.

But these 'oscillations' – its back-and-forth movements – raise other issues. I move, I pass through and cross places, I shift direction; perhaps tomorrow I will be elsewhere: a new place (for I desire something else), yet at a certain moment I may end up returning to a place where I have been before. To return to the same place brings to mind a whole discourse on memory, repetition and, perhaps, a certain lack of mobility. But I want to add another way of thinking about 'return', something other than memory or difference. I want to draw attention to movement: something (or someone) disappears but nonetheless appears again: comes back, refuses to leave. Sticks; that is, persists: is resilient.

One is caught in what appears to be a paradox: to stick to something (a place, a subject, etc), while having at the same time this desire not to tie oneself to a place. What seems crucial here, before all else, in order to unravel this paradox is to differentiate 'place' from 'space'. It is then also important not to consider immobility as the opposite of mobility. For, as Nancy puts it, 'the motionlessness in question is not static'.<sup>212</sup> For example, we could consider the mobility of the face. In reality, we could also consider a certain mobility in the tree; although we cannot really say that the tree moves, if we watch attentively we might see its leaves moving.

210 Barthes, *The Neutral*, p. 25.

211 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

212 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Evidence of Film: Abbas Kiarostami* (Brussels: Yves Gavaert Éditeur, 2001), p. 28.

‘To live in one space without tying oneself to a place’<sup>213</sup> – I stick to these words; they stick to me, planted like tree seeds in my mind. And suddenly I’m at the crossroads between four images of trees.

Image 1: I’m reminded of an orange tree; seating next to it, there was a boy wearing a pale blue striped shirt with a small pocket in the left side, and before him there was an old peasant woman wearing an old black apron over a dark green blouse. At least twice she was seen there, in that same place, which means she has gone back there, but at different times.

For image 2: I remember a tree at the top of a valley in *The Turin Horse* (2011), which, according to Tarr, was the starting point from which the whole narrative of his film developed. Location is crucial for the filmmaker. Indeed, all stories are embedded in particular places. After all, a conversation around trees necessarily implies a question of roots. Under a tree one can feel tied to the ground; it can take us back to our place of origin, our culture and tradition. Passing under a tree that remains fixed in its location also invites thoughts about time, which often comes down to asking ourselves (in opposition to the timeless tree) whether our time is lacking.

More precisely, it is a matter of *passage*, and thus of transitivity, movement, impermanence. In *The Turin Horse*, as we watch the characters in an almost absolute muteness, we trace their movements and the shifting rhythms of their bodies – circulating throughout and around the space, inside and outside. Tarr seems, therefore, to suggest that one can give up talking but cannot really stop moving (breathing). And movement needs to go beyond the top of the valley, the place where the tree is; it gets outside the limits of his camera frame to open up a space of a dimension that is essentially corporeal. He introduces the power of resilience of bodies into the cinematographic image, and it is in this way that muteness neutralises (incorporates) the opposition between mobility and immobility, for we find qualities of stillness and of movement both in a resting body and in an active body.

I breathe, I walk, I rest, I read, I write ...

Image 3 returns us to 1998, when, for his Nobel Prize lecture, Portuguese writer José Saramago developed a speech around a tree, precisely to take us back to his place of origin, and his childhood with his grandparents, both peasants, in the village of Azinhaga in the province of Ribatejo. It was on hot summer nights under a fig tree, where sometimes he and his grandfather slept, that his grandfather Jerónimo ‘set the universe in motion just with a couple of words’. Like his grandfather, Saramago became a storyteller, transforming the ordinary people of flesh and blood into the literary characters that his work developed. ‘I could not and did not aspire’, he says, ‘to venture beyond my little plot of cultivated land, all I had left was the possibility of digging down, underneath, towards the roots.’<sup>214</sup> His purpose, however, by ‘drawing and redrawing’ these familiar faces, was never to repeat, recover or recreate his past. Saramago had another ‘immoderate ambition’: to fragment its deepest subterranean layers. Perhaps just as for Barthes, Saramago had nothing more than a true desire to float.

213 Barthes, *The Neutral*, p. 19.

214 José Saramago, ‘Nobel Lecture: How Characters Became the Masters and the Author Their Apprentice’ NobelPrize.org, 7 December 1998. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1998/saramago/lecture/>> [accessed 13 November 2018]

Image 4, the last image of trees, comes again from film, this time from Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960). For me, there is anger and weariness in this film – but also resilience. Bergman has this extraordinary ability to say things without really saying them; he is a true master of silence. In Bergman's own words: 'everything has to be insinuated; nothing must be emphasised, nothing unravelled.'<sup>215</sup> Set in medieval times, the film tells the story of a rape and a murder. Like many of Bergman's films (as with Saramago's work), religion and morality play a central role. After the girl's murder, and as a response to the terrible events that shook his life, the father makes a plan for revenge. Following a series of rituals, the man, carrying a fine sword in his left hand, goes to fetch birch twigs for his bath, yet as he approaches the young tree, instead of chopping off its branches with his sword, in an impulse overcome with grief, he throws it to the ground and violently launches himself at the tree until it has been uprooted. The man does not merely cut the tree down; its roots are no longer attached to the ground (to the place). Uprooting the tree carries a strong metaphorical sense. Clearly, the violence of this act is less against nature than against a certain legacy. It feels as if Bergman himself is cutting off his Christian roots, as if through the inner struggle of his main character the director is addressing his own loss of faith. So perhaps – more than turning his back on God, or blurring the lines between good and evil – uprooting the tree here comes down to this: legacy being radically questioned.

Allow me to repeat (and return to) Roland Barthes's line: 'to live in one space without tying oneself to a place'. For, when I think it over, it leads me to reflect not only on mobility but on the idea of 'place' as place of origin. And then I wonder: isn't Barthes – like Tarr, Saramago and Bergman – raising questions about legacy here? And then I also wonder whether this desire could be conceived in practical terms – I mean: to what extent can this desire reflect a working methodology? Although Barthes tells us that one should never raise questions about method, everything seems to suggest that Barthes has turned desires into tactics, which also means his methods are never systematic.

Perhaps one has to move away from trees in order to be able to speak about tactics/ methods that are 'fugitive'.<sup>216</sup> Instead of a tree, a pot of flowers could be tried. For a pot of flowers must not be confused with a tree fixed in its location; the pot is portable.

In the final scene of Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-up* (1990), the main character, Sabzian, buys a pot of flowers to offer as a sign of his regret, to ask for forgiveness. At the end of *Through the Olive Trees* (1994), Kiarostami plays this scene back. Note that the director returns to the motif; he chooses to use it again. This pot of flowers returns with both Sabzian and Tahereh (in *Through the Olive Trees*) carrying one under their arms in their final scenes. This motif is powerful in its ability to follow the rhythms and trajectories of those who carry it. I ask myself: if the 'tree gives you the promise of something constant,'<sup>217</sup> what could a pot of flowers do? What is the function of this pot of flowers? Perhaps it says nothing besides the fact that it is minor and ordinary. Yet, somehow, in its ordinariness,

215 Ingmar Bergman, *Images: My Life in Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), p. 26.

216 My approach here takes into consideration Deleuze and Guattari's thoughts on trees (root-tree) in *A Thousand Plateaus*. According to them, the tree has dominated Western reality; it is then necessary to replace it with a different figure: the rhizome. They wrote: 'The tree is a filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb "to be", but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, "and ... and ... and ..." This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb "to be." (...) seeking a beginning or a foundation – all imply a false conception of voyage and movement.' Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, pp. 26 -27.

217 Abbas Kiarostami, 'Abbas Kiarostami and Jean-Luc Nancy in Conversation', in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Evidence of Film: Abbas Kiarostami* (Brussels: Yves Gavaert Éditeur, 2001), p. 86.

it strikes with distinction. Two more of Kiarostami's films, *Where Is the Friend's Home?* (1987) and *Taste of Cherry* (1997), end with an image of a flower; in the latter, soldiers pass them from hand to hand. Flowers<sup>218</sup> often carry a sense of hope, and change. Hence in the passage of this pot from one hand to another, from one film to another, what resonates most for me is the possibility of this motion. Perseverance is obtained for both the filmmaker and his characters.

This insistent motif in Kiarostami's films offers, therefore, an image and a method whose essence includes not only something of the essence of cinema but also something of the essence of the body itself. Bodies cannot be confined to (or tied to) one place, for the place of the body is mobile and multiple; in other words, body is a place in need of space.

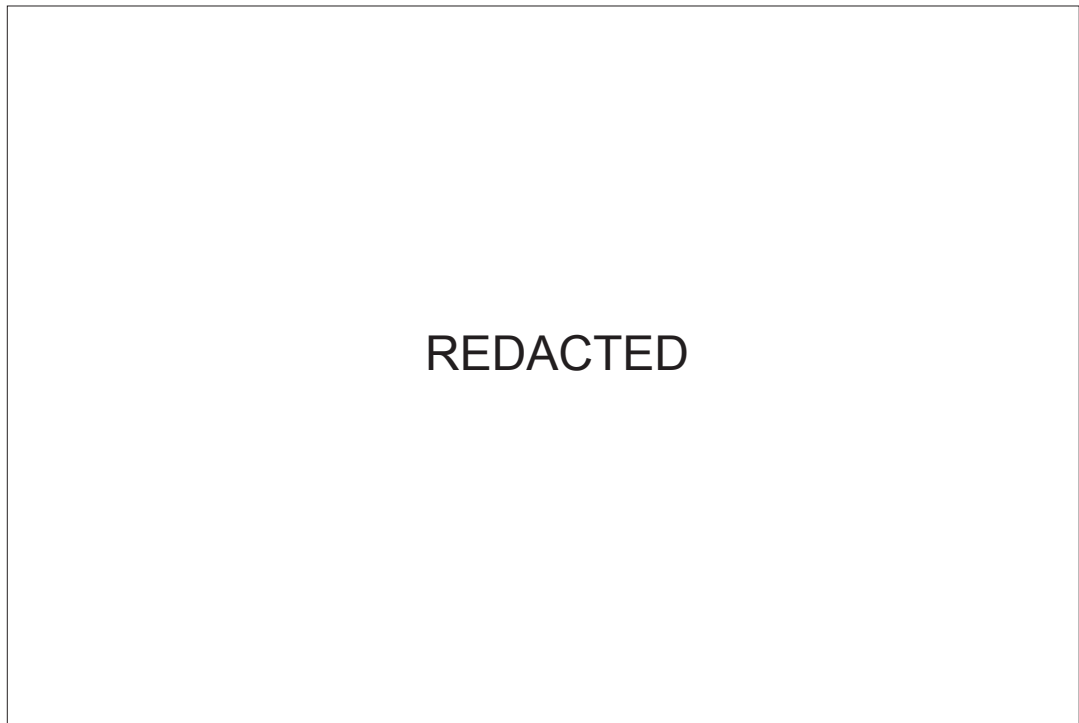


Fig. 15, 16 – Abbas Kiarostami, *Close-up*, 1990; *Through the Olive Trees*  
[stills], 1994

218 After 25 April 1974, the date of the revolution that led to the fall of 48 years of dictatorship, a red flower became the symbol of freedom and resistance for Portugal. On that day, as the population celebrated the end of the regime in the streets, a woman offered carnations to the soldiers, which were later on placed on their uniforms and in the muzzles of their guns.

**Interlude: Mute Music** (by Jean-Luc Nancy)

*Taken at its word: mot, "word", from mutum, an emitted sound deprived of sense, the noise produced by forming mu.*

*Mutmut facere: to murmur, to mutter – muzo, to do mu, mu, to say m.*

*Not saying a word: just m or mu, muttion, mugio, to moo, mûnjami.*

*Muteness, motus, to become mute [amuïr], disappearance of a phoneme [amuïssement]: of the t at the end of the word mot.*

*Kindred sound: mormurō, marmarah, murméti, murmeln, murmur.*

*Falsely kindred root: motus, motion, movement of the lips, emotion.*

*Mumble, mutter, grumble, mussitare ["to grumble"; in its transitive form, to keep quiet about a thing], moan, whisper, grouch, grouse.*

*Between the lips, mulla, passage of the lips, Mund, Mual, mouth, mug [gueule].*

*Word from word, muhen, to form muh, meuh, moo.*

*Mund, mouth – mucken, mokken, mockery, moquer.*

*Münden, open up, lead to, pour out.*

*Muō, to close or keep silent, mustes, mustikos, mystery (not to reveal).*

*Motet: poem or song.*

*Another kindred sound: mouche ["fly"], musya, muia, Musca, Mücke.*

*Mmmmmmm.*

*In Phoenician Ugarit, Mot, god of the harvest, dies on the threshing floor with the wheat, to be reborn at the next harvest. God of grain and of death.<sup>219</sup>*

219 Nancy, *Listening*, pp. 23–24.





Fig. 17 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Dancing Grains II* [still], 2015

## Notes on *The Sahara Desert*

A couple of years ago, while seated on the sand in the Sahara desert, I was overwhelmed by the idea that all of it was nothing but grains of sand. It was as if everything had been removed from the surface of earth, in a place where the presence of life seems unimaginable. I was immersed by the nothingness of each grain of sand. I then felt entirely incapable of finding any point of reference besides the shell of my own body, and as the sun paralysed my brain I was suddenly struck (by the skin perhaps) by a generally peaceful and pleasant sensation.

Nothing but a grain of sand, a grain so tiny that it could travel by the power of the wind to another continent. One thing is certain: it did in fact travel with me, attached to the soles of my sandals, and the only thing to do in order to expose this evidence is to open my wardrobe and search for my old pair of shoes.

REDACTED

Fig. 18, 19, 20, 21 – Francis Alÿs, *Ambulantes (Pushing and Pulling)* [slide series], 1992-2002

*Ambulantes*

Francis Alÿs's *Ambulantes (Pushing and Pulling)* captures the fleetingness of the everyday; moving across Mexico City on the brink of invisibility, it is remarkable how people make the most of the little they have available. It is the struggle for survival, perhaps, that forces the street vendors to keep moving. Here, the precariousness,<sup>220</sup> the improvisation, their inventiveness, seems to affirm, above all, their power of resilience. It could be said of these images that their force resides in the way that vulnerability and perseverance are bought together. Mobility is not only a necessity – it concerns the very condition of existence, of physical freedom.<sup>221</sup>

July: it has been quite a hot summer. I visit the Alberto Sampaio Museum twice, alone. Almost inevitably I return to the same spot, I sit on the floor cross-legged looking at the big olive tree standing right in front of me. It feels as if the cloister that dates from the 13th century was built around it: as if the cloister is embracing it.

From where I am I can see little bits of archaeological fragments apparently left at random, forgotten there – and which maybe you don't see until you sit down – but which punctuate the space in an unexpected way.

But nothing strikes me more than the two workers, crossing my field of view every 15 minutes, pushing an improvised trolley with a rope. I think that would be enough: that trolley moving every 15 minutes.

220 Anna Dezeuze argues that the term 'ephemeral' comes from nature, whereas 'precarious' concerns human action and decision, which therefore means a shift from the natural to the social. Anna Dezeuze, *Almost Nothing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), p. 106.

221 According to Judith Butler, 'Mobility is itself a right of the body, but it is also a precondition for the exercise of other right', including the simple right to walk the street, such as: to walk alone if you are woman or trans; the right of the disabled to walk, to have pavements and machines to make it possible. Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 138.



Fig. 22 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Portraits of Aunt Gininha* [MAS, Installation view], 2018



Fig. 23, 24 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Portraits of Aunt Gininha* [detail], 2018





Fig. 25 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Portraits of Aunt Gininha* [detail], 2018



Fig. 26, 27 – Joana Maria Pereira, *You See as You Move and You Move as You See* [stills], 2015





Fig. 28 – Joana Maria Pereira, *You See as You Move and You Move as You See*, 2015



Fig. 29 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Shades* [Installation view], 2014



**Fig. 30 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Shades*, 2014**





Fig. 31 – Joana Maria Pereira, *The Singer* [FBAUP, Installation view], 2015



Fig. 32 – Joana Maria Pereira, *The Singer* [detail], 2015





Fig. 33 – Joana Maria Pereira, *Some Details are Lacking, Others are Suspect, The Whole is Rather Blurred* [Installation view], 2015

# Final Notes

# Conclusions





The intention of this project has been to explore silence as a theme and a tactic for research in order to understand whether silence could function as a means of resilience through art. In so doing, I have challenged the idea of muteness as a lack and as an imposition; departing from the general view of muteness as a disability, as passive and private, to develop an alternative understanding of it as resourceful and resilient.

Although this project is largely informed by my own personal trajectory and history, marked by specific cultural and political circumstances, I consider, however, that I have provided a ground on which to understand 'legacy' and its questioning to extend far beyond the particular. For example, the mute figure of the peasant woman who punctuates my writing might be an image that 'weighs' on me. However, in a sense, this woman is not unique. Figures of poverty and illness similar to this one are transferable. The peasant woman is both a specific character from my past and a figure or symbol representing many other equivalents. Within my writing, therefore, I have sought to include a plurality of figures, rhythms and voices, to externalise this research and to invert potentially self-reflective modes.

More importantly, perhaps, I have offered a way of thinking the body that proposes the body as container of muteness, in order to demonstrate that in its silence the body still tells us something. For when speech is removed, as it is under a dictatorship, the body is relied on all the more to 'speak' in its place. I claim that history becomes apparent silently in our bodies. Thus I have recognised the power of silence, in its relationship with the body, in the work of filmmakers, visual artists and writers, establishing original correspondences between them and my own visual practice. This has enabled me to develop my work further towards an art practice that utilises minor intervention to prioritise the possibility of change. In other words, through a non-hierarchical and non-fixed approach to materials and media, I have created conditions for the artwork to readapt, reappear, reorganize itself, and through my visual practice I ask essential questions about permanence, dominance and value. The visual work - that either follows or precedes writing - could be labelled as 'hybrid' given the different mediums and materials involved. These works point to the unspoken and the unseen: elements and concerns which I have consciously resisted uncovering to allow silence to operate, preventing outcomes and ideas becoming permanent.

I have also been able to show that modes of making (writing) and thinking often interconnect and combine to address the fragility of the body and its potential to both resist and expose authoritarian forms of thinking. The fragmented, the provisional and the impermanent - impacting on materiality, scale, mobility and duration - have been put into play to test how resilient forms manifest in the face of political, social and economic pressure.

Hovering on the boundary between saying and not-saying, making and not-making, I became aware that in its different registers silence necessarily involves attention; it demands time. Above all, silence is a form of spacing: stepping back or making space for something. 'Spacing', a concept I have inherited from Jean-Luc Nancy (also developed by Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes), has become a crucial aspect of this PhD project as it has developed. Thinking about this 'spacing' has enabled me to shed light on the relationship between the emotional and the political; between past and present, between imagination and reality. However, I am claiming for something other than 'in between-ness': what I am offering is rather an original perspective on the 'space' of silence that entails the idea of openness and change - resilience: that is, the non-fixed space of muteness and its power to escape control. Naturally, this spacing also refers to the space

of the body (and its absence). Moving between the public and the private sphere, the body retains both the experience of the present and past experiences. Furthermore, there is also the space the artwork momentarily occupies in a specific place. And finally, there is the space between texts and between works; as Roni Horn has noted, ‘when you have one you have one, when you have two you got the space between plus you got difference. And difference is where everything opens up.’<sup>222</sup>

Hence, I have identified that within contemporary art practice silence can not only be questioned but also transformed; the arts have a fundamental role in activating the space (*spacing*) opened up by silence. The author who writes and performs silence is an author who refuses to write and perform from a place of authority. My practice offers a meaningful contribution to the understanding and expansion of this space without authority that silence represents, where different configurations of knowledge are proposed in terms of non-fixed and non-hierarchical articulation. I insist: the questioning of power largely derives in this case from my engagement with fragile, affordable and readily available materials; and from the potentiality of these materials to generate unpredictable, fragmented and provisional methodologies. The emphasis on the poverty of materials (and mediums) sheds new light on the discussion about voice and privilege, considering the relationship between notions of muteness, poverty and resilience – discussions around inequality, class differences, marginality and vulnerability – developed throughout the project. An original line of enquiry also comes from the recognition of poverty and marginality in the work of artists and writers. From Bruce Nauman’s experimentations in his empty studio (due to his lack of money) to Maurice Blanchot’s writings on becoming an insect (as he sank into poverty), impoverishment points to the invention of new non-authoritarian languages, and to the use of alternative strategies and tools which implicitly raise ethical and political questions. The silence and invisibility of poverty also offers an occasion to speak of vulnerability, bodily experience, mute legacies and the value of non-verbal communication.

The connection between political discourse, methodological discourse and personal experience is therefore reinforced. This project makes an important contribution to the understanding of the role of autobiography in contesting oppressive and dominant narratives. Autobiography becomes the most comprehensive articulation between private and public, providing a space for muteness to operate and materialise, to become audible and visible: to become resilient. Paradoxically, in the process of sharing the personal any narcissistic trace of the self disappears, to unpack a series of collective legacies. As Portuguese artist Grada Kilomba declares, the decolonisation of knowledge begins when theory (practice) and biography meet. Kilomba puts this sharing at the level of urgency, addressing the necessity to acknowledge that everybody speaks from a specific place and time, from a specific reality and history.<sup>223</sup> In acknowledging how one’s personal history informs and transforms one’s creative practice and research – how it defines ways of looking: what we see and listen, what we ignore or privilege – we reintroduce the idea of plurality and difference. The encounter with the autobiographical work gives rise to silence as diversity.

222 Roni Horn, ‘Roni Horn Interviewed by Dayanita Singh’ [YouTube video], Louisiana Channel, 27 May 2013 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhaMDSQ-rQ>> [accessed 26 March 2019]

223 Grada Kilomba, ‘Grada Kilomba: Descolonizando o Conhecimento’ [YouTube video], 19 March 2021 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLYGbXewyxs>> [accessed 26 March 2021]

A special attention is proposed in which not-saying (and not-making) is understood as part of its requirements. I am attentive to the people around me, but the singularity of the experiences upon which I built the work is the fact that they are grounded less in seeing and more in listening. As Nancy points out, listening evokes a singular mobility; it is an intensification and a concern.<sup>224</sup> This means that listening is not just a matter of hearing – it implies a refusal to ignore difference and a desire to understand it. Another contribution of this practice-led PhD is to take up listening as a key practice of research. Hence, *silent practices of resilience* imply *listening* as a gesture of passive resistance, so that the time when the artist is not-speaking or not-making also counts as productive time, as active time. Without following a chronological order of events, I have produced visual and textual work that emerged from these periods of silence. Note that the practice of writing and the visual practice should not be considered as two completely distinct creative activities, for they never cease to imply one another. A discussion about the implications of writing on visual work cannot therefore take place without the reverse being implied. The intention, however, is not to make the visual and the textual into one total process – they demand different elements, rhythms and intensities, yet the logic/concern involved is the same: muteness as weight, invisibility and mobility. The visual work is deeply influenced by the experience of writing, by the play of words and its physicality. In a similar way, within its different manifestations, visual practice has a key role in determining and reinforcing ideas that then turn into text form. The relationship of proximity with the artwork (with the making) – to experience, look at, reflect on a particular activity, object or material, such as a piece of glass taped directly on the wall, or a floor drawing made out of dust – changes the work; the work changes, shifting the frame of thought on, for instance, notions such as time, space, fragility or precarity. For, as Trinh has taught us, working with silence is about working with relationship and drawing new associations.<sup>225</sup> Hence, the series of questions brought up along these pages are not a recreation of any particular model of thought, theory or method: instead I articulate a conversation between different practices, different time periods, between my own voice and other voices, to map silence (its functioning) and its relationship with the body as both vulnerable and resilient from the perspective of visual arts, cinema and literature.

Inevitably, what is meant to be final could very well become the starting point for another project. When I think back to the few days I spent at the National Archive in Lisbon, looking at what was silenced/censored by ‘the regime’ and wondering how to approach the pile of boxes in front of me, I was not only amazed by the information each file contained (its inherent aesthetic qualities within its diversity of colour, thickness and size); I was also told that a significant part of this material has never been looked at, has never been analysed. I would like therefore to take this investigation further, for there is a ‘mute archive’ to rediscover at the National Archive, a history unseen and untouched: from a single document, further questions can arise to inform a new artwork, or a new body of writing.

224 Nancy, *Listening*, p. 5.

225 Trinh, *Cinema Intervals*, p. 38.

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## Exhibitions

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Kader Attia & Jean-Jacques Lebel, *L'Un et l'Autre (One and the Other)*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (16 February–13 May 2018)

Carlos Bunga, 'Something Necessary and Useful', Whitechapel Gallery, London (21 January – 13 September 2020)

Filipa César & Louis Henderson, 'Op-Film: An Archaeology of Optics', Gasworks, London (27 April – 25 June 2017)

Pedro Costa, *Pedro Costa: Company*, Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto (19 October–29 January 2019)

Martin Creed, *MARTIN CREED TOAST*, Hauser & Wirth Gallery, London (30 November 2018–9 February 2019)

Tacita Dean, *Tacita Dean: Portrait*, National Portrait Gallery, London (15 March–28 May 2018)

Rose English, *A Premonition of the Act*, Camden Arts Centre, London (12 December 2015–6 March 2016)

Félix Gonzalez-Torres, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela (12 December 1995–3 March 1996)

Cliff Lauson (curator), *Space Shifters*, Hayward Gallery, London (26 September 2018–6 January 2019)

Chris Marker, *A Grin Without a Cat*, Whitechapel Gallery, London (16 April–22 June 2014)

Ana Mendieta, *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, Hayward Gallery, London (24 September–15 December 2013)

James Richards, *Requests and Antisongs*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (21 September 2016–13 November 2016)

Ben Rivers, *Earth Needs More Magicians*, Camden Arts Centre, London (26 September–29 November 2015)

Wolfgang Tillmans, *WOLFGANG TILLMANS: 2017*, Tate Modern, London (14 February–11 June 2017)

## Films

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*Close-Up*, dir. by Abbas Kiarostami (Janus Films, 1990)

*Colossal Youth*, dir. by Pedro Costa (Équation, 2006)

*Conakry*, dir. by Filipa César (2012)

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*Damnation*, dir. by Béla Tarr (Midas Films, 1988)

*Dead Souls*, dir. by Wang Bing (dGenerate Films, 2018)

*Fanny and Alexander*, dir. by Ingmar Bergman (Gaumont, 1982)

*Five*, dir. by Abbas Kiarostami (British Film Institute, 2005)

*Life and Nothing More*, dir. by Abbas Kiarostami (The Criterion Collection, 1992)

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*La Jetée*, dir. by Chris Marker (Argos Films, 1962)

*Ossos*, dir. by Pedro Costa (The Criterion Collection, 1997)

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*Sátántangó*, dir. by Béla Tarr (Midas Filmes, 1994)

*Shirin*, dir. by Abbas Kiarostami (Midas Filmes, 2008)

*Stalker*, dir. by Andrei Tarkovsky (Mosfilm, 1979)

*Taste of Cherry*, dir. by Abbas Kiarostami (Zeitgeist Films, 1997)

*Ten*, dir. by Abbas Kiarostami (Zeitgeist Films, 2002)

*Grey Gardens*, dir. by Ellen Hovde, Albert Maysles, David Maysles and Muffie Meyer (Maysles Films 1976)

*Spell Reel*, dir. by Filipa César (Spectre Production, 2017)

*The Ditch*, dir. by Wang Bing (Wild Bunch, 2010)

*The Elephant Man*, dir. by David Lynch (ABC, 1980)

*The Gleaners and I*, dir. by Agnès Varda (Ciné-Tamaris, 2000)

*The Seventh Seal*, dir. by Ingmar Bergman (AB Svensk Filmindustri, 1956)

*The Turin Horse*, dir. by Béla Tarr (The Cinema Guild, 2012)

*The Virgin Spring*, dir. by Ingmar Bergman (Janus Films, 1959)

*The Wind Will Carry Us*, dir. by Abbas Kiarostami (New Yorker Films, 1999)

*Three Sisters*, dir. by Wang Bing (Asian Shadows, 2012)

*Through a Glass Darkly*, dir. by Ingmar Bergman (Janus Films, 1960)

*Through the Olive Trees*, dir. by Abbas Kiarostami (Miramax, 1994)

*Werckmeister Harmonies*, dir. by Béla Tarr (Midas Films, 2000)

*Where Is My Friend's Home?*, dir. by Abbas Kiarostami (MK2 Films, 19





