

Sara Ramo_ A Radical Experience¹
Wakefulness & Appearance

“Our intention is to affirm this life, not to bring order out of chaos, nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.”

John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and writings*

“Like someone entering a Museum, people would take refuge here in aesthetic experiences, as if they were something ‘magical’, capable of transporting them to a level different from the everyday.”

Helio Oiticica, on his “Penetrables”

For John Cage there was no such thing as an empty space or time, but there was always something to see, something to hear. His revolutionary vision was to adopt the impossibility of silence as a metaphor for the experience of man in the world, an interaction that dramatically altered not only music but how the physical world was perceived. This led Cage to a transformative change, turning him into someone open to chance and indeterminacy, creating a body of work that radically expanded the possibilities of the next generations of artists, musicians and viewers. Moreover, Helio Oiticica possessed a radical thought that took him to develop a transgressive artistic practice on such a revealing level that today it is difficult to think about the work of the new generations of Brazilian artists without considering the rupture that his concepts involve. For him art should be capable of taking the viewer to a unique plane of experience, as the artist is the driver of a liberating exercise where creation of works ceased to be the end to be replaced by experience.

Both Cage and Oiticica were artists who tried to lead viewers to reach an incommensurable level of intensity from the work, so that they could carve out from within a new way of seeing and feeling. The work of Sara Ramo is framed in the same dimension. Taking the critical distance necessary from the pioneering approaches of both artists, she, instead of blindly following the mechanics of innovations, generates within this succession of changes an essential reflective interval, a fade-to-black that makes us think about who we are and stop our longing for control over things, rescuing us from the alienation of the contemporary world. And in order to be a little visionary, to see, we do not need to turn on the light but rather to feel our way, to follow our intuition, to be free enough not to be afraid of experimenting. Is not freedom perhaps a basic condition of that? If it were not for freedom we would not be able to see the world as an infinite place of possibilities and we would live impoverished seeing only what is given to us. This is Sara Ramo's idea in *Desvelo & Trazza*: to maximise the freedom of our imagination to the extent that we manage to see with minimum light the shapes present in the exhibition and their repercussion on our unconscious.

¹ I have chosen the title in memory of the text “Lygia Clark: Uma experiência radical”, which the Brazilian poet Ferreira Gullar (1930) wrote about the artist's work in 1958. Gullar explains how Clark gradually moves from painting to space until creating her *Bichos*, which seek to stimulate the experience with the viewer.

In invention, as in freedom, there is a level of resistance created insofar as we are enveloped in the everyday, a need to escape the familiar. Curiously, the demands that make us lose the critical power of our imagination lie there in the day to day. In order to invent new paths we must resist the habits that have tamed us – habits that undermine our dreams, and heighten our feeling of impotence in the face of reality –, resist that kind of invisible tyranny that relentlessly pursues us. For Sara Ramo resistance is how her work introduces a more inventive and tenacious skin on the things of the world, and there we find the drive that originates her work guided by the idea that art must come from the body as something inevitable and transforming. We can see in her a real desire to escape what has already been formulated, delving as deeply as possible into her sensitive experience, adopting the process she encounters, and continuing it based on a new personal experience. This can be seen in her virtue of creating an intense dialogue with the spaces where her work takes place, be it a refrigerator, the desert, an abandoned house or a white cube. These are transformed into an extension of a life experience, which is what determines her way of working, and this “open” space is the place where her art can happen. This is why for Sara Ramo the things of the world and therefore undoubtedly experiences act as an extension of ourselves.

Since the start of her career Sara has worked with objects, waste and materials she has found in the surroundings or basements of the institutions that have housed her projects, as in *Punto Ciego* (2014), *The Garden from Free Zone* (2013), *Geografia do Lastro ou a riqueza dos outros* (2012), *Uma e outra vez lá, mesmo que aqui* (2005) or *Jardim das coisas do sótão* (2004). In these projects, her objective was to generate a tension between the order and chaos in which the things were originally found and the new order in which she arranged them. At that stage, the meeting with the things and the objects that shaped the installation were visible to the viewer and extremely important in aesthetic terms. In *Desvelo & Traza* this aspect is different. Although she has used found things, they are not seen or are not seen with their true appearance. Rather, they are camouflaged and cannot be distinguished, and little importance is attached to collecting while maintaining, like magic, the trick that submerges us in the particular uncertainty caused by this installation.

Sara Ramo has even the smallest detail under control. The moment and the number of people who enter the room, the time we will stay inside, the place from where we will observe the work, the light, reflection, shadows, everything. The only thing she asks of us is that we do our bit and are ready to enjoy the installation, as only in this way can we experience what she offers us. Once inside, viewers have the possibility of creating their own ritual in relation to the abstract shapes that the eye tries, with difficulty, to take in. Because, as soon as we delve into the installation's experience the situation becomes more abstract and makes us redefine the word and enlarge its meaning beyond the stereotype of the abstract as an absence of subject or object. Abstraction represents a kind of spatial and temporal freedom, an elasticity of language beyond all fixing, a potentiality of meaning², thus, we could see this installation as a relation-tension, between the abstract-void, space and time. In the most absolute darkness we feel as if we are in the midst of nothingness. As viewers we are obliged to spend twenty long minutes witnessing an imminent life situation in which the eye attempts to capture the greatest amount of light and the brain is constantly trying to arrange the elements it perceives as best it can – as

² Guy Brett, English critic and curator, develops this new definition of abstraction in the introduction to the catalogue *Transcontinental. An investigation of reality* (Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 1990) to refer to the language of the new Latin American artists featured in the exhibition.

the Gestalt laws of perception indicate –, although its attempts fail as it tries to contemplate an image for which it has no reference. The psychological tension of time and space that this exercise produces occurs because as human beings used to moving in familiar terrain we are here, inside the installation, wishing to do something concrete yet always abstract, limited by our system of beliefs of what the world should be. Finally, the image deceives us. As in Op Art, something static here, such as shapes and colours, seems to move as if driven by an engine. This is why in *Desvelo e Traça* the image is constructed in a beat of lights³ that emerge like glow-worms amidst the darkness, distorting reality; and slowly, as depth of field is established, the space takes on volume and density.

The radical nature of the experience Sara Ramo proposes to us does not lie in scrutinising the warehouses of a museum to bring to light those objects that were concealed, but in unleashing the relation between what is inside and what is outside ourselves, to encourage in us the necessary drive to discover what is there while letting us be moved by the experience of that inexistent silence, that unattainable image, the impossibility of calming our own feelings longing to shape the unknown, and even our difficulty in remaining there inside, in the many dimensions of that darkness. How can we know what made men paint bison in difficult to reach caves, where they had to crawl with torches through a dark breach where they could see nothing? Because there is something in the deepest aspirations of human beings, something far more profound than the problems of the gallery or museum. The artist's drive, which gives birth to the work, is implicit in the viewers' personal experience. They will be able to discover it based on this experience, on their intellectual and sensorial history, and their reading must not be the same as the one produced by the artist. In this respect, Sara Ramo can calculate everything but has no control over the outcomes of her artistic intentions towards the viewers, making her, like John Cage, open to randomness and indeterminacy. Today, more than ever, daily life and the things that it sustains can accommodate the latent possibility of moving away from a passive, docile and conciliatory position to an active, critical and noisy approach, in which things can be different, in which the world as a construct of people always has the possibility of the unexpected, in order to give to our daily life a new configuration, in which what Oiticica calls "*something magical*" could point to a more autonomous and authentic life where freedom is a constant search.

There is no such thing as a determination towards the experimental; in fact, we are not talking about an "experimental art" but rather about the energies emerging for an open number of possibilities. What Mario Pedrosa⁴ called an "*experimental exercise of freedom*" to refer to the works of Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica and which is also undoubtedly the driving force of Sara Ramo's practice. In her works the artist has a possibility and perhaps the obligation of determining, to some extent, the skills of her art, with the caution that it should not become a merely rational activity but rather, in contrast, a phenomenon in which there must be creativity, intuition and fantasy. This intuition -in the artist- must have an increasingly more important role in function of depositing trust in the human imagination -the viewer-, generating a type of knowledge achieved through the senses and also through thought. Then the word *experimental* would describe an act whose results are unknown. What John Cage did when he created his famous piece 433'' was to compose silence, give a place to that space that all human beings

³ If the eyes are kept in a low light level for some time they grow more sensitive, and given light will look brighter. This "dark adaptation" is rapid for the first few seconds, then slows down. The rod and cone receptor cells adapt at different rates: cone adaptation is completed in about seven minutes, while rod adaptation continues for an hour or even more.

⁴ Mario Pedrosa (1900-1981) was undoubtedly one of the most important post-war Brazilian art critics.

imagine exists when in fact we know that it is a metaphor for a complex phenomenon, a paradox of reality, a fiction invented as a contrast to noise. Today, visiting Sara Ramo's installation I cannot stop wondering: how did John Cage come to compose that piece? How did Sara come to create *Desvelo & Trazza*? There is in essence a common feeling, a search for a full void, an attempt to achieve a profoundly sublime experience. Possibly an invitation to meditate, to awaken our senses, to laugh at the inexistent absurd silence, to weigh up the passage of time, the lightness of our existence and also the great influence of our psyche on our perception.

Defining, hierarchizing and validating perceptions, both of ourselves and the external is an arduous task that shapes the relationship we are establishing with the environment. As Castaneda argues,⁵ they show us *a description of the world*⁶ which becomes the valid interpretation of *our world* and lays the foundations of what we will later call *reality*. This constitutes the inner dialogue. A mental dialogue that we maintain with ourselves and that describes and names everything that exists for us, including ourselves. In the contemporary world there is a tendency to excessive realism, so much so that artistic practices have been faced with the need to take refuge in the existential space which is different from the everyday to preserve the distance that art used to possess, faced with the world in which it established itself. Today there are some artists who have become aware that art, and human knowledge in general, cannot be a replica or a kind of imprint of the real but rather a reality apart, artificial, strictly human. Sara Ramo's work is built upon a present which boasts an enormous legacy, and is therefore set before an uncertain yet no less promising future, as the purpose of life must be to achieve the fluidity with which we live, conciliate past and present, challenge our system of beliefs and open up our perception. And undoubtedly art can push us one step further.

⁵ Carlos Castaneda (1925-1998). Anthropologist and writer of a large number of books on the philosophical-metaphysical knowledge of a group of Indians from Mexico, in which he describes the particular view of the *man of knowledge* or the "sorcerer". Within this system of beliefs the *description of the world* would be what confers meaning on each perception, a system of interpretation of the data we perceive that selects and arranges it so that the world of perceptions is meaningful. Castaneda argues that our world exists as it is only because when we perceive mentally we repeat to ourselves that this is what it is; however, if we changed the description of the world or we stopped describing it, the world as we know it would collapse and cease to have meaning, thereby opening up new possibilities.

⁶ Castaneda, Carlos, *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan*, introduction, Washington Square Press, 1991.