

The Art of Relating: Fernanda Fragateiro in Context

Speech is irreversible: that is its fatality. What has been said cannot be unsaid, except by adding to it: to correct, here, is, oddly enough, to continue.

Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*

For Fernanda Fragateiro, there is something ecological – and hence political – about the act of subtraction. To add to the surfeit of things and places that choke our public and private spaces would be to ignore a crisis whose very definition is, one might argue, at least in part ideological. And to remove something from an already glutted physical environment is, by contrast, to wreak gentle havoc in a world that functions according to the logic of accumulation. Fragateiro favours such subtraction, whether in radical acts of extraction, or in the recovery of what is only mutely present, submerged under accrued layers of construction, earth or detritus.

In her recent outdoor intervention, *Air, Earth, Light, Steel, Time* (2008-9) for the Casa da Cerca in Almada, she painstakingly removed all the existing weeds and wilting plants from a section of the garden adjoining the gallery, leaving several austere geometric, denuded plant beds, with their richly dark, composted soil in full view. In her installation *In the vocabulary of profit, there is no word for 'pity'* (2008), made for *Holidays in the Sun*, the public art project curated by João Fernandes for various locations in the Algarve, Fragateiro reinstated the doors and openings that had previously existed in an abandoned building, once the wholesale fish market of Portimão. Both acts – removal and recovery – are performed with mindfulness and an eye to detail that engender a stark and deceptively pared down formal beauty. Such a minimalist aesthetics belies the intensity of the processes – indeed, erases the manifest traces of the labour – through which the pieces are conceived (by the artist) and materially constituted (by the artist, her assistants and the dedicated tradesmen employed.)

Intervention by subtraction or excavation exposes, counter-intuitively, how in the built environment, as in speech, undoing can be a form of continuing: an affirmation, a way of telling us something. The idea that an absence or emptiness might be more resonant than the presence it replaces underlies several haunting contemporary public interventions. Rachel Whiteread's now demolished *House* in the east end of London (1993), the Anti-Fascist Memorial by Jochen Gertz and Esther Shalev-Gertz in Hamburg (1986-1993), whose gradual burying was an intrinsic part of its mission, and Christian Boltanski's "The Missing House" on Grosshamburger Strasse in Berlin (1990), where plaques indicate the approximate spaces once occupied by residents of an apartment house that was bombed in February 1945, are all, in different ways, elaborations on the memory that is ignited when physical presence has been erased. The site of every erasure hovers between the slipping away of historical memory into amnesia, on the one hand, and the establishment of

the very possibility of remembering on the other. Contrariwise, it might be argued that the paradox of every instance of monumentalism is that it sponsors the very amnesia that it aims to forestall.ⁱ

But if Fragateiro's work defines itself by its anti-monumentalism, and if it is also about the collective memory compacted in public places and the common expectations generated by those spaces, whether monastery or concert hall, construction site, patio or garden,ⁱⁱ the idea that an absence serves as a reminder does not fully define the essence of her endeavour. Rather, Fragateiro's work incorporates the binary terms of memory and oblivion, but situates them at a broader definitional crossroads, effortlessly and gracefully straddling the several disciplines and mediums it mobilises in doing so: architecture, sculpture, scenography, site-specific installation, and drawing.

Such a crossroads might be mapped onto the expanded field of sculpture that, three decades ago, Rosalind Krauss famously outlined as the possible parameters for artists working in three dimensions, with the axes running between the points *landscape, not-landscape, architecture, not-architecture*.ⁱⁱⁱ Also opening up the discourse and definition of sculpture in the late 1970s/early 1980s was Benjamin Buchloh, for whom we must look further back into the twentieth century, to Duchamp's readymades and Tatlin's proposed *Monument for the Third International* of 1920, in order to plot out the axes of the expanded field, where the terms are now architecture on the one hand, and the epistemological model on the other.^{iv} And any reconsideration of the scope of that field denoted as "sculpture" must also take into account Donald Judd circling in on those "specific objects" that, already by the mid 1960s, were no longer either painting or sculpture, and that refused to attach themselves to the historical or institutional cargo borne by those two distinct mediums.^v

But as Delfim Sardo has observed in his inspired analysis of Fragateiro's piece *Box in which to keep the void*, (2005), such border crossings between mediums and disciplines are now in effect contained by the field of contemporary "sculpture" itself, which may absorb aspects not only of landscape or architecture, but also of "the social, the anthropological, the documentary ... the inventory, the archive, the performative and the cinematographic."^{vi} Site specificity as the possible condition for a work's emergence is now a commonplace, as is the co-existence of diverse artistic practices and the dissolution of medium-specificity. For Sardo, then, despite its manifest leaning towards the condition of architecture – the piece resembles a small house and readily accommodates human bodies – *Box in which to keep the void* is inherently sculptural: he evokes its haptic quality, the warmth and polished smoothness of its slatted wooden surface, in short, its invitation to touch.

If an apparently architectural piece in effect aligns itself with sculpture, this seems to suggest that perhaps the desire for definition and placement within the given range of artistic mediums and practices is less important to the artist than her desire both to invite sensory exploration, and to confuse it. This is certainly the case in the various works deploying mirrored surfaces, such as *Not*

to see (2008), where the mirrors, following the form of the flagstones on which they are placed, both reflect and break up the vault of the central aisle of the Monastery of Alcobaça. Within a context where we are primed to expect “architecture” to provide the frame of reference, an invitation imaginatively to enter the space reflected in a mirror invariably harks back to Brunelleschi’s earliest experiments with perspective in the Piazza del Duomo in Florence in the 15th century. The mirror is an adjunct not to the real, but to the tricks and illusions of perspectival pictorial space.

Yet here too, Fragateiro confounds us. For the punctual address of perspectival painting – the address, in other words, from a single spatial (and temporal) point in the representation to a single point from which the viewer’s gaze is emitted^{vii} – is an address to – a disembodied spectator. The great and seductive fiction of such pictorialism, generated by an idealised gaze, is that “artist, story, narrator and character all line up together, or like the successive lenses in an optical instrument through which a single line of sight passes.”^{viii} If pictures used as mirrors not only align us with the artist’s gaze, but also reassure us about who and where we are, Fragateiro’s employment of reflective surfaces placed at angles or underfoot unsettles our sense of spatial security, undoes the notion of a singular, directed gaze, and dissolves our sense of bodily integrity. It is perhaps also worth mentioning here that despite the apparent scaling of her work in a 1:1 relation with the real, Fragateiro’s invocation of built spaces is frequently similarly discomfiting in terms of scale and proportion, producing uncanny sensations of unfamiliarity with our own size in relation to the expectations we project onto architectural envelopes. It is as if, like Alice or Gulliver, we were suddenly inflated, or shrunk, or that we simply had forgotten the scale of our own bodies and where their boundaries lie.

Crucially, too, Fragateiro’s use of pictorial forms, such as the flat rectangle, invoke not so much the reflective or translucent framed picture/mirror/window of mimetic space, as the lattice (*Where? On the Other Side*, 2007), or the carpet/mat (*Waiting for a Landscape of Events*, 2006). (In all her flat, ground-hugging works, the artist nods in recognition to her art-historical forebears, most notably, it seems to me, to Carl Andre.) Such flattened forms either interrupt our gaze (the lattice both affirms its status as surface and constantly revokes it by providing broken glimpses of a world beyond) or put a stop to it altogether (we cannot see through or under a carpet). Perceptual and sensory paradoxes multiply. Paradoxically, it is indoors that Fragateiro’s carpets – reminiscent of the reticulated surfaces of the slatted wooden structures made to facilitate passage from and to the beach – have a modular and serial quality that suggests the possibility of their extension ad infinitum. The work of unsettling expectation is continued in the outdoor ‘carpets’ – the beds of earth, defined and contained – that invite us not to walk on them or touch them, but rather, to look (*Not to touch*, 2007) and *Air, Earth, Light, Steel, Time*, 2008-9).

The gaze to which Fernanda Fragateiro’s work addresses itself, it should now be clear, is neither the disembodied, monocular, classical model of vision first sponsored by Brunelleschi and Alberti, nor is it the panoptical vision of domination that we re-enact when, for instance, we peer into an architectural maquette. Many critics have convincingly argued that the dissolution of the classical

model of vision – itself steeped in ideology (and like all good ideology, this one is invisible, naturalised) – has ideological consequences. For the monocular vision of perspective, whereby the cone of vision is intersected by the flat picture plane, had as its corollary not only the disembodied viewpoint, but the sovereign gaze of the spectator, whose gender was, historically at least, implicitly masculine. Some feminists have, in opposition, offered critiques to the masculinist assumptions of spectatorship, which posits the viewer in the position of a voyeur, and for which the peephole in Duchamp's *Etants Donnés* serves as both its hyperbolic metaphor and its most literal realisation. Such critiques extend beyond the sphere of artistic practice to intersect with the discourses of space in what is sometimes called postmodern geography.^{ix}

Some artists have laid claim to more enveloping, tactile, organic spaces, with their uterine connotations, eschewing the geometry of scopic dominion: examples might include Eva Hesse, Ana Mendieta, Louise Bourgeois, Lygia Pape and Lygia Clark. Such enveloping spaces have, on a metaphoric plane, at times been identified with that pre-linguistic formlessness that Julia Kristeva, twisting Plato, called *chora*, linking it to the maternal. Yet in this respect too, Fragateiro frustrates the desire for definition and categorisation. For, while some have hinted at a feminist dimension to her tactile habitation of space – to which one might add the teasing way in which she elides outside and inside – it seems to me that in her geometric precision, her cool assimilation of minimalism, her considered provocations of the certainties of point of view, she absorbs and overrides the gender wars.

If there is a central, defining consideration in Fernanda Fragateiro's work, it is, arguably, a kind of phenomenology of space. Hers may be regarded as an intelligently intuitive materialisation of the production of space in the three variants defined by Henri Lefebvre: perceived (*perçu*), conceived (*conçu*) and lived (*veçu*) space.^x Not only is space, in her continued reworkings of it, unfinished – or rather, continuously produced – but also, as such, it has two important corollaries.

The first corollary is that the production of space, and in particular of lived space, is intimately tied up with the human practice of everyday life: space for her is, by and large, implicitly, potentially, or actually occupied space, social space. As such, it is always imbricated in social practice, and always entails the presence, the scale, or indeed the active participation of the human body. We become, in relation to it, actors or performers rather than mere spectators. And the second corollary is that because the production of space is, by definition, continuous and incomplete, it engages actively with the temporal. So in a fundamental sense, time and space are interwoven in these at first apparently static works. In *Box in which to keep the void*, for example, over a period of time, the appearance of a fixed, recognisable architectural shape (house) turns out to be a provisional pause in a series of continuous spatial improvisations that open it out. The movable divisions establish a fluctuating and ever-changing configuration, whereby the self-contained, closed box unfolds. The closed, geometric envelope thus opens into a space that had previously been exterior to it. The idea of a "void", fully making sense in the context of a self-contained and

sealed box, is itself dissolved as the container becomes a series of screens, ramps, windows and patios that invite human activity and intervention.

The intervention of human agency is present in various ways in Fragateiro's work. In *In the vocabulary of profit, there is no word for 'pity'*, the visitor / performer is invited to explore the passages that extrude (or intrude – depending on one's point of view) from the recovered doors and arches: some are blind alleys, others trace a new itinerary through the space of the old fish market. These explorations arouse the heightened awareness of bodily coordinates and boundaries that we have come to expect from Fragateiro's work. *Box in which to keep the void* stages the human presence more theatrically, in that the work was conceived for an exploratory choreography by Aldara Bizarro, especially targeted at a participative audience of children. In *A Circle that isn't a Circle* (2008) at the Polytechnic University of Valencia, the artist takes up a formal theme used some years earlier (Angra do Heroísmo, in the Azores, 2001), but here, the overlapping sections of circle are at bench height, inviting students to sit at leisure in convivial formation. A similar invitation to conviviality is extended on a large scale in the *Garden of Waves* (1998) at the Parque das Nações in Lisbon. In *It only makes sense if there are two of us* (2000), conviviality is staged on an intimate scale: two hammocks are strung up in such a way as to only be in equilibrium when each of them is occupied. Hammocks used again at the Casa da Música in Oporto (*Not to think*, 2007) provide visitors with a place to rest and gaze out at the panoramic view in quieter, more contemplative companionship, in a space that would otherwise offer itself merely for passage.

Such invitations to community cannot be seen as utopian in the traditional sense of the term, in that they do not propose an impossible ideal at a time when such ideals have been corroded, if not entirely discredited. Rather, they may be seen as engaging in that particular form of contemporary art-making that Nicolas Bourriaud has dubbed relational aesthetics. "These days," Bourriaud tells us,

utopia is being lived on a subjective, everyday basis, in the real time of concrete and intentionally fragmentary experiments. The artwork is presented as a *social interstice* within which these experiments and these new "life possibilities" appear to be possible. It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows. ^{xi}

The situation thus defined is not that of the hybrid "specific object" defined by Donald Judd, nor that expanded field defined by either Rosalind Krauss or Benjamin Buchloh. Rather, it is an arena in which the work of art, neither fully an installation nor properly a performance, stages the possibility of relationality with those who view it. Its basic premise is the claim that the sphere of human relations provides the venue – the address, if you like – for the work of art. At its most extreme, the outcome of such relationality is entirely temporal, for instance in the cooking sessions of Rirkrit Tiravanija. In Mark Dion's work, the process of relationality mimics that of the explorer, scientist or archivist. In the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, the "inclusion of the other" whereby Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics entirely replaces any notion of the work of art as something

to be looked at, yet the relationship leaves material traces that are, as Bourriaud recognises, of great simplicity and beauty. A fourth kind of relationality may be found in the work of an artist like Andrea Zittel, who, much like Fragateiro, examines her own experiences of both architecture and landscape, urban spaces and geography, in an idiom that owes a strong debt to modernism, while critically applying the repetitive structures of minimalism to an exploration of both housing and animal-breeding units.

To view Fragateiro's work in the context of relational aesthetics allows for the cohabitation of characteristics that might otherwise be deemed mutually antagonistic: the encounter of pared down, minimalist form, considered through to its smallest and most exquisite detail, with the messy mobility of human agency. A work thus conceived brings together various social clusters ("micro-communities"), from the groupings of tradespeople, including the artist herself, who materialise the project, to the those who experience the work as "participating viewers" upon the site that accommodates it. The beholder therefore contributes not only "his" gaze, but in effect "his whole body, complete with its history and behaviour"^{xii} to the work.

The history that the participative viewer brings to Fernanda Fragateiro's work is not only the unique and idiosyncratic personal history of the individual, but also the collective and institutional history that informs our experience of public spaces and that colours our expectations of such a space, be it a botanical garden, a university or research centre, a market, the site of an urban development, or, indeed, an art gallery or museum. To return full circle to our point of departure, we now see that Fragateiro's subtractive gestures exist within a broader context of artistic practice, and that in doing so, they tie together the extreme spareness of minimalism to a form of sociability that the work itself sponsors: it is not only, as Bourriaud reminds us, that attitude becomes form, but also the inverse.

But Fragateiro's works also exist, as I hinted at the outset, as a form of critique. The most overt example of such critique is the now extant intervention in Portimão, *In the vocabulary of profit, there is no word for 'pity'*. The Algarve has, over the past years, seen such a surfeit of speculation and redevelopment that, in its emergence as a holiday destination, it has lost its early moorings of community and locality. Such reorganisations may entail evictions and dislocations, as well as class polarisation. Without engaging in sappy nostalgia, Fragateiro's intervention spoke clearly, in the plastic and spatial idiom of architecture itself, of the diverse ambitions that underpin architectural revision and, by implication, of the pecuniary advantages underlying urban redevelopment. The title, indignantly ideological, provides ready access to the lazy, but is, finally, merely a supplement. Not so the series of works whose titles define, only with gentle irony, the stance of subtraction and refusal that is so central to the work of Fernanda Fragateiro: *not to see, not to think, not to touch, not to link*.^{xiii} These determine a programme of privation that cannot be taken entirely seriously: of course we look and see, we think and touch and make links. Yet the works oblige us to slow down in our experience of them, and are inspiring precisely in escaping the

dogmatic and formulaic. They invite us, finally, to engage with them in ways that mobilise new sensory expectations, and new forms of relationality.

- i In the film *Disgraced Monuments* (1996) directed by Laura Mulvey and Mark Lewis, the Russian art critic Natalya Davidova says that in Russia, a country filled with monumental sculpture, “we walk past monuments and we often don’t notice them.” See Laura Mulvey, “Reflections on disgraced monuments” in Neil Leach (ed.), *Architecture and Revolution: Contemporary Perspectives on Central and Eastern Europe*, London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 219-227.
- ii I am referring in particular to *Not to see* (2008), at the Monastery of Alcobaça; *Not to think* (2007) at the Casa da Música, Oporto; *Shadow Project* (1994) on the Rua Braancamp, Lisbon; *A Circle that isn’t a circle*, (2008) on one of the patios at the Polytechnic University of Valencia and the several works in and on gardens: *Air, Earth, Light, Steel, Time*, (2008-9), at the Casa da Cerca in Almada; *Not to touch*, (2007) in the gardens of the Belém Palace in Lisbon, and the *Garden of Waves*, (1998) for Expo ‘98, at the Parque das Nações in Lisbon.
- iii Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” originally published in *October*, 8 (Spring 1978); reprinted in Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Boston: MIT Press, 1985)
- iv Benjamin Buchloh, “Michael Asher and the Conclusions of Modernist Sculpture” in *Performance Text(e)s & Documents*, ed. Chantal Pontbriand, Montreal: Parachute, 1981.
- v Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” in *Arts Yearbook*, 8, New York, 1965, pp. 74-82.
- vi Delfim Sardo, “Ecologia Emocional,” in *Fernanda Fragateiro: Caixa para guardar o vazio*, Lisbon: Assírio Alvim, 2007, p. 31. Translation into English mine.
- vii Writing of Brunelleschi, John White observes that “besides showing all of the Piazza del Duomo that was visible from a carefully chosen position, the construction of the picture was dependent upon its being seen from a single viewpoint set at a particular distance from the picture surface.” John White, *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space*, London: Faber and Faber, 1987 (1957), p. 114
- viii Norman Bryson, Introduction to Mieke Bal, *Looking In: The Art of Viewing*, Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2001, p. 14.
- ix See especially Rosalyn Deutsche’s important collection of essays, *Evictions - Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997; and Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000.
- x This “trinity” is Henri Lefebvre’s, but is in part derived from the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Bachelard. However, contrary to them, Lefebvre favours a dialectical method, where none of the three terms is privileged over the others. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (1974), transl. into English by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.
- xi Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), transl. into English by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, with the participation of Mathieu Copeland, Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002, p.45.
- xii Bourriaud, *ibid.* p. 59
- xiii In fact the Portuguese term is polyvalent: *não ligar* means not to link, not to switch on, and not to pay attention. [omitir esta nota na versão portuguesa]