

Miguel Branco Naked Lunch

March 9 – April 24, 2019

BRAVE NEW WORLD

And, nevertheless, they are in us, those that we have long forgotten, inside us as if a tendency,
a weight upon our destinies, blood that runs in us and a gesture that reaches back to the night of times.

– Rilke

That this excursion through the demi-subterranean regions which elaborated the expressive values of the human spirit, helps
us to overcome the purely formalist method in aesthetics and prepare the way for a dynamic theory of human expression.

– Aby Warburg

1.

For some time now, I have defended that the cultural phenomena of disruption triggered by the new cultural and epistemological regime which, for the lack of any more accurate and precise definition, we may term *Contemporary*, has reactivated a fundamental tension between the technological and the *archaic*¹ in art, as in other fields of human expression. This has therefore forced the review of specific earlier definitions of art and culture through the *re-polarization* of the anthropological factors, whether visual, aesthetic or sensitive, that – at least through to the crisis that brought about the dissolution of Modernism in the mid-20th century – had long since been repressed in the wake of the advent of Modernity throughout the cultural process experienced in the West from the Renaissance onwards. As it remains no less true that such an onset came about through means, on occasion, warped, diffused and, above all, not susceptible to any immediate verification across every level of their emergence, we may thus state that, in this sense, the *Contemporary* did not arrive all *in one go* but that rather we perceive this prior to it taking place and replacing the pre-established cultural matrixes that it immediately dismisses.

Hence, this runs counter to the Foucaultian epistemology that sustains the pertinence of a structural model across all poles of development – whether scientific, technological, cultural or artistic, among others – mutually and dynamically corresponding among each other, swiftly providing the clues not only for their recognition but that enable their joint evaluation across the spaces and extended periods of time of any given episteme. However, the new field, opened by the violent eruption of the symbols of the Contemporary, which simultaneously express the advent of the era of Artificial Intelligence, globalisation, whether of art or the economy, elicits across each of its dimensions, a profound transformation that, at least for the meanwhile, lacks coordination and is far from having attained any stabilisation.

Multiple and uncertain forms that threaten either to replace or to once and for all sweep away the earlier models now incorporate them into symbols of a difference that changes them in the former structure. Such changes that we today witness, all but dumbfounded, across diverse levels and fields, from the social to the technological, the cultural to the economic and the political, have no recognizable precedents. Therefore, we do not grasp where such developments might be heading given

¹ - Cf. My essay *Arte e Infinitude, Relógio D'Água*, Lisbon, 2018.

² - See, above all, the classic *Les Mots et les Choses*, Gallimard, Paris, 1966.

their failure to at least superficially display any recognisable precedents, which range from *geopolitics* to redefining culture, the greatly powerful and dominant *techno-science* field through to the territorial redistributions and the spatial expansion of the models of economic transformation. This change, for the meanwhile as if some kind of profoundly uncertain fabric, highly malleable and dynamic and in constant mutation, hence shapes and fashions our prior indices for our perceptions of time, space, material and the body. Indeed, and clearly, this extends to the ways we envision art based on these new perceptions calling for a new phenomenology.

The advent of the image — and, consequently, out of all the multiple consequences and fields of operation — has now become the central feature in all forms of communication and expression, redefining and changing the previous terms of equivalence and the structural relationship that served to process the diverse forms present in the cultural fields to enable the mapping of the forms of art and their most current expressions. It was also this new regime for the circulation of images, the new and differentiating factor that rendered art into the altar, the ideal point of observation and the barometer of the transformation typifying the *Contemporary*. This took place simultaneous with the introduction of destabilisation that brought the former forms of recognition and the previous understanding to an end in order to preferably operate as a model in itself unstable. A model that constantly deregulates the scope for normalisation and settlement, to the detriment of the maintenance of an infinite *malleability* through an erratic mobility that displaces and impedes the feasibility of mapping and precisely defining any particular terrain. Time and space, and even material itself, are today configured as infinitely changeable and uncertain.

Hence, the unlimited expansion and the extreme dependence between the temporal and spatial coordinates and their redefinition via the discoveries made possible by image — revealing plans of contiguity between the microscopic and the macroscopic (from the perceptions of cosmic space returned by telescopes through to the perceptions of the tiniest of inner spaces enabled by microscopes, the examples are endless) — or the way in which this came to act on every domain of expression, from advertising through to the Internet, fostering a greatly accelerated sense of time and space, which equally changes our understanding of that which is material and our ways of thinking the body.

A model that Artificial Intelligence shall further accelerate in the near future, with highly unpredictable consequences but that shall inevitably redesign the map of our knowledge and our culture, especially in facilitating the dawn of a never before seen society of control, resting on the unlimited sharing of data.

For at least the last half a century, some artists and creatives, interconnected with the most diverse forms of expression, have been sounding out the progressive arrival onto the scene of this new form, emerging directly out of technology whenever approached without duly taking into account the necessary appropriation to the benefit for humans. From the *interzone* imaginary of W. Burroughs, foreseeing and pre-empting zones of shadow and the sinister profiles attached to a global market without rules where everything resembles that which has today become the mysterious dark Internet, configured into that termed the *Deep Web*, through to the dreamlike spatial environments and demented relationships that David Cronenberg predicted in *Videodrome* — an hallucinated voyage through the sub-world of drugs and the trade in sexual images that so greatly resembles what is taking place today in the world's great metropolises — or some recent cinema (for example, the film *2049 Blade Runner*, — based on the Phillip K. Dick novel), there are many signals for the advent of this new era that we may glimpse within the interior of our own world, especially when recalling Huxley's *Brave New World* in all its vertigo of still greater cruelty. An era where technology redesigns the human maps to the benefit of the emergence of a world without rules, shared between the new model of coexistence of an untamed capitalism and a state of almost total control, increasingly mutually intertwined in promiscuous relationships. Everything contributes towards the inexistence of obstacles to the major corporations, allying the most blatant profitability based cynicism to the interests of totalitarian states that, thanks to data and information, control everything and everyone and are currently dissipated across all the layers of data manipulation, once and for all abandoning the defence of citizens, protecting only the most obscure and sinister interests of these same faceless corporations.

2.

For a long time now, Miguel Branco's work, — more than establishing itself in the stabilised forms of painting, drawing and sculpture, which he has always used only as a support for the images — settles its own ground through using a strategy of invention and production of an imaginary that, allegorically, enables us to become consciously aware of the emergence of this *brave new world*, that the rising development of *technology* has generated and that I have sought to describe, even if only briefly, above. Simultaneously, he inscribes an intensive dynamic of invention, the exemplary measure of opposition deriving out of the dialectic confrontation that the presences and surprising figurations of the *archaic* establish in this new landscape, generated by the typical forms of technological acceleration. The very same dynamics that question the differentiated awareness of time. This is, I believe, the greatest function of all current art: to oppose the oppressive flow of continuous images, virtual, incessantly generated by the hypnosis of technology, other images, that open up space to the disturbing and probing presences of the archaic. Those that manage to display, as resistance and as a boundary limit, another and deeper revival of our anthropological reality that hinders the definitive fixation of this superficiality of the appearances and shadows that define the contemporary landscape redrawn by the development of *techno-science* (in the terminology of Lyotard), through which is revealed the scale, in itself unthought and unthinkable, of our *humanity*.

Current art (that in this aspect remains interconnected with its ancestral concept) reintroduces not only symbols but also *reality into reality* (Godard), dismantling the temptations of virtualisation and their derivatives in the phantasmagorical unreality brutally announced by technology. Which in fact only come to happen when becoming capable of recalling, in body and in form, and transfiguring them in keeping with that mysterious order of archaic reference. As Warburg stated, "only those that share the spiritual heritage of the past are in a position to encounter a creative style for the new expressive values. Because these values remove the strength of penetration not of suppression but rather of the nuance that brings transformation to the ancient forms³⁹."

This was thus how, with his monks and elders — strange phantasmal figures that, like buddhas and gaunt warriors, confronted us after having arrived from some mythical time — or with the monkeys that populated the libraries and other deserted rooms of the palaces of times past, with the hybrid figures of colourful monsters and fabulous animals in the small scale modelling paste sculptures made between 1997 and 2008, Miguel Branco set about creating a type of secret crowd, erratic and tightrope walking, mysterious, obscure and simultaneously vital, living in a time and space adjoining ours but whose presence has always caused the greatest of disturbance. Therefore, purposefully to deal with the emergence of these *uneimliche*, this disquieting presence that shadows the tales of Hoffmann and on which Freud commented, the characters of this underworld appeared before almost as if apparitions from another immemorial time and space; exactly that which precisely configures the archaic.

Thus, in a different fashion, there also figured that magnificent and gigantic, headless black horse, made out of black wood and subsequently burned that, abandoned on the site, evoked the presence of the animals in archaic sculpture with a particular violence. That was how in his smaller paintings there also began to appear increasingly intense depictions of solitary skulls, what vanitas of our time, wounding with ironic and distanced seriousness, the blind detachment that moves us through the anaesthetised labyrinths of careless consumerism. As in the paintings in which, under the sweet hues of tranquil heavens, emerge military drones to capture, in swift flight, our overlooked intimacy.

Over the course of three decades, Miguel Branco has been confronting us with this universe of strangeness that triggers our attentions to the threat, present but diffused, which recent times have only served to densify, that under our most solid beliefs and expectations — above all anchored by fragile foundations — in fact hides away the emerging forms of *another world*, which is preparing to break off from our own under the pressures of agitated communication and the generalised control looming above us.

3 - Aby Warburg, *El almuerzo sobre la hierba de Manet*, Spanish ed., Casimiro, Madrid, 2014.

3.

Indeed, these are the ways in which these figurations would seem to echo with recollections of the most remote past (even if now remade, sophisticatedly, based upon these expressive models) in fact serving to question about the irrational pathways that take shape in our own times. Given that, and as Warburg once wrote, “we should not demand of Antiquity that it respond immediately to questions of knowledge when it is classically serene or that then reveals a modality of demonic frenzy as if such represented the only possible alternative. We know that Antiquity elicits passionate action within each of us, or that it incites the serenity of tranquil wisdom depending on the reality of the subjective nature of posterity. More than just the objective character of this classical heritage⁴.” Hence, and additionally, this ensures that the surviving features of Antiquity, as they are normally perceived as threatening to our current values, simultaneously function as potential guides to their expression.

Thus, that is how in this new series, inhabited by figures that evoke the representations of death as previously figured in Gothic paintings and sculptures in an awareness of the Late Nordic Renaissance that extended into the 16th and 17th centuries — as, in another fashion, they did reappear in the strangeness of the works by Borremans and the phantasmagorical installations of Jan Fabre — the artist places us ironically face to face with the limits of our current circumstances.

Such images which, in a formula of pathos (resuming the renowned expression of Warburg), recreate the iconic Roman portrait that holds in his hands the busts of two of their forefathers and the figuration of the Three Graces, firstly represented in a Roman painting (that Rubens, Canova and so many others later recreated) just as they revisit the tormented figurations of the body in the performances around a dead hare by Beuys (*How to Explain Paintings to a Dead Hare*) or in the *Singing Sculptures* by the duo Gilbert and George.

All of these figurations would now seem to serve him for recreation in unexpected scenarios, falling into darkness and the weaknesses of humans, which in fact do now threaten us. They therefore resume the capacity to reflect, at the level of (re) creation, on what lies in the order of a courageous challenge to this tragic polarity that all of art, right from the most remote of ages, confronts us with, rendered here, in these works, in a vital and sarcastic form and through some kind of contagious happiness.

As Gombrich referred, “The symbol — in the broadest sense of the term — happens to conserve these same energies that it itself results from. These energies that gave birth to the symbols of civilisation, derive from the intense original experiences that equally constitute the lives of primitive man⁵.” It is through questioning the survival within us of an eventual continuity of this most ancient reason of humans that the works of Miguel Branco confront us with surprising lucidity.

Bernardo Pinto de Almeida

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⁴ - Cited by Ernst Gombrich in Warburg, une biographie intellectuelle, Klincksieck, Paris, 2015, p.225.

⁵ - idem, p. 230.