

3 + 1

ALBERTO CARNEIRO

Os caminhos da água e do corpo sobre a terra

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The enlightened wayfarer

Many of my most gratifying experiences of relationship with natural landscape have taken place on the island of Madeira. I recall dozens of wonderful outings, in all the meanings of the word wonderful, on which, following the guidance of knowledgeable friends, I witnessed the unfolding of surprising views that followed on from each other in a dazzling sequence of colours, outlines, perspectives, shades, brightness and silence. I recall an unforgettable ascent in which on the same afternoon of the climb the light, the image of the sky, the clouds and the outline of the landscape down below went on changing. One moment the sun shines like a summer's morning. A little further up and the sky turns into a sea of foam. Then darkest night falls. Immediately afterwards the sun rises again, tearing through dark wrappings of clouds. We continue to climb, the air becomes colder and the light begins to take on an intensity of its own that allows one to see almost nothing. It is only light. The clouds dissolve in a sky that stretches out like an immense sheet, the limits of which one can no longer say whether it is the edge of another far-off mountain or a sea or perhaps another sky.

It was also in Madeira that I had my first long conversations with Alberto Carneiro, conversations with no concrete aim or pragmatic intention, directed by the variations in the light, the cadences of the limpets, the fish and the wine, the passing of the hours. Conversations like conversations sometimes know how to be and that feel good. Sometimes circumstances fall into line in order to generate propitious crossings, and I would like that to be the case of this text.

Alberto Carneiro's work is the result of a personal experience of an artist's relationship with nature, in the terms in which he lives it and understands it, as the generator of a broader reflection and of a specifically artistic process of production, aesthetic if you like, from which the end result is that which is proposed to us and that we have become accustomed to designate as works of art. Conceptual and aesthetic mediation makes his works achieve a level of generality that is enough for them to address each of us, and myself in particular in the case of this text, in a way that is also personal. For that reason I feel I have the authority to introduce some personal meanderings in a preamble dealing with my own personal experiences and questionings for which Alberto Carneiro's work has been a privileged interlocutor, or perhaps, to put it better in these circumstances, an inspired travelling companion.

Often during my walks, when I am forced to linger due to a view or a feeling that seem exceptional to me, I stop, I try to open my eyes a little more and, like someone breathing in deeply and filling his lungs to their limits, I wonder what I can do in order to preserve it, to preserve that moment, that coincidence between a view and a feeling. An experience of this type may take place in different circumstances. For example, in a large city, in the middle of the huge shapes of buildings, of the lines drawn out by the cars and the agitation of a multitude of passers-by. But there, in the middle of the city, not everything appears to have to be lost.

3 + 1

There is an obvious human scale, and it is easy to admit that the experience might be repeated. We are, despite everything, facing a world of things that we believe we control.

When faced with the sea, to give another, symmetrical example, we are at the other end of the range of emotional possibilities. The sea is, in itself, an infinite form of freedom, and the power of the sea itself, through the grandeur of its presence, is transmitted in a faultless completeness to all those who love it.

But it was not the experience of the sea or of the cities that led me to dialogue with Alberto Carneiro's work, and it is because I am dealing with his work that I am going to circumscribe analysis of the above-mentioned exceptional spatial experience to the domains of the vegetable kingdom of nature. What I call the vegetable kingdom of nature is a world of green and brown land, trees and grass between the ground and the sky, crossed through by lines of water which are often visible, audible and other times underground.

For me this is a territory of threats, mysteries and complications in which everything seems more complex and imponderable. Nothing is free and infinite like the sea because everything is fixed to roots and to the inexorable lifetime cycles. Everything seems to be immobile and closed in upon itself, but we soon discover that the things move on their inside, in their own way, and that everything is unrepeatable and uncontrollable after all, because it is subject to the inclinations and whims of the wind, of the light and of the waters.

A city is built or destroyed, the sea never ends, but a mountain, a river or a tree are more complicated.

Because they are descendents of immortality and yet they are not eternal. This may cause a sort of paradoxical claustrophobia, the most common images of which perhaps correspond to the sensations of being closed in inside a tree or having our way blocked by an impassable mountain. But at the same time it is enough to look up at the sky or press the silence of our closed eyes to the ground to feel that a deep promise of peace undeniably passes that way. The knot of contradictory sensations that appear to me associated to the experience of vegetable nature becomes particularly gratifying when one is led to meditate on these matters and can count on the company of an enlightened wayfarer like Alberto Carneiro.

The work *The Paths of Water and of the Body over the Ground* (2002-2003), specifically conceived for the rooms of the first and second floors of the Porta 33 in Funchal, take their starting point from a series of walks in the mountains of Madeira and a particular attention given to the watercourses, a traditional form of directing water that is one of the most characteristic marks of the island's rural landscape.

"The title *The Paths of Water and of the Body over the Ground* is an abstract title that does not refer objectively to Madeira, it may refer to anywhere. But this work indeed refers particularly to the water in the watercourses, and above all to the spatial situation they create. It is a complex situation in the sense that the problem of water circulation is fundamental to the location of the body on the space, that is, relative to the topography of the island and relative to the need for water as a vital element. For me the questions of the vitality of the elements are fundamental, and here exactly that aspect has been played out. There is also the way that the space is organized along the watercourses, which has to do with the way that nature is laid out, whether relative to a small intervention by man, which is minimal after all, or relative, let us say, to the very situation of the terrain and thus to the way nature organises itself, then, in a plastic, one might say formal, manner in the sense of the plasticity, not in the sense of the form as such."

The work, which is laid out over three rooms, is one of the most complete and complex works carried out by Alberto Carneiro over the last few years, and in the sense that it may be seen as a work of synthesis in relation to many of his lines of research, it forms an excellent entrance into an analysis of his work as a whole.

The main guiding line of the reading of this work is, literally, a line. The author calls it "the line of the gaze: of the body on the landscape". Along the walls of the three rooms throughout which this work is distributed the visitor is led to follow, at eye level, a line made up of a succession of photographs or drawings that are a personal reconstitution of the experience of the author's walks.

3 + 1

The guiding line of the exhibition is thus also the horizon line associated to an experience that was the artist's and that is now proposed to the observer as a horizon of possibilities. The photographs do not aim at presenting, nor do they present, an imagetic reconstitution of a path on the landscape. We are not witnessing a documentary stance, and the very alternation between the photographic register and the much more imponderable register of the drawing made by hand reinforces the open and reversible nature of this type of register or evocation.

As Gilles Tiberghien writes, analysing contemporary theories of landscape, "in order to see a landscape we need to stand back a little, to create a distance that is not only physical but also intellectual". In travelling through a landscape, "we have the experience of its dimensions in relation to our footsteps, but also in relation to our gaze and to its complex organisation. The geography of the forms captured by our mobile gaze determines the setting. The desire to move closer or to move away, or to produce a representation of the landscape, allows us to understand the body-horizon dialectic that is inherent to it. The crossing is as physical as it is mental; and it presupposes techniques of distancing, log-books, sketch-books, or techniques of "landscape transposition" like those practiced in Japan". The same author tells us of "artialisation" of landscape, a term that Alain Roger (*Les théories du paysage en France (1974-1994)*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 1995) found in Montaigne, and stresses the fact that artists like Richard Long or Hamish Fulton have "returned [redonné] a mental reality to landscape" (in *Critique*, n.o 613--614, June / July 1998, Paris).

Alberto Carneiro's working methods ensure and amplify a specifically plastic space of distance in relation to what would be the documentary register of a journey so that within that distance and through that distance there may appear the space allowing the line we have been mentioning to be transformed, at the actual moment that is the seeing of the exhibition, into the visitor's horizon line. A space that is also broad enough to allow the experience of the gaze and of the walk around the gallery rooms to set up an adopting of the rhythm that allows the observer to see beyond the photographs and drawings proposed to him and to manage to evoke and look at his own memories of relating with horizons comparable to those presented to him here. The height of their presentation and the size and spacing of the succession of photos and drawings have been determined in order to be adapted to the natural rhythm of the person passing in front of them, looking at them and allowing his gaze to wander: naturally.

But the images proposed in the photographs and drawings are not all that is offered in the work's first line of reading. Two sentences, with the complex simplicity characteristic to the author's writing, give us the hypothetical keys to the reading of the exhibition. The sentences are: "on the horizon of your gaze you are the being of this landscape" and "in you life will make of this moment your art". Let us then try to unfold the possibilities of meaning that these sentences set out.

"On the horizon of your gaze you are the being of this landscape". Who says this sentence? And to whom? It is the artist speaking to the observer, in the scope of a relationship between the author and his public. In this case the author declares the observer's identity with what he sees as simultaneously a work of art and a landscape. The observer is called by the artist to become a part of the art and of the landscape, to be art and landscape. The author is in command. But at the same time the declaration may be read as a quotation from that which, according to the artist, had been said to him by the landscape itself. In that case, the speaker is the landscape itself, addressing the artist, firstly, and then, called upon by the artist, it addresses the public. According to this possibility it is the landscape itself that commands the process. It is the landscape that, so to speak, puts the artist in his place and what he does is to plastically elaborate his place so as to be able to share it with those who visit his work. The artist was and essentially still is in the same place as the public. The place of someone who, through his gaze on the landscape, is called by the landscape to become landscape.

3 + 1

"In you life will make of this moment your art". Conciliating the two hypotheses of interpretation of the previous sentence, we would say that this "moment" is both the first moment of the artist's gaze on the landscape and each one of the current moments of an observer's gaze on this work's "line of gaze". What allows the identification between the two moments is the collocation of these experiences under the aegis of a general and all-inclusive category: life. It is the presence, the manifestation and the expression of life that makes art, that allows one to add to a moment or grant a moment with a supplement (of life) that shifts it into a place called art. The possibility of this shift occurring depends on the capacity of the person who is looking (the public or the artist) to, at a given moment, grant the experience of his gaze with an intensity of life that is sufficient for him to fully identify with the horizon of that gaze. In this perspective the place of command is always the place of the person who is looking: from the side of life.

The experience of this work, that which Alberto Carneiro likes to call a "surrounding", a designation he prefers to "installation", an expression that is used more today, does not end in the exercises of deduction and speculation to which we have dedicated ourselves up to now. What gives them meaning is the wealth and diversity of the physical and material elements that complete the work and the way they are distributed according to the structure of the exhibition spaces. These are the palpable, tangible, coloured, smelling and shaped elements that allow the above-suggested conceptual project to make sense, that is, to become thought through the experience of the senses.

The elements brought together in each of the rooms, according to different sculptural combinations, adequated to the architectural characteristics of the space and to the exhibition's visiting sequence, are essentially branches of trees, sticks and gorse branches with which the sculptural and architectural shapes that direct the visitor's steps are constructed.

Earth and clay serve as supports and are also the bearers of the marks of the author's body. Games of glasses and mirrors strategically placed in each of the rooms help to redesign the space, redesigning itineraries, and multiply the possible games of gazes through the alternating between transparencies and reflections in mirrors, the latter also forming an important form of inclusion in the exhibiting of the image of the visitor himself.

The diversity of elements used in this sculptural surrounding and the sophistication of its different spatial combinations opens the way to a retrospective wandering leading us to some fundamental and emblematic works in Alberto Carneiro's path, of which a significant and representative selection is presented in the Museum of Contemporary Art at the São Tiago Fortress in Funchal.

"One of my concerns is to work with the space given to me. If the work is conceived for the space I am going to exhibit it and I know this space in advance the work naturally has this component. That is one of the concerns that runs through my work: the space generates the form more than the form generates the space. I am much more interested in the relationship established in the space than what is established intrinsically to each of the forms. In that sense each exhibition is an event for me, something new."

We start with the last room on the last floor of the Museum, which houses the most recent work, *My Vegetable Body* (2001-2002), conceived specifically for this space.

"The work appeared naturally according to the space in the Funchal Museum that I wished to occupy. Let's say that the first fact for that work was the room. Then there was the material I had available, mainly material given to me by the Serralves Foundation, from a chestnut tree that had dried up. I then began to work according to the space and I came to the number 7. I noted that the number of elements had to be a multiple of seven and I ended up with 49 elements. I worked with all the 49 elements at the same time without any fixed

3 + 1

programme. At the beginning there was nothing; the result only started to appear more or less in the middle of the gestation period. And there is no skill at all in terms of manual making. The hand is capable of not being there very much. There is the tree and then the reading that each natural element provided me with as energy naturally flowing from the tree. I know something about this, how the tree grows, how it develops, what forces it has from the moment when it was cut and starts to generate from the inside out, how it breaks itself to respond to the demands of the change of state, the passage from something alive to something that has stopped being alive. The sap doesn't run anymore, it starts reacting in a different way. The whole structure of the work, element by element, starts to emerge according to these data that are being played. Then there are many different references, cultural references to several different places, for example a boat, a turtle; they are clear references to a determined spatial situation, they refer to a garden in Kyoto I visited many times and which has a special meaning for me. But there are no direct, strict formal references. There is reminiscence and, in this case, the reference, although not formally obvious, was recognised by a person who had been with me in the garden: 'It looks like the turtle and the little boat.' - Yes, it is. That's it."

A first general view of *My Vegetable Body* impresses us due to its formal composition and spatial positioning that makes it stand as a work that could have been conceived according to mathematical principles of seriality, symmetry and repetition. Yet when we approach each of the 49 elements that make up the sculptural set, what is most striking is the sensitive exactness of the modelling that seems to be based on physical complicity with the structure of the raw material, the fragments of a tree-trunk, a chestnut, as if the hand only helped to exteriorise the sculptural pulse implicit in the way of life of the tree itself. The effect of communion resulting from the establishing, in the hands of the sculptor, of an apparent physical complicity between the wood of the trees and the forms of the sculptures, as if it had been the tree that asked for the form that makes the sculpture, is one of the distinctive marks of Alberto Carneiro's practice as a sculptor and one of the most persistent motives of fascination associated to his talent. It is the exercise of a sculptor's workshop knowledge that allows us to understand the course uniting the concrete work with the tree-trunks to a wider conceptualisation of the issues of the constitution of a human identity in its relationship with art and nature.

"I would say that the major theme in my work is the tree, the tree in the singular, as a substance in itself, that naturally inhabits the forest. The tree as an archetype of a culture and of a civilisation. I think that deep identifications are indispensable for each creator. People only create starting from these identifications, with whatever it may be. My identifications naturally arise from my life experience. If I had always lived in an urban environment my identifications would naturally be something else. I have no doubt about that. Also, if I had been born in another civilisation or at another time my motivations would be something else. Here there is a search for the artistic path, or artistic realization, that goes through that process of deep identification that each person has to accept in their own body, here understood as the body as a whole. I am not only talking about the physical body, I am essentially talking about the mental body and the subtle body. It is a movement we make in space relative to time, it is the shiftings, because deep down, curiously, it is not time that organises our space but space that organises our time."

My Vegetable Body, in the line of a vast set of works carried out over the last twenty years - like, for example, *Evocations of Water* - using determined wood or determined specific trees, gives us the manufactured dimension of a work of aesthetic identification, deconstruction and reconstruction of and with the tree conceived as an archetype.

At the other end of the chronological arc of the author's career we find *The Cane Plantation: memory / metamorphosis of an absent body* (1968), a fundamental work in the history of the Portuguese art of the second half of the XX century. Here we also find an appropriation of natural vegetable materials - canes - but

3 + 1

in this case it is not a question of a natural object (a trunk or a tree) that is transformed into another, artistic object through a work of sculptural modelling.

With The Cane Plantation we are faced with a natural environment or space that, through a work of metaphorical conceptualisation and shifting, is transformed into an artistic environment or space: an installation or a surrounding built with the use of natural materials.

The layout in space and the form of organisation of the visitor's circulation here has a fundamental role. The fulcrum of the evocation and convocation is not an object but a place, a state of mind associated to a place and what it recalls or arouses as a field of sentimental possibilities. Unlike the tree, the polarising archetype, the grouping of the canes is not the event but only the punctuation that circumscribes the place of the events. The Seven Aesthetic Rituals on a Sheaf of Wicker on the Landscape (1975) is a work in which one witnesses the development of this hypothesis. We could almost state that a surrounding like The Cane Plantation is a sculptural scenography for a performance that is no more than our presence as living visitors, creatures granted with sense of smell and memory.

"The cane plantation is the moment of great revelation in my work. I know the exact moment that it appeared, on the 12th of December 1968 at two thirty in the afternoon in my bedroom in London. It appeared like a flash, and the title of the work also appeared immediately (The Cane Plantation: memory / metamorphosis of an absent body) and it indeed has to do with my first sexual experience, that is, with my first notion of sexuality arising from a children's game. It was a sort of awakening, something that immediately imposed itself, or, rather, that created a complementary pole in relation to that in which I was then deeply involved, that was erudite culture. It was a call to something that had to do with a different type of aesthetic experience. That is why The Cane Plantation is a founding work for me. Not so much because so many people think it is a greatly appealing work from the point of view of the form, but because it is also associated to that other dimension."

We believe that the richness and specificity of Alberto Carneiro's work results from his capacity to consistently convoke and articulate different registers of artistic approach to nature and to landscape that, most of the time, appear to us separately, if not as antagonistic or incompatible when described in accordance with some of the most common and simplifying aesthetic-theoretical treatments. Let us enumerate some of the traits that may be evoked: - the tradition of sculpting in wood, giving special attention to manual sculpting capacity and exalting the tellurian values of connection to the material and organic forms of nature; - the avant-garde experimentalism of land art, with primacy to the direct experience of the physical relationship between the artist and nature through trips or walks from which the works of art emerge, above all, as a testimony;

- conceptual art and its concern to inscribe each object of art with a self-reflection on the process of conceptualisation and the process of signification that allow him to present himself as a work of art;
- a tradition of metaphysical speculation on nature, as it is manifested, namely in some oriental currents of thought.

We believe, however, that if we wish to understand the deep unity of Alberto Carneiro's work we should look for it not so much through an always possible applied combination of classifying critical categories but through the identification of a peculiar form of relating and search for coincidence between the memory of a sensitive experience of total immersion in a natural space and a concrete activity of production and analysis of forms (physical or discursive, objects, images or texts) in accordance with determined given spaces and materials. We would call the fundamental mechanism through which this identification operates productive reminiscence.

3 + 1

"There is something that arose exactly from my walks on the water-courses. Initially it wasn't in my plan, but then it came in. It has to do with something that runs through my work, which are reminiscences. I hold that in the field of poetic creation what flows as a base, as a root, as initial energy, is always supported on a previous experience, on an experience that at first is not conscious, is not able to be taken consciously, and only becomes so after the moment in which it becomes evident. For that reason I thought it was fundamental to have an experience of translating landscape. The work that results as realized is that which is established between a, quote, deep authenticity, unquote, and a mental verification of process. Intuition, feeling and sensation are not enough to make the work; one needs to mentally and cultural assume the process and decant it."

Alexandre Melo, in catalog of the exhibition in Porta 33 and Museu de Arte Contemporânea do Funchal, Alberto Carneiro, ed. Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa, May 2003 Translated by David Prescott