



Joana Patrão: *Céu de sal, sal da terra*

Curated by Luísa Santos

Céu de sal, sal da terra [Sky of salt, salt of the earth] (2020), by Joana Patrão (1992, Barcelos) is a diptych-sculpture-installation. Specifically designed for the 1,20 x 1,20 x 2,35 m space of Lab Box, a space which, due to its physical features, can only be entered by one person at a time, it entails an immersion which determines a vertical reading, from within the place / diptych-sculpture-installation which is, in fact, a landscape.

Artists and architects have always had an interest in beauty and in nature's mysteries, putting forward representations in different ways and through different mediums, but also reflections and critical analyses. Focusing on the latter two, with numerous examples in art history since the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, a temporal leap to the 1960s will lead us to the *land art* experiences, with pieces such as *Line made by walking* (1967) – a line drawn on a terrain departing from a path taken on foot by Richard Long, which seems to visually translate the mark of the human footprint on nature. Nearer to current times, in which the discussions around the degradation of the natural world and the causes and effects of climate change are more and more urgent and cross-sectoral to disciplinary fields and cultural, social, and economic contexts, instances such as *Rescued Rhododendrons* (1999), by Simon Starling, offer a reflection on the relation between human beings and nature in such a way that calls to action and, oftentimes, forms an intervention in politics. In this project, the artist recovered rhododendrons, plants which are considered weeds by the British Government and, as such, are destined for destruction. By taking seven samples from Northern Scotland to the South of Spain, in a process of reversal of the introduction of these plants into the United Kingdom in 1763 by a Swedish botanist, he underlines the subtleties, complexities, and paradoxes of what we understand as nature, alongside a clearly political attitude that serves also as a metaphor for xenophobic matters of the purity of species. In turn, pieces such as those Olafur Eliasson put forward in the recent retrospect at Tate Modern (*Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life* – July 2019 – January 2020) use the manipulation of space to amplify our self-perception with all that implies regarding the process of awareness of the role we play in nature.

The work of Joana Patrão brings together these traditions of research of the role of human beings in nature – on the one hand, it entails a material dimension of nature and of the human (physical) effects on this materiality and, on the other hand, a simultaneously physical and mental action in order to amplify the individual processes of perception and consciousness. These dimensions of *Céu de sal, sal da terra* can be read in three parts: i) experience; ii) matter; and iii) time.

i) Experience

The experience of entering *Céu de sal, sal da terra* is reminiscent of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1945)¹ notion of phenomenology (and of his predecessors in that idea, such as G.W.F. Hegel) and, in particular, of the notion of lived experience as "being-at-the-world-from-within-it"². This idea expresses, on the one hand, the inevitability of contact between the body and the world around it and, on the other hand, the need for the physical experience of the world so as to understand / know it.

When we enter the space of *Céu de sal, sal da terra* we are confronted with a (portion of) landscape that exists at the limits of our bodies. To see this landscape organized according to the linear structure sky-earth, without a line of horizon, it is necessary to be inside it. This action implies a transformation of the space into a "theater of action" in which, on the one hand, the body flows towards the objects (Merleau-Ponty, 2002:121) and, on the other, both elements (the salt that makes up the portion of sky and the stone that makes up the fraction of terrain that we step upon) precipitate themselves mutually and in this precipitation they run through us and limit us.

ii) Matter

If we come to know this portion of landscape departing from the experience of its matter in confrontation with our own matter and physicality then our body is a present matter, embedded and alive, of this landscape made up of a salt sky and a terrain of lioz limestone. The salt that precipitates over our heads holds a paradoxical symbolism – it preserves as much as it corrodes; it protects as much as it prevents growth. A metaphor for the relation between life and death, due to its ability to be dissolved in water and later recrystallized, it represents also the alchemical process of division, depuration, and reintegration, with the instability that this process entails. Through the increase in the humidity of the air, this part of sky made of a sheet with salt crystals can be dissolved again and collapse upon us in its return movement to the stone of the ground.

The lioz limestone can be easily associated, in a Portuguese context, with colonialism, with narratives of power and dominion, and with the reconstruction of Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake. However, the protagonist of the narrative of *Céu de sal, sal da terra* is the physical and natural condition of the material. The light that comes through the salt sky makes evident the presence of fossils of extinct rudists, remote inhabitants of this territory we now occupy. The exercise that Joana Patrão asks of us is, thus, at the same time physical (that of entering the space) and mental (that of becoming landscape), appealing to the material imagination (Bachelard, 1980)³ that resists formal transformations. What this resistance implies is that, by always keeping its substance, matter becomes transversal to the times and the origins of the images.

iii) Time

In this landscape, with a salt sky and a ground of fossiliferous limestone, our bodies seem to be submerged under a sea that no longer exists, testament of a past or potential for a future. The conflict between the different times of this landscape – present, past, and future – is put forward in a confrontation with us. Firstly, we are confronted with the present time, that limits our bodies to a portion of sky and earth. As for the marine sedimentary organisms revealed in the lioz limestone, which organized into reefs, they reveal a time (and a substrate) when Lisbon was submerged under a sea.

Céu de sal, sal da terra is restricted to the narrow dimensions responsible for a sensation of confinement between a physical sky and earth, in a present time, but the history and the symbolism of its matter free us towards a landscape far more extensive and a temporality as multiplicitous as our minds allow. This exercise of simultaneously confining and setting free serves as a metaphor for the relation between the micro reading of self-perception and the macro reading of the human condition: the individual action, apparently benign, of stepping upon the terrain is also collective. What we step upon after all are fossils of extinct rudists, exemplary testaments of a species from the last great mass extinction, from a past that seems to come to haunt us in a near future.

In other words, *Céu de sal, sal da terra* is a 1,20 x 1,20 x 2,35 m micro landscape that confines us to the limits of our own bodies. But, by implying a multiplicity of cultural, social, and political spaces it adopts a dimension that transcends us, impossible to measure physically. The role we choose to play – confined to a micro-scale or aware of our potential for change at a macro-scale - is the sole responsibility of each of us.

¹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1945). *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith, London 2002.

² Dreyfus, Hubert L. & Dreyfus, Patricia A., "Translators' Introduction" in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 1948, Evanston 1968, p. xii.

³ Bachelard, Gaston (1980). *L'eau et le rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Paris: José Corti.

Luísa Santos, 2020