

Catarina Botelho*Qualquer coisa de intermédio**(Anything in between)*

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So alive

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From one of Montjuïc's slopes, behind the Castle the tourist most visit, I find a place almost unfrequented by people where I sit to contemplate the city. This is an atypical frame because focus is in the direction of the commercial port instead of the urban fabric. What you are seeing is the free zone: the sea and primary-coloured container ships (blue, red, yellow) storing goods produced thousands of kilometres away, that pump the consumption/obsolescence flow that articulates the urban *oikonomia*. This view reveals that much of the city is occupied by all those monstrous boxes floating on the water. Up there, you really feel that neither the buildings nor the streets matter, and that if all that exists it is only because it is sustained by uninterrupted global production and trade. The image is impressive; there is more space for consumer goods that will soon stop being used, than for the people who have lived there for centuries.

Before I knew I would write this text I wanted Catarina [Botelho] to invite me to one of her walks along the banks of the wild city. It was from there from where I wanted to write about her work: from the sensitivity of our accompanying. But that walk did not happen for one reason or another, and that is why this text must be read with the emotional particularities of those who evoke memories that are not their own*. Something related to this memory's way of doing interests me in Catarina's photographic work. To photograph implies to record and to scar somehow. Implies to transfer the fleeting and unrepeatable encounter with the other to an out-of-our-body materiality. *To take a memory of me out of me so that it has a life beyond me.* I try then to look from the body and the affects that captured that moment, going from the photograph to the heat, interiority, disorientation or even fear sensation, that anyone who framed the image could have been feeling in that moment.

I evoke Catarina's body. First, walking and walking without really understanding her own wandering*. Later, laying on the ground, trying to match her body to that of the object has enchanted her, groping the distances between that *other* and her, and the way in which to allow the light to be part of the dance. How to love the rocks, the tyres, the chairs, the rugs... that were left there, by others? I feel that it is through this remains and traces that various bodies can touch without touching. As now I also caress the surface of that white sheet that looks like a shroud covering, perhaps, some stubble burned by the sun. And I touch the hands of the one who delicately put it there. And I am not sure if those hands, which I imagine a bit rough, wanted the sheet to cover a secret or, on the contrary, they wanted to draw our attention so that we looked at something that is not usually seen. The haptic potential of the photographic refers to the moment the sight discovers a tactile function of itself that is its own, and that is different from its optical function. We photograph with our eyes but only as long as we touch with those eyes. There is something of that; of the touch that looks, in these photographs. That is why I understand Catarina telling me that they are like sculptures to her. That is why I talk about how to love what is being photographed; because there is a collision in intimacy; a close body fight leaving a mark on the one who when he looks touches, and when he is touched he is looked at. We see some carefully placed rocks in another of the photographs. I would not say its arrangement tries to imitate some sort of construction or totem. They are left there with no apparent utility. But again, I feel very strongly the more I look at those rocks, the more I notice the presence of the person who placed them in that precise place, in the firmness of their unproductive gesture. Why did someone leave them like this? I wonder if that person knew that he would be looked at and touched through those rocks, and again, if those rocks are there covering a secret or calling our attention so that we look at something that is not usually seen.

The remains photographed by Catarina are “out of joint”, as it is said about time. They erred in their circulation as merchandise within that uninterrupted, global flow. They stayed stranded in indeterminate and semi-wild territory. They stalk us in a way we cannot understand, because although inanimate they seem alive. Having been photographed, the experience of intimacy of the person who found them is transmitted to us, making this *insignificant* and forgotten materiality an expectant emotional landscape. Having paid her attention on them, there is care and resignification, which does not reduce them to the economic and productive system that has made them. But these remains are not only cared for by those who photograph, but by those who live with them there, in that kind of no-man’s land. Although there is no human presence in the images, we can sense a vital choreography around and through those objects. Reeds are as alive as I, who write, and you, who read. The doors, sutured together to form a wall, are as alive as the grass that grows twisting on themselves. The plastic, land, blood, fire, garbage... they are part of an assembly that inhabits the place. In one of the photographs we see several carpets on a neglected lawn, carefully placed one beside the other, pretending to be one and the same surface. There is some medium-size rocks arranged over some of them so the wind does not carry them away. The rugs must have been there for a while because grass has sprouted on the braided surface of one of them. The symbiosis, garnet-coloured cotton geometries crossed by the organic on the green is impressive. Wild reeds grow up and weeds fight to find the light on the banks of the rugs. It seems a river; a rug river with its banks. The perspective from which the photograph has been taken suggests a diagonal vanishing point that invites me to get lost in the image, and to surrender myself into the hallucination of hearing the sound of its waters. In these obsolete territories, it is easier to become aware that we cannot so easily distinguish the inanimate from the animate, the living from the dead. Everything trembles with this entire indeterminate, fluctuating ecosystem where the city and its flows; they seem to be no more there.

These land portions are strange and/or foreign to the urban system and its neoliberal capture. As long as they have not become goods, they are cracks that, in order to be inhabited, demand us to take a stand at the outer scale of the citizenry. We are all more *vermin* than people, there. Here are those who may be privileged enough to living it as a choice, and there are other bodies that are condemned to these forms of existence. Stripped of the right to the “city”, expelled from the abstract order of the human (that is, from language and money), desires become feral and the *other* is recognised – including the territory itself, as a part of one’s own intersubjective experience. They are fugitive places and those who inhabit them do so furtively. As if we became immediately a suspected person with the mere wandering around those territories. As it seems there is no reason to be there, it is that apparent unproductiveness that makes the scene really dangerous. Through a certain sense of temporary subtraction, photographs give me the tension of someone who is about to be discovered. As if the images had been captured just seconds before something was going to move, or someone was about to arrive. The “somethings” and the “someones” are waiting for us to turn around to continue with their lives. I do not think they feel invaded, but rather surprised by the presence of a person being there and wanting to look at them. But the sensation of gradually moving away from the city and entering these ambiguous, semi-abandoned territories must be strong: temporal perception adapts to our breathing, our body in these space takes presence. We are not used to those unregulated geographies, and there is an instability (discomfort*) difficult to get rid of.

I talked about fear with Catarina quite a lot, especially at the beginning of her walks. The fear of seeing herself there with her body read as a woman; small, with such a large camera, walking alone through places where no one can hear if someone shuts. As she tells me, some verses from a June Jordan poem that someone read to me some time ago when I was talking about my fears come to mind:

Even tonight and I need to take a walk and clear
my head about this poem about why I can't
go out without changing my clothes my shoes
my body posture my gender identity my age
my status as a woman alone in the evening/
alone on the streets/alone not being the point/
the point being that I can't do what I want
to do with my own body because I am the wrong
sex the wrong age the wrong skin and
suppose it was not her in the city but down on the beach/
or far into the woods and I wanted to go
there by myself thinking about God/or thinking
about children or thinking about the world/all of it
disclosed by the stars and the silence;
I could not go and I could not think and I could not
stay there
alone
as I need to be
alone because I can't do what I want to do with my own
body and
who in the hell set things up
like this¹

Fear of finding herself also in territories may be inhabited by others, being the homes of others... Fear of not being sure about what they think of her being there, perhaps without permission, getting into their houses. Uncertainty in the look between those two, who do not know very well the reason their bodies found each others. Both, in their stealth, might feel threats to each other. I can imagine a few moments of silence and immobility; the look touches, gropes, trying to recognise itself. Contact is not through voice or words. It is the gaze, a gesture, a letting go. It goes without saying. They observe each other as *vermin* and then each other keeps going its path. Catarina does not look back again. The coexistence in these assemblages is thus, tacit. However, the body's state of vigilance in fear's tension causes a certain insecurity or disregard in the act of photographing. I recall the uncomfortable posture of Catarina's squatting body that makes her stagger, close to losing her balance. There is something on the ground she wants to photograph, but photographing the ground is like wanting to capture an empty space. It is the third time she returns to that exact place to take that photograph because she is not happy yet. While bending down, her hand lies on the slightly wet land; staining and tickling her palm. She hears the crack of a wooden stick breaking behind her. Far away, although blurred, she can hear the car engine's noises that drive on the highway, too. She does not want to look where the crack is coming from because her attention is trying to be on what she feels has to be photographed. She hears another crack. This has already happened to her on another occasion, the first time fear made her turn automatically. But now she has got used to it. She tries to trust and knowing herself safe first; to connect to the assembly that also cares for her, to inhabit matter's time that for a brief moment is there with her. She manages to take the picture without turning around. A fourth crack can be heard, and now, with the camera pressed against her chest, she directs her expectant body towards where she perceives the sound coming from.

¹ Go to <http://cuadrodetiza.cl/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/june-jordan-poema-sobre-mis-derechos.pdf> to consult the complete poem