

Visual and Literary Narratives of Dissent: unframing women and representation

Instead of non-interference and specialization, there must be interference, crossing of borders and obstacles, a determined attempt to generalize exactly at those points where generalizations seem impossible to make. (Edward Saïd)

Who, then, she continues, tells a finer tale than any of us? Silence does. And where does one read a deeper tale than upon the most perfectly printed page of the most precious book? Upon the blank page. (Isak Dinesen)

I- Framing Feminism or Feminism Unframed?

(Feminism and the paradigm of *Difference* in ‘retrospect and prospect’)

It is not by mere coincidence that the concept of “frame”/framing” shows in the title of three influential and fairly recent feminist volumes. The following titles:

- 1- *Framing Feminism, Art and Women’s Movement 1970-1985*, eds. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (London: Pandora, 1987).
- 2- *Unframed. Practices and Politics of women’s contemporary painting*, ed. Rosemary Betterton (London: IB Tauris, 2004).
- 3- *Feminism Reframed: Reflections on Art and Difference*, ed. Alexandra Kokoli (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publ., 2008)

What is so crucial about the concept of ‘**frame**’ so that it is repeated (in a number of variables) in each of the three titles? What does it signify, what meanings and subtleties does it contain in relation to the definition of Feminism as a movement, its history and major changes throughout the two and a half decades that separate the first from the third volume? A reflection upon each of the three Introductions of the volumes by the respective editors is illuminating onto the differences and shifts of paradigm regarding Feminism and its recent history, over the last two decades and raises important questions worth considering in the context of a *retrospective* and a *prospective* of Feminism’s concerns, conceptualizations and changing territories of inquiry and engagement, with a particular focus on Visual Culture. It would of course be impossible

to review here at length the three mentioned volumes and besides that is not the main object of my talk today. This reflection will rather be a starting point, a trigger, though not merely rhetorical, to help me contextualize the two case studies I will be discussing.

1- In the Preface of the earlier volume, edited by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock in 1987, titled *Framing Feminism, Art and Women's Movement 1970-1985*, the editors claim that “Whereas the majority of political movements have employed art and artists for propaganda purposes, feminism has worked to transform art – and artists themselves” (xiii).

The volume has confessedly a historic purpose, i.e., mapping the history of women's art and women's criticism in a dialogue with Feminism as both “a catalyst and a component of a broad front” (xiv), and making sure that “feminist art groups are not hidden from history” (xvi). Hence the title of the Introduction: “Fifteen years of feminist action: from practical strategies to strategic practices”. The concept of “frame” (as in the title *Framing Feminism*) has here a positive and proactive meaning, signalling both that Feminism as an emancipator movement was definitely out of the closet, and the opening up and promotion of new territories of enquiry through its global critical commitment to the agencing of women. The binomial *Art and Difference* is here in great evidence, as feminist Art History and feminist Art criticism had undergone a notorious outbreak in Europe and the US throughout the 1980s.

2- Rosemary Betterton's collection, *Unframed. Practices and Politics of women's contemporary painting* (from 2004) has its critical eye definitely set in the territory of women's art, as an established field of scholarship, as the title indicates. The concepts of “framing” and “unframing” engage here in a dialogue (not really an antinomy) as one can gather from Betterton's own Introduction, tellingly named “Unframing women's painting”. Betterton claims that her aim is “to redress the balance between contemporary practices and politics of women who paint and to rebut two propositions – that both painting and feminism are dead – by exploring the current state of making and thinking about painting by women. It aims to reclaim a space for different practices of women's painting and to assert that these are important if we are concerned with “the current meaning of both art and gender” (p.1). Therefore framing and unframing are not here set against each other in a dichotomy as one could at first infer, but rather the second term adds a nuance to the former, which precludes a deterministic and fixed

conceptualization, and favours the continuum of a debate on “both art and gender”. The same idea is proposed by the use of the plural in the title (*Practices and Politics of women’s contemporary painting*).

But surely it is the third volume that is most challenging to us.

3- In the Introduction to the volume *Feminism Reframed. Reflections on Art and Difference* (2008)¹, tellingly entitled “Looking on, Bouncing Back”, Alexandra Kokoli claims that the volume “addresses the ongoing dialogue between feminism, art history and visual culture from contemporary scholarship perspectives (...)”, with a focus on “the emergence of new interdisciplinary areas of investigation, including notably that of visual culture” (2008: 1). The collection proposes thus a re-evaluation of the impact of the “indisputable transformations” that took place, by making a balance between past and present both in feminist thought and practice around art and visual culture since the 1970s, “highlighting continuities as well as points of disjunction” (Ibid.). The concept “reframed”, as in the title *Feminism Reframed*, means an open movement of a simultaneous “homage and critique” to the announced feminist interventions and revisions of the canon of art, its agents, locations, spectators and activists, as stated by the editor, and most importantly it engages deliberately with the collection edited two decades earlier by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock’s (1987), *Framing Feminism, Art and Women’s Movement 1970-1985*², an evocation made clear from the its very title. The volume is “clearly of its time”, as openly claimed by the editor, in that it bears the awareness of an impending transitoriness, translated in the consideration that prospectively, “feminism will be considered ‘in need’ of other reframings” (1987:13), therefore endorsing that the notions of fluidity and becoming are inherent to the inquiry of Feminism in the Visual Arts, as in other fields.

In the context of this collection it becomes clear that the dialogue between *framing* and *unframing* carries the dual meaning of *fixing* and *unfixing* as part of a continuum

¹ Alexandra Kokoli, (ed.), *Feminism Reframed. Reflections on Art and Difference*, Newcastle: Cambridge Publ., 2008.

² Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (eds.), *Framing Feminism, Art and Women’s Movement 1970-1985*, London: Pandora, 1987.

within an ongoing debate, a synergy and a dialogue that rejects fixed meanings and standardization.

In this same volume, Griselda Pollock in an important essay which functions as a kernel for the whole collection, entitled “What is it that Feminist Interventions Do? Feminism and Difference in Retrospect and Prospect” (pp.248- 280), claims that “Feminism is not synonymous with simply collecting and exhibiting works by *women* artists and that it also implies a shifting of paradigms, including going beyond notions of gender (men and women artists) and *engaging with difference*: sexual, ethnic, cultural, geographical, generational, orientational and so on?” (Pollock, *apud* Kokoli, 2008: 251).

Pollock raises here a crucial question which she leaves in the open: if Feminism and feminist work is “transgressive of existing institutions and structures in which nonetheless it has to intervene, and to which it should make a radical difference” (Ibid., p.255), the question remains as “how to reframe that difference so that the price of the ‘institutionalisation’ of feminism, or the ‘writing of feminism’s history’ does not effectively erase the feminist effect, or render (it) invisible” (Ibid.,p.255).

In this assumption, the “reframing” of Feminism at stake here is not an essential or static category, but rather implies a self-reflexive analysis, ethically and politically situated, accounting for a double movement: Feminism in *historical retrospect* (i.e., Donna Haraway, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva’s apport) and as a constant projection into the future, thus signifying a ‘*poiesis to come*’, a ‘*becoming*’ (Ibid.,p.277).

4- The concept of “frame” in the context of intertextuality

As a second referent crucial to our debate, I would like to propose that the notion of frame be understood as indissociable from the concept of intertextuality. This would open up another huge debate, the field of intertextuality being so rich and challenging, but I will necessarily be brief, with my mind set on my objects of study.

Its conceptual implications have been exhaustively considered by numberless reputed critics (from Barthes and Kristeva to Derrida). In the context of painting and photography I want to refer two essays published in a special issue of the journal *Style*

(1988), on the subject of *Visual Poetics*: Norman Bryson's "Intertextuality and Visual Poetics" and Linda Hutcheon's "Fringe Interference. Postmodern border tensions"³.

As stated by Bryson, a movement towards unframing is essential to promote intertextuality and the interpenetration of images in the context of painting. In his own words:

Within the boundary of the individual image, each glance of the viewer across its surface reflects the sum of previous glances upon the present image, as well as all the images to come; the image before each glance has the structure of a hologram. (...) Interpenetrated by past and future images, its frame is dissolved and crossed through principles of mutual entering, mutual reflection, mutual containment (Bryson 1988, p. 186).

(...) In the case of the image, intertextuality is established by dissolving the frame around the work (Bryson, p.187).

And he adds: "To think of paintings as mutually interpenetrating is to discover in the realm of the image the same phenomenon of mobile intertextuality made familiar to us by Barthes and Derrida in the field of literary criticism. The logistics are indeed similar in both domains". (Bryson, 187).

On her turn, and with a focus on photography, Hutcheon speaks about "photographic 'fringe' constructions that combine the visual and the verbal, mass media and high art, artistic practice and aesthetic theory" (p.299). She defines this "fringe interferences" as a "play with the border tensions of theory, politics and art" and claims that they instigate a dual mode of "complicity and critique", polemical but not necessarily invalid, characteristic of postmodernism (p.320).

It is important to bear these considerations open, in the context of our discussion around the concept of frame. We will come back to them later on in the course of the analysis.

Finally, and in articulation with the concept of intertextuality as an interpenetration of the fields of knowledge and the view of a global "politics of interpretation", I want to make use of the concept of "interference" as championed by Edward Saïd in a celebrated essay "Opponents, Audiences and Constituencies and Community"⁴. This essay was published in an issue of *Critical Inquiry* precisely

³ Norman Bryson's "Intertextuality and Visual Poetics" (pp.183- 193) and Linda Hutcheon's "Fringe Interference. Postmodern border tensions" (pp.299-323) in *Style* 22.2 (Summer) 1988.

⁴ *Critical Inquiry*, "The politics of interpretation", Sept. 1982, pp-1-26; (p.24). W.T. J Mitchell's introduction, "The Politics of Interpretation". (In this context see also Saïd's *Reflections on Exile*, p.145).

devoted to “The politics of interpretation” (Sept. 1982), edited and introduced by W. T.J Mitchell. The claim that interpretation needs ”unpacking” and historicizing is powerfully made by both critics, as a “vigilant” mode that prevents critical scholarship “to sink back into the murmur of mere prose” (pp.25-6), in Saïd’s words. Hence his demand that: “Instead of non-interference and specialization, there must be interference, crossing of borders and obstacles, a determined attempt to generalize exactly at those points where generalizations seem impossible to make” (p.24).

Furthermore, and within the context of the postcolonial critique, the notion of **frame** is intimately related with the concepts of *inbetweenness* and liminality developed by Homi Bhabha, to signify the close articulation of spatiality and temporality. In a recent essay by Richard Brock, “Framing Theory. Towards an Ekphrastic Postcolonial Methodology”⁵, this argument was further developed and the critic argued for its strategic duality, as a “model for postcolonial discourse”:

“... the notion of the frame, I argue, offers a powerful conceptual tool for negotiating the operational difficulties of such models of postcolonial criticism, for which neither their originators nor their more recent critics are able to fully account. (p. 102) (...) Yet, my suggestion of the frame as a model for postcolonial discourse theory in particular rests on a duality, unique to the object of the frame, which situates it always at the boundary between spatiality and temporality. (p.104)

The concept of “interference” should be understood within the notion of “worldliness” crucial in Saïd’s framework.

⁵ Richard Brock, “Framing Theory. Towards an Ekphrastic Postcolonial Methodology”, *Cultural Critique*, 77, Winter 2011, (pp. 102- 145).

II- “The Blank Page” – Framing/ Unframing Women

Who, then, she continues, tells a finer tale than any of us? Silence does. And where does one read a deeper tale than upon the most perfectly printed page of the most precious book? Upon the blank page. (Isak Dinesen, p.100)

Isak Dinesen's well known poetic story, which belongs to the collection *Last Tales* (1955)⁶ starts the way all traditional tales do, with an old woman, sitting at the ancient city gate, who makes her living by telling stories.

And so she starts: “High up in the blue mountains of Portugal there stands an old convent for sisters of the Carmelite order”. In old times the convent was prosperous but now it lived mostly from the exquisite linen the sisters grew and manufactured at the convent. “The linen of the Convento Velho draw its true virtue from the fact the very first linseed was brought home [to Portugal] from the Holy Land itself by a crusader” (102), so tells us the old woman. No wonder therefore, that the bridal sheets of the Portuguese princesses were made from such a fine cloth. And, so we are told, in appreciation for its good service, the Convent held the privilege of receiving back the central piece of the bridal sheet which “bore witness to the honour of a royal bride” (103). These were framed in gold and hung on the walls of the main gallery of the convent, besides a plate of pure gold on which was engraved the name of a princess: Donna Christina, Donna Ines, Donna Jacintha Lenora, Donna Maria (Ibid.). For this very reason, “in days of old” Princesses of Portugal and foreign countries would go to the Convento Velho on a pilgrimage, which was “both sacred and secretly gay” to stare thoughtful and bemused at these framed “old canvases”. For each had a story to tell, “from the markings on the canvas, omens were drawn”, the narrator tells us, some were fulfilled throughout the life of each lady, others weren't, as to be expected.

But, (there is always a “but” in any story, as in real life), the most enigmatic, and the most stared at canvas in the long gallery of the convent, was one that was totally blank: “The frame of it is as fine and as heavy as any, and as proudly as any carries the golden

⁶Isak Dinesen, “The Blank Page” in *Last Tales*, first published by The Curtis publishing Co., 1955; Vintage, New York and London, 1991, (pp.99-105).

plate with the royal crown. *But*, on this one plate no name is inscribed, and the linen within the frame is snow-white from corner to corner – a blank page” (104). This gilt framed canvas unswervingly tells the story of a woman who, despite all secrecy was ‘loyally’ put up on the wall, to pass on the evidence of its own particular story. No wonder it is before it, so the narrator tells us, that every storyteller becomes dumb and every princess of Portugal, bridesmaids and maids of honour, “most often stood still” (105).

And the echo of the old story-teller’s words remains with us:

“Who, then, she continues, tells a finer tale than any of us? Silence does. And where does one read a deeper tale than upon the most perfectly printed page of the most precious book? *Upon the blank page*. (...) When a royal and gallant pen, in the moment of its highest inspiration, has written down its tale with the rarest ink of all – where, then, may one read a still deeper, sweeter, merrier and more cruel tale than that? *Upon the blank page*” (100).

What “silence” is this story unveiling? What secret life, what erased identity is it exhibiting? First by framing the untold story, and then unframing publicly its transgression, silence is paradoxically made audible, and the blank page is made to speak through the very gesture which wants to silence it. As the narrator warns us: “Where the storyteller is loyal, eternally and unswervingly, loyal to the story, there, in the end, silence will speak. Where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness” (100).

Imprinted in the blank page is the story of a woman’s life, unframed.

And it is through the eyes of each viewer, each woman who bemusedly pauses before the blank canvas and constructs a mute dialogue with it, her own mind crowded with hundreds of other images, that “the frame around it dissolves”, as recalled by Norman Bryson ⁷, and the blank canvas is made to speak, enacting a new form of embodied intertextuality and intratextuality.

Susan Gubar in a celebrated essay, “The Blank Page and Issues of Female Creativity” (1981)⁸, elaborates a reading of Dinesen’s tale from a hermeneutical and a comparatist point of view within the frame of gender politics and as an illustration of

⁷ Norman Bryson, “Intertextuality and Visual Poetics”, *Style* 22.2, 1988 (p.186).

⁸ Susan Gubar, “The Blank Page and Issues of Female Creativity”, *Critical Inquiry* 8, Winter 1981, reprinted in Elaine Showalter’s influential anthology, *The New Feminist Criticism. Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, London: Virago, 1986 (1989), pp.292-313.

the misogynist paradigms of creativity throughout the history of culture. I want to briefly revisit it as an homage to a critical essay that was pioneer and deeply influential in the construction of a matrilineal genealogy of women's writing and establishing feminist scholarship.

Gubar claims that the metaphorization of feminine creativity is the central trope in the tale: "'The Blank Page' addresses this question with brilliant clarity. This story can be used to illustrate *how woman's image of herself as text and artefact has affected her attitudes toward her physicality* and how *these attitudes in turn shape the metaphors through which she imagines her creativity*" (p.295) [my emphasis]. Gubar illustrates her point through numberless incursions in the history of literature and culture – from Ovid to Chaucer and Shakespeare to the moderns, James, Pound or Eliot, amongst many others. She exemplifies how the myth of masculine creativity over women's objecthood has been widespread and impregnated women's own vision of their subjectivity as inexistent, women envisaging themselves as not the artistic creator but the art object itself, woman as the "text" (the 'blank page') upon which the word is written. Thus, she argues, the "attraction of women writers to personal forms of expression like letters, autobiographies, confessional poetry, diaries, and journals points up the effect of a life experienced as an art or an art experienced as a kind of life" (299).

In fact, the transgression represented and embodied in Dinesen's tale is manifold. It allows the reader an ironical revisitation of the collective cultural memory – womanhood framed by domesticity, law and tradition – which, through a performative gesture it literally exhibits, while making the proposition that women's body, its blood and fluids, is the first and sometimes "the only accessible medium for self-expression" as Gubar sustains (296). And she further argues, "Not only are artist and art object physically linked but also the canvases in the nun's gallery are a direct response to the princesses' private lives" (Ibid.). One could nevertheless reclaim the framed "blank page" and its transgressive unframing of an erased identity, as an act of empowerment and defiance for the otherwise mute existence of these women, to whom each viewer makes up a face and a story, beyond the opaqueness of each canvas and a gold plated royal inscription.

Susan Gubar wrote this essay in 1981, i.e., over thirty years ago, notwithstanding the echo of her premonitory words is still with us today:

“We are only just beginning to read the patterns and trace the figures in what all too recently has been viewed as nothing but the blank pages of women’s cultural and literary history” (308).

III- Paula Rego’s “Oratório” (2011) – women framed/unframed

The centrality of the body is to this date a main *topos* of women’s creativity and crucial in contemporary women’s art. Contemporary Feminism has been reclaiming that the need for a situated politics – a ‘politics of location’ – is inseparable from the mapping of new feminine corpographies⁹. Today, Feminism is still at odds with this issue, which, however, as Judith Butler has argued¹⁰, has somehow shifted from “writing the body” (the concept of *feminine écriture* postulated by French feminists in the 60s and 70s¹¹, and even Virginia Woolf’s symbolic killing of the “Angel in the house”, to free the authoress), to “inscribing the materiality of the female body” (Butler, 1993:ix). The awareness of the materiality or corporeality of the feminine has thus come to mean the redesigning of the boundaries of the female body and the search for new patterns of representation, in parallel with a redefinition of the patterns of identity, subjectivity, social roles and political citizenship.

Thus, in the third and last section of my paper, I propose to focus on a visual composition, which could also aptly be called an installation, by the artist Portuguese artist Paula Rego, that was exhibited at her museum in Cascais, which was founded in

⁹ This section of my paper is further developed in a previous essay of mine: Ana Gabriela Macedo, “Herstories: new cartographies of the feminine and the politics of location”, in *The Controversial Women’s Body: Images and Representations in Literature and Art*, eds. V. Fortunati, A. Lamarra, E. Federici, Bononia : Bononia U.P, 2003 (71-86).

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993.

¹¹ See for example Hélène Cixous’ claims in ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (‘Le rire de la méduse’, *L’arc*, 1975): “Write your self. ... Your body must be heard. ... To write. An act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength ... her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; ... inscribe the breath of the whole woman” in Marks, Elaine and de Courtivron, Isabelle, eds., *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (New York, Schocken Books, Univ. of Mass. Press, 1981), p.250; Luce Irigaray’s ‘Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un’ (*Minuit*, 1977), as well as Julia Kristeva’s ‘La Femme ce n’est jamais ça’ (*Tel quel*, Autumn 1974).

2009 and is tellingly named “House of Stories”¹². I am referring to the piece “Oratório”, a work which I would argue, can be understood as a mirror image of Dinesen’s story, “The Blank Page”, as it shares with the latter its central trope – silence, as the metaphorization of the female body and the erasure of identity – nevertheless offering the viewer an overcrowded scenario with puppets as surrogate representations of human beings, in this the inverse of the Blank Page’s nudity and tacit mutism. The two share, however, the same paradoxical universe of denial and possibility, framed by repression and censorship, while both exhibit an identical performative “unframing” gesture where the reader/viewer is actively called to participate. Once again we call to our help the concepts of interference, interpenetration, interweaving, interlocking of images and texts as described in the first section of my paper, deeply anchored in the fields of interdisciplinarity and intertextuality, and the global understanding of an hermeneutics that, as Saïd argues, rejects the “silent norm” of the autonomy of fields and the “purity” of the disciplines as essential categories, existing, as it were, in a void of extreme specialization (Saïd, 1982: 12-13). Instead, with Saïd we envisage an interpretive gesture that rejects the deafness to the existing dialogue among fields and disciplines as if they were “antagonist and immune to each other”, and besides, involves social awareness, or to put it in his powerful phrase, one that calls for a “vigilant form of interpretation” grounded on the “value of responsibility” (Ibid., p. 24-5).

In view of our present case-studies, set within the frame (and the “unframing”) of contemporary Feminism, I want to recall Griselda Pollock’s urge for a pressing shift of paradigm and a redefinition of Feminism as a “series of interlocking practices of making, analysis, historical revision, theoretical expansion, and astute and continuing analysis of ever-changing socio-political and cultural situations (...) feminist work is transgressive of existing institutions and structures in which it nonetheless has to intervene, and to which it should make a radical difference” (Pollock, in Kokolli, 2008: 255).

The composition “Oratório” gave its name to the exhibition which was inaugurated in July 2011 at Rego’s museum in Cascais (her home town), tellingly called

¹² Paula Rego is internationally acclaimed as one of the leading contemporary women artists, Portuguese by birth, she lives and works in London. Amongst the many critical assessments she has received over the years, see the following which offer different perspectives and contexts of her work: Macedo, Ana Gabriela, *Paula Rego e o Poder da Visão. Reescritas, Re-visões, Adaptações* (Lisboa: Cotovia, 2010; Lisboa, Maria Manuel, *Paula Rego’s Map of Memory. National and Sexual Politics*, London: Ashgate, 2003; Rosengarten, Ruth, *Contrariar, Esmagar, Amar. A Família e o Estado Novo na obra de Paula Rego* (Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim, 2009).

Casa das Histórias (*House of Stories*, inaugurated in Sept 2009)¹³. The piece faced the visitant centre stage in the main room of the Gallery, as an exuberant Introit – at the same time disquieting and moving – to the whole series of images, prints and paintings to follow in the remaining rooms of the *House*. Space is here a crucial issue. The majestic size of this closet-oratory, about 3 meters high, standing solo in the large room, faces the viewer with its panels wide open like any other sacred triptych unveiling its mysteries, only here these are profane mysteries – exposing women and children in deep suffering, uncovering private scenes of violence and victimization and making them shockingly public.

As it is well known, Portugal is a deeply religious, traditionally catholic country. An oratory, as described by Helena de Freitas, curator of the exhibition, is a familiar object of devotion, often to be found in the homes of traditional families, which performs “a dual religious and domestic function and establishes a closer and more direct relationship between the home and the divine. Saints are the most commonly found figures, being small sculptures, also created to protect the families, which are placed on these intimate altars”. At the very heart of the profane triptych, the three dimensional models created by the artist as proto-sculptures create a grotesque universe of extreme despondency and abandon, in a direct evocation of the topic proposed to the artist by the London “Foundling Museum” (previously, the Foundling Hospital, an 18th century institution that took under its care abandoned children). But this sacrificial leitmotif is clearly recognizable in Rego’s previous work as stemming from other sources of inspiration, predominantly literary narratives of the British and the Portuguese literary canon, from Dickens and Brontë, as well as two Portuguese realist writers, favourites of Rego, Camilo Castelo Branco and Eça de Queiroz. Moreover, the scenes staged issue from Rego’s own “interior theatre”¹⁴, revisitations of her recurrent themes and obsessions, where spectral images from her earlier compositions, as “Jane Eyre”, “Father Amaro” or “Maria Moisés”, depicting rape, infanticide, child abuse, reappear

¹³ Helena de Freitas claims concerning this exhibition: “In this recent cycle of Works, based on the dialogue that is created between drawing and sculpture, the artist deliberately seeks to stree the sense of ritual and to make the narratives much denser”[From the catalogue of the exhibition by Helena de Freitas, (dated July2011, unnumbered)].

¹⁴ “Painting is practical but it’s magical as well. Being in this studio *is like being inside my own theatre*”, (my italics). *Apud* “Paula Rego in conversation with John McEwen”, catalogue *Paula Rego*, Serpentine Gallery (15Out – 20 Nov. 1988), 41-48, p.48. *Vide* as well John McEwen, ‘Letter from London. Paula Rego’, *Colóquio Artes* 50 (September 1981), 58-59, this quote p.58. In his review, McEwen (as if corroborating our views expressed in this essay) stresses the “vitality” of Rego’s art, its theatrical quality “with much humour and not a trace of whimsy (...). No sides are taken, no conclusions drawn” (p.59).

time and time again, phantasmagorias in a performative display, as disclaimers of human cruelty, hypocrisy and ultimate abjection.

On the backstage of this profane “Oratory”, in the same main room, a subsequent series of images are unveiled before the viewer, singular episodes of a dramatization previously announced, as brief thematic soliloquies. Each image staging a singular horror – the human predator in all its figurations, from direct horror and passive complicity, to agonistic fear.

We proceed to another room, but the open shutters of the “Oratory” do not close on us, conversely their unveiled/ *unframed* mysteries lurk in every corner, assume new proportions and new shapes that are successively conjured by the artist. As if the bleak visions of the “Oratory” were successively revisited and reenacted in a palimpsestic narrative creating a dense hypertextual chain – through plates from the Untitled series on clandestine abortion, “The Life of Mary”, “Father Amaro”, to engravings and prints from the series on Virtues and Vice – Love, Mercy, Disdain, Shame, Envy, Sloth. These and many other images follow each other in the adjoining rooms, as if issuing out of their own accord – “excavating time” – from the nightmare of the “Oratory”, as its legal dwellers. This section is part of a second exhibition within the former one, which the artist obscurely named “The body has more elbows”, a phrase used by the artist, in a clear reference to the hardship of working from the model, as stated in the catalogue by the curator, Ana Ruivo:

This [painting in the early 1980s] was so easy to do! And so quick. It was like squeezing your head and everything came out. I held the paintbrush, started at one point, and went ahead, until the bottom. Now it’s more difficult, working with a model. *The body has more elbows* ¹⁵.

It is however important to stress a point of cleavage at the heart of Rego’s 2011 exhibition at the House of Stories – another large, solo composition in a large room, authored by Vic Willing (Rego’s late husband), named *Place* which strikes a powerful dialogue with Rego’s exhibited work. *Place* is an oil triptych dated from 1976-78 which stages a “vivid scenery”, in Willing’s words, of the identity of the artist – his physical and mental space – represented through a few personal objects of his daily routine: a bag, a mug, a plant, a deckchair. And Rego comments: “*Place* is without doubt the best thing Vic ever did. It is complex, it has all manner of clues in it, it has more of the things he did well than any other painting and shows many aspects of his

¹⁵ Paula Rego *apud* Ana Ruivo, (consultant of *Casa das Histórias* and author of the exhibition catalogue), “The body has more elbows” (June 2011), unnumbered.

work”¹⁶. “Place” strikes the viewer as a clear evocation of Willing’s presence in Rego’s pictoric (as well as emotional) universe.

“The intellect and hope and travel and sex”, a picture “about exploring (...) the centre balanced against the two other parts” (159-160), thus Rego unravels the primordial meaning of “Place” and the reason why it was chosen to figure in this show. Rego’s comments testify the centrality of the dialogue staged between the two main pieces exhibited, “Oratório” and “Place”, both works issuing from the “interior theatre” of each artist, both “excavating time” and memory, uncovering and recovering them in each specific way. Both works are excessive in their own right, one overcrowded, the other bare and neat. They share an excessive dimension and impose themselves solo in the large empty space of the rooms where they are set as pivotal figurations; excessive their subject-matter too, foregrounding in multifarious ways a ritualistic projection of opposites – loneliness, fear and desire, absence and possibility.

Having reached my final paragraph, I would like to make clear that it was not my intention to wrap up my argument, close my case and “hand you after an hour’s discourse a nugget of pure truth”, as Virginia Woolf once wittily wrote in the conclusion of one of her most famous and also most polemical essays, *A Room of One’s Own*, (1929 [1981]: 5). Like her, “I should never be able to come to a conclusion” (Ibid.), but nevertheless, I would modestly hope, to contribute with my case-studies to the fostering of the dialogue amongst the disciplines and to challenge the porosity of the fields of knowledge and, this way, join in with those who deem critical scholarship to exist “beyond the murmur of mere prose”. The writing of women’s history – and one could equally say, the writing of Feminism’s history – is largely articulated through a dialogical process of “framing”/ “unframing” women and their social, cultural, political and aesthetic representations. However controversial, unstable and ambivalent at times, this is a process which, one would hope, signifies “a constant projection into the future, a ‘poiesis’ to come, a becoming” (Pollock, 2008: 277), and therefore, one that necessarily calls for a “prospective retrospect”.

¹⁶ Paula Rego, “Place” text from the catalogue “Victor Willing uma retrospectiva”, Lisbon, Fundação Paula Rego/Casa das Histórias, 2010, (pp.158-9).

