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“Writing Challenges: At the Frontiers of the Body. Apropos of Cindy Sherman in Dialogue with Luiza Neto Jorge”

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I first started working on creative writing within the pedagogical context; subsequently I came into contact with the Education and Events team (CPA) in CCB (Belém Cultural Center), at the time coordinated by choreographer and cultural programmer Madalena Victorino, with whom I had the privilege of working for some years. The personal satisfaction drawn from these experiences, as well as the participants' overwhelming enthusiasm, led me to outline a postdoctoral project that included creative writing interventions in museums. The FCT has awarded me a research grant to: i) study the representations of the body and identity in the work of two poets (Luiza Neto Jorge and Elizabeth Bishop) and two photographers (Helena Almeida and Cindy Sherman); ii) plan and implement creative writing interventions in the museum, dialogically relating the verbal and visual texts of these authors. At the beginning of 2009, I contacted Cristina Gameiro, currently responsible for the CCB's Department of Education, who received this proposal with interest and helped me launch the Writing Challenges.

This project is entitled *At the Frontiers of the Body* because it intends to problematize the corporeal dimension of identity. It has a performative character, since the target audience are all the museum visitors who happen to pass by the “target work” during the three hours that each of my “cultural performances” lasts. I approach the visitors at random (in Portuguese, Spanish, English or French), introduce the project briefly, and invite them to write, to become artists in their own right. These interventions are developed taking into account the venue and the curators' choices; and they are structured by prior research, in order to highlight the main features of the selected artists' oeuvre. I aim to offer the “writers” the opportunity to plunge into a state of concentration, in order to engage into an imaginative search. And so I create a sort of “island” suspended in the flow of visitors, many of which are on the move, fulfilling a mere cultural ritual, far from the receptiveness at the root of the aesthetic experience.

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Next to the chosen work I place two wooden benches on which I put some reference books (the poetry anthology and the artist's catalogue), some paper (color and size depending on the activity), and writing instruments (felt pens, pencils and ballpoint pens) for the visitor to choose, which already generates an opportunity to reflect on the material dimension of writing. Visitors are usually willing to share their texts, so I leave them on one of the benches for other people to read. Finally, in front of the chosen work, I line up some folding benches where there is always at least one "writer," throughout the period these interventions take place.

I start by making sure that people are available to listen to my proposal, since some visitors feel intimidated and choose "not to have time." In this first approach I briefly introduce the project and share some reflections about the "target work," considering the artist's overall production and the context of the exhibition (in particular when it is thematically organized). I then establish a connection between this visual text and the chosen literary quotation, usually handwritten on a rectangle of colored paperboard, which I hand over to the visitors, to inspire them while writing, or for them to carry along as they stroll through the exhibition and decide whether or not to take part in the Writing Challenge. Once they have finished the text (written in their mother tongue for maximum creative freedom), I invite the "writers" to share their work, reading it out to me, or hearing me read it. This moment is extremely important since it values each individual's creative potential and validates the communicative efficacy of writing, embodying the word. Furthermore, I invite participants to take a look at the books on display and to read the full poem from which I have selected the verse(s), which introduces them to the poetry of Neto Jorge or Bishop and to the visual artist's oeuvre; sometimes, it is the participant's companions who handle these books while waiting.

During these performances I meet with many apologetic answers, "I can't write" or "I'm sorry, I have absolutely no imagination," but those who accept the Challenge become proud of having dared to imagine, and transfigure the serious look used by standard museum visitors into the creator's open smile.

In the exhibition *She is a Femme Fatale* (Dec 2009/Jan 2010, CCB), a display of the Berardo Collection's works, showing woman artists from the beginning of the 20th century to the contemporary context, I was invited by the artists and curators Ana Rito and Hugo Barata to plan and put into practice an extensive series of interventions (totaling 30 hours), inspired by images of seven photographers.

I will now describe my proposal for Cindy Sherman's *Untitled* (1981), a photograph from the Centerfolds series, originally an assignment to the magazine *Artforum*,

which ended up rejecting the work due to its provocative tone. In fact, when the series was later shown in the Metro Pictures gallery in New York, it caused some controversy amongst the feminist community, which accused the artist of victimizing the female figure. Sherman subverts the typical iconography of the centerfolds, with its alluring and sexy women on display, and chooses a high-angle shot to present figures often lying down, depicted in a close-up that highlights their vulnerability. The spectator's voyeurism is further foregrounded by the theatrical lighting, combined with a strong chromatic contrast that parodies the rhetoric of this type of image, as well as by the fact that many of these figures, framed within a flattened space, seem to be lost in contemplation, ignoring the look that dissects them. The disturbing effect of these compositional choices is hyperbolized by the large formats of the prints, which present the body almost life-size, accentuating the fictional nature of physical identity.

After contextualizing the photograph, developing my initial remarks according to the interest and availability of my interlocutors, I highlighted the fact that the woman's body is partially obliterated, and the center of the visual field lies on the triangle circumscribed by the legs, with the vertex on the subject's genitalia. Indeed, the female figure is blatantly sexualized and inscribed in the melodramatic paradigm, figuring as a modern version of the lady in distress, a gender code which is underlined by the prevailing pink tone (the night gown and the flowery bed sheet), and also by the subtle detail of the engagement ring on the visible hand (the right hand, associated with agency, remaining outside the picture frame). This amputated body, face cut just above the vacant eyes, seems to struggle against anxiety, alone on an empty bed: taking about a third of the image, the wrinkled sheet becomes the objective correlative of the figure's internal struggle and conveys a sense of abandonment, since it points to the hypothetical absent partner.

In my approach I proposed a narrative frame, stating that the woman had just awoken from a disturbing dream and asking the visitors to describe it, inspired by two verses by Luiza Neto Jorge – "You've slept with the chimneys smoking / I slept giving birth to light" ("Prelude for Sex and Dream," my adaptation, 30). After reading this excerpt out loud, I made some comments concerning the text the visitors were about to write: on the one hand, I mentioned the implications of choosing different subjects of enunciation, from the closeness of the first person singular, identified with the female figure, to the greater distance of the second and third persons; on the other hand, I underlined the paradoxical quality of these verses, close to the oniric state. This type of dreamlike coherence allowed me to suggest to groups of visitors (such as multi generational families) the surrealist technique of the "exquisite corpse" – a

sheet of paper where each person is going to write a sentence, then fold the paper and pass it on, so that the next participant cannot read what was previously written. Turning the writing process into an inclusive game foregrounds its accessibility as a means of expression (contradicting the elitist biases that denigrate the creative potential of the “common man”), and values each voice’s singularity in the construction of meaning(s).

This exercise in particular was equally suited for a younger audience, with whom I have developed a more intimate strategy, suggesting that they start by discovering this lady’s name, so as to humanize the character and establish an emotional bond with her. There were groups of friends that wrote texts together, under the supervision of an adult, and families with young children who, unable to write yet, dictated their story to their mother or father. I would like to quote two of these contributions. One child referred to the contrast between the states of sleep and consciousness as a means to combat the terror of immobility: “My name is Rodrigo, I am five years old. To me, the woman in the photograph is called Amélia. She has just woken up and is sad. She dreamt she was in prison, stuck to the floor. When she wakes up she’ll feel happier because the dream wasn’t real.” Another child associated the character’s anxiety to the primordial fear of the dark: “Luísa dreamt she was in the dark. She was looking for the light, but she couldn’t find it ” (Duarte, seven years old).

Most adults also described a state of distress, often framed by a love crisis, the loss of the loved one (“How noisy it is to wake up in bed alone and see love away”), or the breaking of a commitment, whether by fear of its consequences (leading to “the challenge of solitude”), or by rejection (“You went away. / I remained with the long awaited awareness. / White smoke rose as you burned... I’m going to take off the ring”). In some cases, the melodramatic subtext was hyperbolized, for example when one visitor suggested that the woman had a miscarriage and was later abandoned by her companion, or when another one hinted that her cataleptic state resulted from having taken pills to try to commit suicide (this assumption came from a young female doctor who confided that she had dealt with some tough cases in the emergency room the night before). For others, the female character’s melancholic expression was due to a night of alcohol abuse, ending in casual sex, which accentuated her feelings of desolation.

A significant group of participants referred to existential malaise, to an empty life undermined by skepticism (“Maybe something’s bothering her, some problem to which there is only one absolute truth: doubt”), to the burden of mortality (“She dreamt about death dressed in black”) or mediocrity, in a nihilistic context, in this

“bloody postmodern life,” where “surviving isn’t good, but being dead is even worse.” There were some allusions to the context of artistic production, to the malcontent USA generations growing up in the idyll of the suburbia, shaped by TV and by mediatized identity roles: “I had an American dream... I live in Technicolor.” Interestingly enough, this last interpretation in part unveils Sherman’s motivations, since her work parodies the female stereotypes offered by the mass media that have for decades fed the Western collective imaginary. Other visitors were directly inspired by the verses: engaging in a quite linear reading, some alluded to the woman’s desire of becoming a mother; some attributed an oppressive quality to the light (“I gave and stole from the light, the lingering light that fumes... I no longer intend to return with the voice still remaining from the remnants of rest to be grieved”); some rephrased the quotation (“You fell asleep giving birth to light. You woke up with your head in flames... Today I won’t get up. I’ll leave that for tomorrow”).

In contrast to the dominant dystopic view, some visitors saw in the character’s ambiguous expression an index of change, the choice to abandon an oppressive relationship, or the ability to turn suffering into joy: “After a slow and melancholic struggle that made her sink deeper and deeper into the airless space of other memories, Helena concentrated all the energy of her own grief and turned it into the serenity of her awakening in the illusory apple tree orchard [that she had dreamt of].” Some visitors conjured up a creative persona: “Today I dreamt I’d be an artist. I’d paint pictures with the idea that flowers have of themselves.” Some imagined a dream of ascension, capable of overcoming opposites: “She rose up in the sky and saw the earth from the universe, she looked back and didn’t see an end, but a beginning.”

During the nine hours (three sessions) that I have implemented this particular Writing Challenge, I gathered seventy-three contributions (though some visitors took their texts home), from which I have only analyzed those written in Portuguese. Having taken place in the context of a free entrance museum, open to a heterogeneous public, this project demonstrates the enormous creative potential of adults who, with few exceptions, rarely have occasion to use their imagination. Indeed, the current socialization practices, in particular the school curricula (after primary school), value above all the analytical competences and promote mainly the argumentative text. This may explain why children come close at once when they see the writing instruments, while adolescents and adults need to be persuaded to participate. Given the relevance of language and imagination to structure subjectivity, to (re)construct identity throughout our lives - especially in contemporary society, characterized by a

fast pace of change and by ever-growing demands of active citizenship - I believe this type of intervention should be encouraged in public spaces.

Bibliography used in this Writing Challenge: Luiza Neto Jorge, *Poesia* (Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim, 1993), and Catherine Morris, *The Essential Cindy Sherman* (New York: The Wonderland Press, 1999).