

Contrary to the expectations that usually surround an anthological exhibition of an artist's work, for the majority of its audience this exhibition will correspond more to a moment of revelation rather than to a re-visitation or a re-reading of Luisa Cunha's work. I am not, of course, referring only to that which has been conventionally designated as the great public, but also to the one that is familiar with contemporary art, including that which is composed of people who gravitate to the so-called art world, and who, likely as not, came in contact with the artist's output only, or mainly, through the works which received a greater visibility. In fact, although this is an artist whom I would not hesitate to consider as one of the fundamental names in the Portuguese artistic context of the past two decades, Luisa Cunha's trajectory has been relatively discreet and her work remains little known as yet.

Luisa Cunha's artistic career is atypical. An unmistakable indicator of the fact is that she initiated her artistic activity somewhat belatedly, in an age when most artists aspire to enter the art world professionally from very early on. In 1987, many years after her studies in German Philology, and after having started her professional activity as a secondary school teacher, which she still pursues today, Luisa Cunha decided to take her interest in art further by enrolling at the art school Ar.Co, in Lisbon. She was thirty-seven years old at the time. She completed her art studies in 1994, at the age of forty-five. Her first participation in group exhibitions dates from the previous year. Luisa Cunha allowed her entrance into the art world to fall in step with the necessary time to consolidate her work in conceptual and formal terms. In fact, it was in the advanced stage of her art studies that she made what may be considered her first relevant works, included in this exhibition in their own right rather than for any historicist whim or any fetishism of the origins: *Subversão I* [Subversion I] (1992) and *Straight to the point* (1993), shown spontaneously at the school without any prior notice; the extensive series *Objectos sem nome* [Nameless Objects] (1993), which are also exhibited here for the first time; *Sem título* [Untitled] (1993), *Drop the bomb!* (1993), *Do what you have to do* (1994)¹, and *Hello!* (1994), pieces

that are decisive in the definition of her vocabulary, as well as in the reception of her work, and were presented for the first time at Ar.Co in student shows.

The development of her artistic activity away from the protocols of professionalisation – Luisa Cunha has become linked to a gallery only since last year, and her integration into the art market is still incipient – helps to explain both a rhythm of production that is foreign to the pressures of the artistic system towards hyperactivity, and the scant circulation and visibility of her work. Up until recently, and as happened with many Portuguese artists of her generation (that emerged in the first half of the 1990s), her work was shown in a dispersed and unavoidably atomised manner in group exhibitions, some of which resulted from informal dynamics of self-organisation involving artists of the same generation, whilst others came about through the initiative of a few curators who soon acknowledged the significance and singularity of her work.

Around four years ago, when the possibility of organising an anthological exhibition started to be contemplated, Luisa Cunha had only done one solo exhibition – in the chapel adjacent to Casa de Serralves, at the end of 1998. Initially, and before it was taken over by the Serralves Museum, this project was destined for the spaces of the Lyceu Passos Manuel, the high school where the artist taught at the time. An anthological second solo exhibition, and at a site eccentric to the circuit of contemporary art! Such a gesture could hardly be more in tune with her discreet and atypical trajectory. As it now materialises at an institution as central and prestigious as the Serralves Museum, sparing the artist and the curator a disproportionate voluntarism, the dissonant character of this exhibition regarding the conventional stages of artistic careers is further reinforced. An exhibition which constitutes a return, not entirely devoid of irony, to the place of her first solo exhibition: the two pieces (BC and 3, 2, 1) shown at the time find once again their site at the same space almost ten years after.

From these introductory notes it is not legitimate to conclude the false idea that Luisa Cunha is, or has been at any time, a marginal or misunderstood artist. From very early on, her work was unequivocally noticed by art critics of widely different aesthetic and ideological sensibilities. Already, in 1994, Alexandre Pomar referred to

Do what you have to do as a “strong intervention” within the scope of an exhibition (“20000 Minutos de Arte”, at Instituto Superior Técnico, Lisbon) that brought together very young artists at the beginning of their careers.² João Pinharanda, for his part, included Luisa Cunha among the artists featured at that exhibition “whose future is already evident.”³ In critical reviews of the exhibition “Greenhouse Display” (Estufa Fria, Lisbon, 1996), which assembled a very heterogeneous constellation of artists from an emerging generation, the same critic highlighted the piece *Sem título* [Untitled] (1993) as one of the most interesting in the show – “a piece of exceptional interest”⁴ – that didn’t go unnoticed for instance by António Cerveira Pinto⁵ or Isabel Carlos.⁶ Commenting on the piece *Ali vai o João* [There goes João] (1996), shown at the exhibition “Mais do que Ver”, which took place within the scope of the Jornadas de Arte Contemporânea in Porto, in 1996, Alexandre Melo placed it “in the sequence of a series of significant works [by the artist] in which sound has a fundamental role.”⁷ And Alexandre Pomar salvaged that piece, together with the one by Ceal Floyer, from what he considered to be the “prevailing nullity” of that exhibition.⁸ Finally, without specifying them, one could mention the brief but positive commentaries of several critics quoted herein (António Cerveira Pinto, João Pinharanda e Alexandre Pomar) regarding *Dirty Mind* (1996), when it was presented at the exhibition “Mediações” (Palácio das Galveias, Lisbon, 1997).

The contingencies of Luisa Cunha’s exhibition trajectory and the ensuing reception of her work by the critics and the audience have created and established the idea, which this exhibition completely denies, that she is an artist who fundamentally works with sound. It is undeniable that sound (to be precise, the reproduction of the human voice in speech acts⁹) is, from the beginning, at the core of her artistic practice, being a predominant, often even exclusive medium in many of her key works. The addressing of the spectator through a voice which enunciates a text (with very few exceptions the voice of the artist herself¹⁰) has been a recurring strategy used by Luisa Cunha to explore her interest in language as a socially codified (conditioned and conditioning) instance of mediation of the experience and perception of reality, and to create unexpected and destabilising situations which invite reflection and convoke the

self-reflexive consciousness of the spectator in the act of aesthetic perception.

However, it is necessary to diffuse the excessive identifying of Luisa Cunha's artistic practice with sound as media.

Firstly, we should bear in mind several pieces of an initial stage from which sound is absent, most of them related to the field of sculpture, although they move away from traditional sculpture (even when traditional materials such as clay or plaster are used). On the other hand, the works from the first years which incorporate sound/text are still strongly indebted to the link between her practice and sculpture during those years. I am not referring here to the way in which, in those works, sound comes into a relationship with the space and with the body of the spectator located in space, but rather to the fact that such an element appears repeatedly combined with readymade objects and materials of a varied nature: an electronic panel (*Subversão I*, 1992), a sheet of newspaper, sand and loudspeakers (*Sem título*, 1993), tables or a counter (*Drop the bomb!*, 1994), mirrors (*Hello!*, 1994), a pulpit (*Do what you have to do*, 1994¹¹), a shutter (*Dirty Mind*, 1995), or a chair and mirrors (*Ali vai o João*, 1996). Although, as a rule, the material elements are reduced to the minimum and maintain a visually discreet presence, it was necessary to wait for works such as *The Hat* (1997) and *BC* (1998) for sound/text to appear as autonomous from material elements.¹² Finally, since 1998, we have been witnessing how Luisa Cunha's work has been branching out into other media with a particular insistence on drawing and photography (often incorporating text), or how she has been using text without resorting to sound (nevertheless emphasising rhythms and cadences that confer an eminently musical quality to the text). It is a fact that, since the end of the 1990s, sound is far from being predominant in her artistic production.

In 1992, at a small theatre studio in Lisbon, the artist presented a performance that I shall describe. It began with the artist sitting anonymously amongst the audience. There was no scenery but a black stage on which was placed a structure formed by two rectangular planes opened and connected at an angle of 90 degrees, suggesting another, imaginary space. After a wait of many minutes, which generated a crescendo of expectation as to what was about to take place, the artist got up and walked

towards the transition space between the stage and the audience. At that moment, a hypnotic soundtrack with a duration of approximately twenty minutes started to be heard, consisting of a small excerpt of the theme *What's behind that curtain?* by Laurie Anderson (which was also the title of the performance) repeated constantly. Then Luisa Cunha started to draw on the floor, with chalk, the outline of legs and feet of some spectators who were seated in the first row. Afterwards, she drew the outline of her own body in different points of space and in different positions. The performance was over as soon as the soundtrack ended. The artist left the room, as silently and discreetly as she'd appeared, leaving behind the abstract drawing of the body marks, particularly her own.

The question of the body as a measure of our relationship with space and objects, with the world around us, was exemplarily expressed in that performance. That question, which is central in the work of Luisa Cunha, was also noteworthy in a series of sculptures of the following year, which to a certain extent were reminiscent of the process sculpture of the end of the 1960s¹³, and which resulted from the manipulation of the material (clay) through very simple procedures such as throwing it repeatedly against the floor, bending it or rolling it. The aim of the artist wasn't so much to emphasise the physical properties and the process of making the sculptures, but rather to bring the material into shape. Hence, we may use a traditional sculptural term such as modelling to understand the process of making those objects: modelling through the action of the body, and particularly the hands, by subjecting the material to certain forces, by the constant pondering of looking and its leading role in the whole process. Although it incorporated a margin of contingency and indetermination (which led the artist to consider many of the sculptures as unsatisfactory, and to reject them), the process was strongly controlled through a constant pondering of what to do and how to do it. The sculptures are fragile, archaic almost, they take on organic and elemental shapes, some suggest instruments of aggression (daggers, for instance) and gain a phallic connotation, others resemble tubes or pipes. Many evoke the hand that participated in their making, and seem to be made to be manipulated by the hand. In several of the objects modelled by the action of throwing the clay against the floor (actually against a textured cloth on the

floor), the process of shaping the material defined, simultaneously, its texture, which is a fundamental aspect, alongside weight and density, to the sensation of scale which they convey.

The question of scale (and its relation first with the artist's body and ultimately with the body of the spectator) reappears even more explicitly in an installation from the same year composed of a multitude of handmade paper boats scattered on the floor. The boats' dimensions were extremely variable within a scale defined by the minimum length (approximately 1.5 cm) and the maximum length (approximately 120 cm) with which the artist was able to create the boats by using one single piece of paper. The abrupt variation of scale, resulting from the coexistence side by side of boats of widely different sizes arouse in the spectator an awareness of his own body as mediation in the perception of the objects.

Linha #1 [Line #1] (2001) provides an interesting parallel to this installation. Along the four walls of a room, the artist traces two parallel horizontal lines and, in between them, writes a text: the upper line is equivalent to the height at which she is able to draw a line with her arm stretched upwards (approximately 195 cm); the lower line indicates the height which her hand reaches with the arm stretched downwards and without bending her legs (approximately 62.5 cm); amongst other things the text said that the artist wrote it at the height along which, while standing and wearing shoes with 5 cm heels, she was able to write with the least effort (approximately 137 cm). To point to her body as the measure of the drawing, together with the direct reference to the performative action of her body as making the drawing, provokes an interesting effect of resonance and mirroring in the act of aesthetic reception, requesting in the spectator the awareness of his own moving body and of his experience of perception/reflection as it unfolds in time and space.

Linha #1 is one among several works in which Luisa Cunha seems to abide by the precept, extensively cultivated by ancient philosophers, according to which the act of walking stimulates thought.¹⁴ In fact, the spectators' experience is converted into a peripatetic activity. The sound installation *The Hat* (1997), presented for the first time at the cloister of an old convent ("Interior / Exterior" exhibition), is a paradigmatic example of the way she engages us in an experience which is both physical and

mental. In order to reconstruct the narrative that is being told, we must walk along the space to approach four loudspeakers placed at regular intervals on the walls at eye level. Each loudspeaker continuously broadcasts a fragment of a text in English read haltingly. As we walk through the space, going from one loudspeaker to another, we follow the course of the main character (the man in the hat), who is mentioned in the narrative. Like a puzzle whose pieces we lock together according to a guiding thread, the narrative unfolds. The thread here being the curiosity that the hat arouses in people who walk by the man (first in the street, after at the bus stop, and then during the trip). However, once the narrative is deciphered, we are taken back by perplexity: nothing is said about the reason why everybody looked at the man's hat or what lies behind the association which his wife establishes between the hat and their granddaughter when meeting him at the end of the story. The strangeness sensed by the people looking at the man's hat becomes our own as we listen to the story.

Similarly, in 3, 2, 1, one of the most amusing of Luisa Cunha's pieces, we ignore that which the little monkey had been trying to tell us for so long. The title alludes to the movement of the progressive approach of the spectator to the work and, at the same time, to the phased process of the act of reception. Initially, as we enter the narrow and long room, we can only make out a spot on the opposite wall above a line drawn at about 155 cm from the floor. We are immediately drawn towards that point of perspective. A few seconds later, as we more or less stand in the middle of the room, we are able to glimpse the figure of a monkey sitting on that line of the horizon. At last, already perching over the image, we discover that the monkey addresses us: "I've been trying to tell you this for a long time", reads a hand-written sentence on the wall. Therefore we are implicated in a process of communication whose message, laconic and incomplete, becomes insignificant. As in *The Hat*, the de-contextualising of the message through resorting to an ellipsis, in a speech act that is already rarefied in itself, provokes a minute but incisive seismic tremor in the process of communication. A strangeness regarding the (indeterminate) meaning of the message that is addressed to us and the (gratuitous) finality of the communication process prevails over the familiarity of linguistic codes.

The way in which 3, 2, 1 convokes the spectator, mobilises and focuses his/her attention, and then confronts him/her with an unexpected situation that defies his/her expectations, brings to mind one of the most frequently shown and known of Luisa Cunha's works, *Dirty Mind* (1995). Once more, that which arouses our attention is not the sound, but rather a red shutter left ajar (here, the point of perspective is given by the slight lifting of one of the blades), an irresistible invitation to peek and see what is happening on the other side. However, once we get there, our curiosity (in a more literal reading, our voyeuristic instinct) is frustrated because the field of vision is blocked by the wall upon which the shutter hangs. Instead, we hear a robotic voice coming from the other side: "I saw you / going in / going down / disappear / getting near / going out". In the act of hearing, the spectator changes from observing subject to subject of observation. This reversal of the terms of the relation between subject and object, between the work and the spectator, hands us back our reflexive consciousness of ourselves and of our act of reception with remarkable efficiency and sense of humour. *Turn around* (2007) takes that operation of objectification of the spectator one step further. The work can be quickly described and it does away with additional comments: four loudspeakers, placed at the corners of a square empty room, emit the sound of a feminine voice that addresses us, first by exclaiming three times (each word clearly spelled out) "you are so beautiful!", and finally requesting the spectator, in an attentive and anxious tone, to turn around himself ("turn around").

While *The Hat* unfolds in a fictional space and time, in other works the spectators' attention is focused on the space of display itself. Because they are irreducibly site-specific, because they cannot be dissociated from the places they were thought for, these works must be reformulated in order to allow for their presentation in other contexts. *Ali vai o João* (1996) is an excellent example. In a large room, located in a former industrial unit (the old premises of *Fábrica das Moagens Harmonia*, in Porto), a sound text named and listed the structural elements (windows, columns, a chair, a door, another room), also identifying the distances in the space. A chair that the artist found in the room when she visited it for the first time was left in the same position,

facing one of the windows. However, the windowpanes were covered with mirrors. The coming together of those two elements underlines the referring of the spectator to the space and his presence in space. During the time the spectator remains in the room, the tendency will be to align the act of observation with the point of view enunciated by the voice. However, the linguistic operation of objectivation of the space and the corresponding strategy of redundancy between that which is seen and that which is said do not close the visual perception experience. Quite the contrary, they raise the question of the irreducibility of that experience to the speech act. The affinities are evident between *Ali vai o João* and the sound installation that the artist conceived, a few months ago, for the space of the library at the Ancient Art Museum in Lisbon (Biblioteca [Library], 2007). Here, a voice identifies the alphabetic labels that punctuate the bookshelves. The voice starts by identifying those points of reference, the co-ordinates of a classification and ordination system intrinsic to the functioning of the library. At a given moment, it expresses the surprise caused by the absence of certain letters ("there is no CC"; "there is no TT / there is no S nor R nor P nor Q"), a small anomaly which any library user easily finds out, but to which he/she doesn't pay special attention. As in *Ali vai o João*, a phenomenon typical of a synaesthesia is produced: the aural perception unleashes and stimulates the visual perception.

Having come to this point, it becomes evident the extent to which vision (and the correlate issues of attentive observation of things and of the point of perspective) occupy a central place in the artistic concerns of Luisa Cunha. Without elaborating further on this matter, it is important to stress the generative role that the observation of spaces, of their architecture and their usage, of what exists and occurs in them, plays in the creative process of many works, and not only in those which take on a site-specific nature. From the beginning, the artist pays constant attention to spaces and the conventions that govern their daily usage. It is not a coincidence that several works were conceived for public spaces. Already in 1992, the artist carried out an intervention at Ar.Co (Subversão II), which consisted of blocking the entrance to the building with one ton of paper, cancelling not only the routines for a few hours but also the very possibility of the school's functioning.¹⁵ One of her first

sound pieces, *Drop the bomb!*, was thought for public or semi-public spaces (bars, canteens, work spaces) in which daily activities take place around tables. The call to insubordination – the sentence “drop the bomb!” repeated to exhaustion albeit in many and varied inflections of tone – introduces a disturbance in the routine of those who use the place. In *Hello!*, another work of this phase, the artist creates, again with disconcerting humour, a situation of intrusion in the privacy of the users of a public toilet: from within a small mirror placed inside the cubicles for individual use, a voice questions and salutes in a friendly tone whomever comes in: “Are you there? Can you hear me? Hello!”

More commonly, even when the works do not have a site specific character, the places where they are shown influence, sometimes in a decisive way, their reception and may amplify the critical intentionality that underlies them. Let us take as an example *Straight to the point*, a domestic heater turned on at maximum strength and placed outdoors, near a public building from where it extracts its energy. Installed in the outer courtyard of Ar.Co school, as it was shown in 1993, the work could read as a fulminating comment on that school establishment. Now positioned next to Casa de Serralves, and regardless of the artist’s intentions, it becomes especially receptive to a critique of the artistic institution. In the same way, the fact that *Do what you have to do* was shown at the main lobby of the rectory of a University, the Instituto Superior Técnico, in Lisbon, is not indifferent for the reception of such a work. The piece is extraordinarily efficient in the ambivalent way in which it approaches the question of power: the text broadcasted by the two loudspeakers may be understood simultaneously as a dictum of subordination to power and as an alignment in favour of self-determination in the face of all and any kind of power. In that spatial and social context, neither the normative and disciplining function of the school institution, nor the strict and imposing architecture of the building – an example of the Estado Novo architecture – go unnoticed.

To say that a text does not replace the actual experiencing of the works is a truism, but can’t be stressed enough when dealing with the work of Luisa Cunha, since it’s intense performativity implicates our body in such a decisive manner and arouses

with such rare intensity the awareness we have of ourselves as spectators and as individuals in the world. This text is far from exhausting the questions, concerns, and strategies (conceptual, formal, discursive) through which Luisa Cunha sets in motion her vision of the world and expresses her irreducible singularity as artist. Throughout this text, we sought to identify and understand the main questions, concerns, and strategies that are found across her work, but also to give an account of the multiple ways in which they are reflected in different works, ensuring the extraordinary vitality of Luisa Cunha's artistic practice. Hence, the insistence on the description and commentary of many works to which, if time had allowed, many more examples and remarks could be added. To close this text, I would like to underline that which seems to be the corollary of the work which Luisa Cunha has been developing, in a position of rare independence, for the last fifteen years: the de-conditioning of habits, of conventions, of expectations and predispositions in the relationship with art and, through it, with the world surrounding us. To that purpose, she questions the spectator and places the act of reception at the centre of her concerns. To the rhetoric and protocols of participation (often demagogical and paternalistic), so widespread in contemporary art, she prefers semantic indetermination, the aporias, impasses in the process of communication, and the effects of redundancy in relation to reality.

¹ For reasons to do with the exhibition area and the type of spaces of Casa de Serralves, Do what you have to do was excluded from the show. The work, together with another piece (Turn around), conceived in 1998, but completed only now, will be presented at Culturgest in Porto, between September and December of this year, in an exhibition which is somehow complementary to this one.

² Alexandre Pomar, "20000 Minutos de Arte", Expresso, November 5, 1994, Cartaz supplement, p. 77.

³ João Pinharanda, "20000 Minutos de Arte", Público, November 5, 1994, Zap supplement, p. 23.

⁴ João Pinharanda, "Efeito de estufa", Público, January 19, 1996, Zap supplement, p. 17.

⁵ António Cerveira Pinto, "Any Daddy Marx", Independente, January 26, 1996, Vida supplement, p. 44.

⁶ Isabel Carlos, "Arte verde", Expresso, January 27 1996, Cartaz supplement, p. 14.

⁷ Alexandre Melo, "Uma Jornada Nómada", Expresso, May 18, 1996, Revista supplement, p. 121.

⁸ Alexandre Pomar, "Mais do que ver", *Expresso*, May 25, 1996, Cartaz supplement, p. 20.

⁹ The exception is *Sem título* (1993), a floor sculpture that incorporates inarticulate sounds created by the artist's own voice.

¹⁰ In *Do what you have to do*, the sound was completely produced in a computer. In *Dirty Mind*, the artist resorted for the first and only time to the voice of another person. The manipulation to which Luisa Cunha subjects sound often results in an impersonal voice of a generalised subject.

¹¹ When last year she showed the sound piece *Do what you have to do*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Vigo, Luisa Cunha disposed of the pulpit that was originally part of the piece, considering it as a dispensable rhetoric device.

¹² Regarding this matter, Luisa Cunha confesses the insecurity she felt while conceiving *BC* for the empty space of the chapel at Casa de Serralves.

¹³ Cf., Ricardo Nicolau, "Fazer coisas com as palavras", *Luisa Cunha: Words for Gardens*, Lisbon: Fidelidade Mundial Confiança; Culturgest, p. 5. This is the text where the sculptures made in 1993 (therein erroneously dated from the following year) are mentioned and commented for the first time. Cf., also Ricardo Nicolau's text published in this catalogue where the author returns to that set of works.

¹⁴ As the artist says in a recent interview (unpublished) with Nuno Crespo: "I cannot be seated, I rather stand, for I think better. It can even be indoors, but I think better while walking."

¹⁵ Some of the works made by Luisa Cunha while studying at Ar.Co, achieved a clear sense of provocation in that context. One such example is *Subversão I*, an amusing commentary on the art market and fashion. A text appears, at different speeds, on an electronic panel hanging on a wall: "Paris / Paris is dead / London is in / \$ / Dead queen / New queen". After the text runs on the panel, a small speaker placed on the floor underneath it, emits the sound of a repetitive, parrot-like voice saying: "London / Paula Rego".