Adriana Varejão in Conversation

with Raphael Fonseca

Raphael Fonseca (RF): I think we can start this conversation by thinking about the exhibition in which you are participating at the Haus der Kunst. The name of the show is *Interiorities*. Four female artists who live in different parts of the world but work with different notions of the "interior" were invited. How do you see this relation in your research?

Adriana Varejão (AV): I am an artist who found her roots in the baroque, and it is interesting to think about how baroque architecture deals with the notion of interiority. Upon entering a baroque building, you notice that the interior space does not relate to the exterior, that it doesn't have any relation to the façade. It is as if we had entered a world of its own, into a reproduction of the atmosphere of theater. It's the opposite of what happens in modernist architecture, for example, which seeks the integration of the internal space with the landscape. There is a book by Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, where he analyses this notion of interiority and the idea of the monad. From this book, I found a clearer concept of what I was doing in my series *Saunas and Baths*. They are spaces of pure interiority, almost psychological, timeless, which have no connection with the outside. These environments were based on baths and saunas that I visited around the world and were designed using 3D software. First, I create the tiled environments, navigating within them until I select a frame. From there, I project and trace the pattern of tiles onto canvas. Then, the filling in with paint begins with each square, which is individually painted, each with a specific color, creating dynamic colors and tones. In this series, I use very few historical references and I focus on the more traditional exercise of painting itself.

RF: Saunas are places that often have a public character but can also be private.

AV: The baths or saunas are spaces intended for cleaning and are always related to bodies. The idea of tiling is connected to a desire for purity and asepsis. Traditionally, places such as butcher shops, slaughterhouses, meat markets, hospitals and morgues where they open bodies, and baths and saunas were tiled. Here, the tile is not intended as decoration but rather translates the idea of cleanliness. It is interesting to think about how these spaces are contaminated by bodies, by their traces, by their most intimate fluids. In the drawings of this series, especially in *A Malvada* (The wicked), the surface is contaminated by dirt, hair, and remains.

RF: There are no human bodies in this series, but the way in which the saunas are depicted is reminiscent for me of something cinematographic. There's something imminent in these images. The titles of the works contribute to this—like this drawing you just mentioned called *A Malvada*. The relationship between word and image seems important to your work, but taking this series as an example, how were the titles decided on?

AV: In the past, there was an interpretation about my work that seemed a little shallow. The meat was related to the afflictions suffered by the colonized peoples and the tiles were a symbol of the colonizers. The lack of complexity and the superficiality of this cliché interpretation bothered me. For me, this unraveling of flesh from tile has always inspired me to more complex relationships that might or might not involve violence. You can think, for example, of interior and exterior, tactile sensuality and reason, culture and barbarism, cooked and raw. The cliché interpretations made me think that the flesh should be taken to another dimension other than just pure torment or affliction. At that time, the subject of meat took on a different weight because of my interest in the baroque and Severo Sarduy's *Written on a Body*, which I first read in the 1980s. Years later, in 2005, when I had an exhibition in Paris, at the Fondation Cartier, I met Philippe Sollers and asked him to write a text for my catalog. That's when I read his book, *Sade Against the Supreme Being*, and one passage caught my

attention: when he says that Sade did not work on bodies but on language in the same way a printmaker puts acid, scratches, and marks on the surface of metal. I very much identified with this idea. This dimension, in which I do not work with meat but with a space of fiction, has led me to Sade and Bataille. The titles of the series *Saunas and Baths* refer to these readings and are ambiguous as they may be good or bad attributions. *O sedutor* (The seducer), *O colecionador* (The collector), *A malvada*, *O voyeur* (The voyeur), *O especialista* (The specialist), *O obsessivo* (The obsessive), *O predileto* (The favorite) . . . make us project psychological atmospheres onto these images and lead us to create our own narrative. We face a situation of imminent risk or pleasure—as well as flesh and entrails which, when related to eroticism, have a double meaning between violence and pleasure.

RF: I think of the genders behind these names: *A malvada*, *O sedutor*.[1] We create a mental image due to archetypes and the relationship to specific genders. I am reminded of the Brazilian sociologist Roberto DaMatta and his book *A casa e a rua* (The house and the street), where he relates, in the case of Brazil, the daily life of the private space to women and the public space to men: house and street. As four female artists have been invited to participate in this show at the Haus der Kunst, I was wondering, what is the relation between your research, gender, and the idea of interiority. In another series of works, you quote the "invitation figures" that are historically masculine, but when you appropriate these images, they are all women; one of them carries a decapitated head that is your self-portrait. How do you see this interpretation of the house as a space historically related to the female gender? Would that be a question for your work?

AV: It's very interesting that you bring up that picture. It was these "invitation figures" that separated public from private spaces; these panels of tiles in the vestibules, courtyards, and

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[1] Of the works listed from the series *Sauna and Baths*, only *A malvada* is feminine (i.e., "the wicked woman" or "feminine wickedness"), as opposed to *O malvado*, which is the noun's masculine form. Alternatively, the seducer referenced by the title *O sedutor* is masculine.

stairwells of Portuguese palaces from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were intended to indicate the location of the building's entrance to the visitor. In this work, I substitute the courtesy figure with this female body regarded as "savage," as "Other" in comparison to the European, inviting you to a weird banquet—more specifically to an anthropophagic ritual, that is, an invitation to enter a place that is Other. There is a sort of game between the idea of a space which is safe, private, internal and the possibility of being guided into a dangerous, unsettling place . . . a space of Otherness.

RF: Since we are talking about these figures and their reference to images from other historical periods, I was curious, when did your close relationship with art history begin?

AV: My first series of paintings from the 1980s entered into a dialog with the baroque in a more pictorial way. They were gestural and of a dense materiality. From the moment I began to identify specific elements of the baroque, and its references, I began to insert elements which were more historical into the work, which later led to a shift in the overall concept. That was in the early 1990s, and that's when I started building different histories and versions of the official narrative, shifting elements and moving the story elsewhere. This was evident in the exhibition *Terra incognita*, in 1992, at Galeria Luisa Strina, in São Paulo. It was inspired by my reading of *Visão do Paraíso* (Visions of Paradise) by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda. In this exhibition, there was, for example, *Quadro ferido* (Wounded painting), a work that is painted in a Chinese style but represents a scene between China and Brazil with sugar cane and figures, such as those out of Eckhout. From there on, I started using many elements from art history and, because of that, doing more research.

RF: Could we call you an "artist-historian"?

AV: I always avoided this term. That is why I even invited a historian, Lilia Schwarcz, to write a book about my work. I saw more than ever how different our visions were. It's as if we had the same interest, but I am on one side of the mirror and she is on the other, and in the

end, we see it from different angles. Severo Sarduy talks about the relationship between "text" and "textile." Text, in the sense of tissue, and it's very interesting because it is timeless; it has no beginning or end, no hierarchy. I always think of references and history like that, with freedom to weave multiple references and versions together. I made the *Mapa de Lopo Homem II* (Map of Lopo Homem II) using iconography that I researched in books of Portuguese map. I know there was a cartographer with that name, but I don't know who he was, where he made the map, where he lived or was born—which I think are concerns more specific to a historian.

RF: Yes, they are different commitments. Perhaps the tension of old Portuguese is more interesting between *história* (history) with an H and *estória* (story) with an E.[2]

AV: Yes, I am more a creator of fictions, of narratives.

RF: I wanted to touch on that point about fictions and those works done in the 1990s. It's a time when there was no Internet and in which you were unable to type "Lopo Homem" into Google and have a blast of images.

AV: Oh, it was so good [*laughs*]! But now it's good, too [*laughs*]! Ah, it was all books. In Rio, there was a bookstore called Leonardo da Vinci, where I went at least twice a week or someone would call to tell me, "Adriana, a book just arrived, and I think you'll like it." They were these books about historical iconography from the Age of Exploration.

RF: I find it interesting to think that these artists you reference also produced—between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries—by means of a culture of bibliophilia. De Bry's books passed hand to hand and that makes it all very different from this current moment of the Virtual, Instagram, and hashtags.

AV: Exactly. So much so that the book's presence is felt in the works—the pagination, for example. The diptych *Proposta para uma catequese, parte I e parte II* (Proposal for a

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[2] In contemporary Portuguese, this differentiation is no longer made, and *história* means bother "history" and "story."

catechesis, part I and part II) is like an open book; there is a page layout, blank space, captions, and also a difference in the blue used for the reproductions of the tile panels because we are dealing with a history learned through reproductions, far from the originals. Here in Brazil, we don't have a Cézanne to see just around the corner; we only have access to copies. I remember when I started using Instagram, I posted about *Gênios da pintura* (Geniuses of painting), a memory that I have of my first contact with art history. It was a publication that my mother collected in installments, and which I was always leafing through. I left Brazil for the first time at the age of twenty-two, and at that time this was the "official" history of Western art that I knew, and I knew it from those books. Now, much later, I often remember having been surprised by the colors when confronted by the originals. Portugal, for example, I only visited in 1997—I had already done all those works on Portuguese colonization and tiles before going there. I preferred to imagine Portugal through the traces of its presence in Brazil. I really like this idea of knowledge through books and reproductions, the image that travels, which is reproduced and interpreted many times. I am talking about a history of images.

RF: Speaking of these narratives, I'd like to go back to self-portraying works, like this recent series, *Tintas polvo* (Polvo portraits) in which you commissioned images of your face from a studio of professional painters in China. How do you think about your physical presence in such works?

AV: I have always depicted myself. And there are several reasons for that, but first you do it and then you look for the reason [*laughs*]. In the *Tintas polvo*, it is very clear to me. When another person or model becomes involved—whoever it is—they are already part of a choice that demands a justification: Why him or her? I think your own figure is the one that is closest to you and the one you can get away with the most, without any compromise. I think self-portraits are more neutral in comparison to any other model. There is also this question

of you as an agent of your own history. I think working on my own image makes me feel more comfortable and gives me more freedom. I also speak from an ethical point of view.

RF: In this series, *Tintas polvo*, and in other works, like *A chinesa* (The Chinese woman) or *A moura* (The Moorish woman), there is always this game of putting yourself in someone else's shoes. At this time in history, which we are discussing, in Brazil and around the world, issues concerning the "standpoint of speech," as discussed by Djamila Ribeiro, and decolonialization in the visual arts, how do you feel about these works in which your face embodies many different types of Otherness?

AV: I speak of the history of the reproduction and interpretation of images; I never speak from the perspective of an anthropologist who travels and does field research. For example, recently, in 2016, I did a series that I called *Kindred Spirits* for an exhibition in Texas. I researched traditional Native American face painting as well as images of iconic works of minimalist art from the United States. I created hybrid self-portraits with face painting that mixed these two themes. However, the largest source for my research was a book of a collection of nineteenth-century paintings of "American Indians" from the McKenney-Hall Portrait Gallery, with reproductions of works by such painters as George Catlin and from other sources. I am not trying to represent or interpret any one group in a particular or generic way, and the theme of this work is precisely the history of the images and parody. My work inhabits the baroque territory that has parody as one of its primary strategies.

RF: I know you don't like a superficial interpretation of the subject, but I want to return to the question of violence in your research. There are many depictions of violent acts, but violence itself never appears in a propagandistic sort of way. Even in these more recent and abstract series with the large craquelure, you can also see different types of violence, regarding time and the physicality of the canvas. How do you observe this aspect of your work?

AV: My interest in the image of the wound began with those narratives linked to colonialism in my work in 1992. My first wound was *Filho bastardo* (Bastard son), one of the parodies of Jean-Baptiste Debret in which I depict scenes of rape . . . and so, this idea of an open wound. It is curious that oil paint has the characteristic that it never dries. If you were to take a closed tube, it would last a hundred years. It dries by oxidation and not by dehydration. So, if you have a very thick surface of paint, it forms a skin, and inside, it is always moist. If you cut into it with a knife and open it, the paint is still moist. I began to associate this process with the idea of painting onto skin, from history imprinted onto the body. I mean, the observation of technique can also bring interesting things to a work. The paint itself indicated the wound and, therefore, the skin. Then, I began to introduce the narrative that referenced the dialectic of colonization and its violence into the work. But it is important to emphasize that this violence of the wound, of the scar, of the suture is staged; that is, the flesh is not flesh and everything happens within the field of the fiction of theater. The baroque is a very visceral aesthetic; the baroque emblem itself, the Sacred Heart, is an exposed organ. Something that attempts to give the body the role of mediator. I like this feeling that I'm in a theatre and, because of that, everything is possible there. Being a space of fiction, it is a space of total freedom. When I defend total freedom in art it is because I believe it is in this space of fiction. In society, such freedom is not possible, but in art, it is.

RF: Your research deals with many narratives that form ideas around one or many stories of Brazil. How does your non-Brazilian public relate to works that deal with such direct historical issues?

AV: It's difficult. I never walked an easy path. I had an exhibition in New York in 2000 where I was harshly criticized and thrashed by the *New York Times*—one of those reviews that keeps you in bed for three days—but the feeling I had was that the critic didn't really understand the use of tiles. How can you understand my work without knowing the history of

Brazil and Portuguese colonization? I feel that maybe people in Protestant countries have a harder time understanding my work. Catholic countries understand it more easily because they have a tradition of the baroque. You need to have a certain amount of knowledge to understand the games I'm playing. How can you fully understand these works without knowing what anthropophagy is? Fortunately, the perspective has shifted a little today and more light is shed on different histories, especially non-Eurocentric ones. We talk more about decolonization and value other points of view. On the other hand, anyone who knows the films of Peter Greenaway, Cronenberg, Derek Jarman, or even Pasolini can also have an interesting interpretation of my work. It does not necessarily have to come from my sources.

RF: The history of the Haus der Kunst is linked to the history of fascism. The building was inaugurated in 1937 by Hitler and was devoted to nationalist German art as opposed to so-called "degenerate art." How do you feel—also from the perspective of the fascist discourses so prevalent in our world in 2019—when exhibiting these works that review so many historical narratives in this space?

AV: I first visited the building during a Paul McCarthy exhibition in 2005. I think the space has been inhabited by many other interesting, strong stories that help exorcise its ghosts. In fact, while talking to Anna Schneider in January, she commented, "Wow, Brazil is in such a difficult time. Wouldn't you be interested in doing a new work that talks a little about this political moment, about the rise of the right?" Then I commented, "But all my work talks about it; I try to highlight the dialectics of power and control." I think it's important to kick out the ghosts that live inside these structures—deep inside—and let out that scream that comes out of the walls.

This text is an edited version of a conversation which took place in Rio de Janeiro, in the artist's studio in the neighborhood of Horto, in August 2019.