

Saunas

by Paulo Herkenhoff

This belongs to the History of Nothing.

After the end of history, the decline of modernity, the failure of ideologies and the impossibility of contemporary art history,¹ the *Saunas* suffer from aphasia and face the death of the signifieds. Empty architecture lives a functional non-existence. The gaze occupies the zero state of space. The place is mute. The tiles are silent. The room awaits.

Serenely, we inquire whether the Baroque has saturated its meaning for Adriana Varejão's painting. Her post-colonial pictorial corpus is a dialectical friction between two worlds which formed a dystopian Baroque field in the confrontation between Paradise Lost and Paradise Not Found.² In this History of Nothing,³ Adriana Varejão's *Saunas* fall into line with the silence in John Cage's *4'33"*, which could be the music for these interiors. What we find in the deserted *Saunas* are conceptual echoes of the hollow insides of certain *Bichos* by Lygia Clark, of Mira Schendel's verbal void at the metaphysical limits of the unspeakable, or of Anna Maria Maiolino's *Buracos* under censorship. Adriana Varejão's political painting could be linked to the political void of the ghetto and its metaphor as a black hole for Cildo Meireles. It is said that, in its orgy, the Baroque precipitated the end of the signifieds. The Baroque's harmonization of sacred and profane elements finally ended up "canceling out the differences between the signifieds," notes Janice Theodoro.⁴ In contrast, Eric Hobsbawm considers that the overexplanation of partial "signifieds" would be counter to a necessary universal history.⁵ This is the deliberate meaning of the empty architecture built up by the monochromatic tiles, to trouble and create doubt with regard to the signifying nature of space.

The tiled rooms establish a subtle difference between contamination and asepsis. They may be places of pleasure, of thought, of expiation, of death—and now of inquiry. Adriana Varejão's *azulejos* tiles have been

everything: 1) a kitchen; 2) a bathroom; 3) a Carioca bar; 4) a public pool in Saint-Germain-des-Prés; 5) a cubist mesh of modern painting; 6) a hotel for casual sex; 7) a hospital; 8) a laboratory; 9) an operating room; 10) a supermarket; 11) a butcher shop; 12) a slaughterhouse; 13) a morgue; 14) a dissecting room; 15) a flaying room; 16) a tattooing room; 17) a church; 18) and even a sauna.⁶ Now it seems as if the *Saunas*, perverted in a “labyrinth of the continuum” of an anamnestic scene, could only fit into the paradoxical History of Nothing.

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“You ain’t seen nothing yet.” This is Al Jolson’s first spoken line in *The Jazz Singer*, the first talking movie. It could also be the secret held in Adriana Varejão’s *O Sedutor* (2004), her large *Sauna* the size of a movie screen: 230 x 530 cm. Al Jolson broke the silence of another seducer, the cinema, back in 1927. The film buff Adriana Varejão explores virtual spaces in 3D with a camera in her hand. Painting emerges as tracking and framing.

Public use of history seems exasperated by the intimism exposed in these silent saunas, a totally enclosed environment with no exteriority. Reality has no access to this closed space. At the very extreme, Adriana Varejão projects tight sets of inexactly symmetrical binomials: figure and geometry, sparseness and accumulation, transparency and density, reason and plastic sensuality, blood and asepsis. The death of the signifieds is resolved as a result of the blurring effect of these equivalences. The hypothesis of contagion circumscribes the scene.

The tiled floor of *Sauna*, slippery and full of architectural folds and double folds—steps, little canals, beams, columns and benches—demands caution when moving around. The senses alert against accidents in the zero state of architecture. They mobilize proprioception.⁷ With this “sixth sense,” it is only through vision that the disembodied subject positions his/her body in

space. The *Saunas* require the action of the "inner eye." They could be the Leibnizian monad that would reconcile the being with its folds.⁸ Yet the blood spilled in *The Guest* means the return of the bodies. Its symbolic charge insists on intruding into the gaze. The blood spreads like a stream of formlessness over the orthogonal grid, capillarity between the junctures of the tilework. "It's as if the entire space could be these folds. It could be a scission between geometry and architecture," says Adriana Varejão.

The titles for the *Saunas* suggest intense Sado-Freudian psychological workings under the symphonic, chromatic composition in half-tones of the dominant color: the yellow in *The Obscene*, the pink in *The Diva*, the blue in *The Seducer*, the grey of the corridor in *The Obsessive*, the red and white in *The Guest*. A cross between scatology, ecstasy and sublimation, Sade and Freud, the *Saunas* belong to the order of symptoms, dreams and bungled actions, somewhere between forms of the return of the repressed (*Verdrängung*) and the emergence of the libertine. After the furor created by the announcement of the end of history,⁹ what is repressed is not only the concrete processes of the history of the losers or of the minor arts (such as the insignificance of the history of the colonial body and the history of tilework in Adriana Varejão's painting *Tales of Tiles*). What insists on returning to the level of consciousness or the action of the libido, after unleashing the voice of the azulejos, is History itself and the body. Adriana Varejão understands that the purpose of artistic practice, as Guattari says, is not to tell histories (nor to repress them, we might add), but to create mechanisms that enable the history to be told. Adriana Varejão arranges history. The silence in the *Saunas* owes nothing to the past, it merely hijacks the gaze as a condition of the present in process. In this economy of repressed signifieds, the *Saunas* are an instinctual "re-investment." Like Gianni Vattimo's texts, these paintings insist on the impossibility of forgetting. With Jürgen Habermas, they make silent challenges: "History does not stand still."¹⁰ With ahistorical Nothingness, it is impossible to indefinitely repress and forget.

This belongs to the History of Something.

The painting is the work of a mason. It opened up and flesh poured out from the open surface of the pictorial masonry *a la Fontana*. The canvas suppurated and exposed its guts. The painting furnished its body (Paul Valéry) and the painter lent her body to the world. She wanted to change “the world into painting.”¹¹ Having become sutured canvases in an empty environment, the *Saunas* seem to demand little of the gaze, if not to observe painting itself. The juncture between the tiles, individual monochrome elaborations, is both scission and caesura.

The *Saunas*, spaces with no exterior, revive the discussion of outdoor painting. Fresh air can now only be virtual light. Concepts and photographic writing are founded on the *Saunas*’ references. At one end, the word *slaughterhouse*, sacred and cursed, of the *Encyclopaedia Acephalica* by Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris *et al.* At the other, images of the overflowing red instinct of Miguel Rio Branco’s slaughterhouses. With Sade, Freud and Bataille, Adriana Varejão elaborates a fantasmatic of geometry. Something uncomfortable comes to the surface.

The “autocaditic”¹² space of the *Saunas* is made of planar dimensions deformed by perspective—squares become diamond-shaped, bands almost lines. Each tile-square is a monochrome. They are all the same color, and under the light, they bloom, in the painting, into a symphony of half-tones. At variance with the frontality of the tiles, as in Mapplethorpe’s 1979 photograph of James Ford in the bathroom, the *Saunas* are more directly related to the painting *The Tiled Room* (1935) by Vieira da Silva. The Portuguese painter builds her terrain through a mesh of pictorial tilework. As does Adriana Varejão. Vieira da Silva does not distort the mesh solely as an optical phenomenon, but attempts to obtain an improbable elasticity of space after the relativity proclaimed by Einstein. Since she cannot be a concretist artist, this makes her endeavor the most advanced spatial experiment in the ‘40s in Brazil, a sort of proto-Neoconcretism before Max Bill. In Adriana Varejão’s production, the

scission between the azulejos leads to *Ruínas de Charque*, which deposed signified discourse, parody and metaphor, to move on to geometry.

The pause in the *Saunas* distances itself from the metaphysical extensions of Giorgio de Chirico. What is fundamental for Adriana Varejão is the real space of the juncture between the tiles. Perhaps it corresponds to the organic line between the real planes (in wood) which modulates the surface in Lygia Clark's painting. It is, nevertheless, masonry. It is closer to that structuring space between the air and the objects in Morandi's *Still-Lives*. Each *Sauna* is the place where the gaze meets the history of the processes that went into the elaboration of the painting.

What the *Saunas* propose is paradoxical, a confrontation between the discontinuity of the History of Nothing and the signifying void. Having now become the History of Something, it can only be the history of what has yet to be discovered by the gaze. "You ain't seen nothing yet."

Paulo Herkenhoff

Translated into English by Jennifer Kaku

1 Given the volume, proliferation and multiplicity of production, Donald Kuspitt proclaimed contemporary art history to be impossible, a harrowing task. In "The Contemporary and the Historical: More at Odds Than Ever", a lecture given at the IV SITAC, Mexico, January 2005.

2 In this sense, her history differs from the positivism found in the painting of Pedro Américo, Almeida Junior and even Tarsila do Amaral of the "Pau-brasil" (*A Religião Brasileira*, 1927) and social (*Operários*, 1933) periods.

3 We might refer to *The Nothing that is, a Natural History of Zero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) by Robert Kaplan, *Nothingness, the Science of Empty Space* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 1999) by Henning Genz and *The Book of Nothing* (London: Random House, 2000) by John Barrow.

4 Janice Theodoro, *América Barroca* (São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, Nova Fronteira, 1992, p. 149).

5 Eric Hobsbawm, "Em Defesa da História" in *O Estado de São Paulo*, 23 January 2004, Booklet 2, p. 1.

6 Corresponding respectively to the following works: 1) *Azulejaria de Cozinha com Caças Variadas*, 1995; 2) *A Diva*, 2004; 3) *Linda da Lapa*, 2004; 4) *Swimming Pool*, 2005; 5) *Azulejões*, 2000; 6) *Linda do Rosário*, 2004; 7) *Extirpação do Mal por Incisura*, 1994; 8) *Azulejaria Azul em Carne Viva*, 1999; 9) *Parede com Incisões a la Fontana*, 2002; 10) *Ruína de Charque Chacahua*, 2000; 11) *Varejão Acadêmico—Heróis*, 1997; 12) *The Guest*, 2004; 13) *Extirpação do Mal por Overdose*, 1994; 14) *Reflexo de Sonhos no Sonho de Outro Espelho* (Study of *Tiradentes* by Pedro Américo), 1998; 15) *Irezumis Gêmeos*, 1999; 16) *América*, 1996; 17) *Proposta para uma Catequese*, 1993; and 18) *Green Sauna*, 2003.

7 Jean-Didier Bagot, *L'ABCdaire des Cinq Sens* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998, p. 95).

8 Gilles Deleuze, *Le Pli : Leibniz et le baroque* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1988).

9 Robert Storr, "The End of History?" in *The National Interest*, Summer issue, 1989. Robert Storr discusses an "art of history after the End of History," recalling how the predominance of formalism discredited illusionism, figuration and "literature" in art. Storr illustrated his lecture at the SITAC (Mexico, 2005) with references to narrative or to pictorial representation in the works of Immendorf, Kieffer, Richter, Varejão and Walker.

10 Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism, Cultural Criticism and the Historians Debate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989, translated by Schierry Nicholse, "history does not stand still," p. 232).

11 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Œil et l'esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965, p. 16).

12 *AutoCAD* is a software used mostly by architects and industrial designers in order to create virtual 3D spaces and objects.

