

The Invisible Paintings of Pedro Calapez

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The artistic path of Pedro Calapez (Lisbon, 1953) is as broad as it is consequent. With initial training devoted to engineering and an early dedication to photography, Calapez holds his first solo exhibition in 1982, in the Galeria Diferença, in Lisbon. Two decades later he is rightly held as one of the most well-known and valorised Portuguese artists. The constructive nature that he puts into his production exists alongside the dreamlike manifestations of a creation that is fundamentally directed at the senses. Which is an aspect that likens him to the creators of *all-over* painting with whom he has admitted he shares a desire to cover the viewers of his painting in a chromatic field¹. Calapez's creation, through different formal solutions, expresses a small number of themes and proposals that he persistently repeats in an exercise of superb variations. Something which could equally be said of Borges, who defended the existence in the whole of universal literature of no more than three or four essential metaphors and who developed his inexhaustible literature using an extremely reduced thematic list. Borges is without doubt one of Calapez's favourite authors, judging by the number of occasions on which he has quoted or paraphrased him in texts with which, since 1975, he has liked to accompany the publications of his successive exhibitions².

The works from his first phase are characterised by presenting unornamented architectural perspectives on very synthetic backgrounds on which are expressed abstract polychrome fields stripped of the aggressiveness of some of the representatives of the last abstraction. His participation along with the sculptor Rui Sanches (Lisbon, 1954) in 1990 in an intervention in the space of the Convent of St. Francis (Beja) marks out a decisive step in this long and fruitful path on which his artistic becoming is erected. On that occasion the architectural sense and the scenographic vocation that characterise the mature Calapez found their definitive origin, even though a good part of his most recent production, as we will see, seems antithetical to it. The works were called *Passagens*, a Portuguese word that shares its double meaning as a walking space and as a fragment or extract from a book with the English word "passages". The works consisted of the laying out of a grid of bricks on the floor, on which Calapez made drawings with chalk. The clearly marked out figures were not coloured in. They represented natural elements, like a lake or a

mountain range, as well as man-made objects, all characterised by their geometry: a ladder, a table, a bench, a box. The presence of a fountain is surprising. Unadorned and resulting from the piling up of three spheres and two bowls, a hybrid between geometry and the curved elements of landscapes that seem to be formed in the abstracted representation of a woman. Three years later he would repeat the experiment, intervening in the naves of the Chapelle Saint-Louis de la Salpêtrière (Paris) with new chalk drawings on carpets of bricks in which he once again kept to the genres of landscape and architecture. Sometimes with trees that are embraced in a communicational exuberance of branches (as in *Paysage*; 9,56 x 2,65 cm.), at other times bare and unprotected, although close together unable to meet, close to geometric forms that are familiar in his painting: the opening of an arch or a stairway, on this occasion architectural (as is the case in the different floor panels in the set *Petit jardin*). In both interventions Calapez set out his drawing on a grid of bricks that he laid out without gaps, without interstitial spaces. Those bricks were hand-made, porous like only those made today by tile makers, compared to the smooth, reflecting quality of the industrially baked brick. The friction of the chalk wears down and penetrates more enjoyably into the material chosen by the artist. Today Calapez's work, and for this reason we would say that his mature production is in many senses opposite to that which he has created, involves industrial volumes (sometimes aluminium and other times using an industrially pressed wood, MDF) that he sets out in a reticular manner and presenting gaps, at regular intervals³. He lays the paint on the front side of these surfaces in two different manners. The first layer is an exuberant density of pigments among which the clear and rigorous drawing is absent. They are pigments that flow from the tube and that are poured onto the surfaces in order to be manipulated, being hidden, spread and intermixed due to the caresses and the violence of the spatula. The second of the possibilities with which the painting is approached is through the clear and voluminous outline of synthetic figures, once again sometimes architectural and sometimes of landscape, over a surface of pure pigment. Whether this is through incision, the use of dry pastel or through acrylic painting. The passing of the chalk over the porous skin of the brick seems to be in this way updated in this production.

Calapez's pictorial territory is a labyrinth. A labyrinth that is more complex at each step. The layout of his paintings is governed by a manner that might be more suited to the rules not so much of the category of the installation as of scenography.

As the author of stage sets⁴, he has often termed his paintings as scenes (*cenias*). Scenes not so much without drama, taking into account the obstinate absence of characters that devastate them, but settings that open up the possibility of drama in their spectator: the possibility that the spectator may see in his paintings the duel proper to the last things or the chance of the promise, of that which is yet to be done. A scenographic sense that is particularly remarkable in his work *Muro contra muro* (*Wall against wall*) set up in the central nave of the Luís Serpa Gallery (Lisbon, 1994), in which two large wooden panels (240 x 1080 cm. each) faced each other in order to establish a passage that can be walked through but which obliged the visitor to turn round through the entrance space, with the opposite end, that of the natural exit, being condemned against the wall⁵. An illustration of his interest in Borges, a renewed Heraclitus, who reminds us that a river is never the same river, nor is the man who steps into it or crosses it.

Calapez's painting is Babelish and wanders among ruins, the place, the painter's favourite *topos*. If anything defeats the unifying discernibility of Calapez's painting it is the simultaneity of actions that takes place within them, forever veiling their susceptible univocal interpretation of reading, the certainty of knowledge of them, of "being back". Exit from the labyrinth is not easy when one never goes down the same corridor twice (or at least one believes so) so as to thus provide the bearings for recognising a mistake. And then eliminate this path in a new attempt. A simultaneity that is noisy and that gives rise to an incessant and convulsive movement, in pursuit of an always elusive sense. As Calapez himself acknowledges, his are most often "paintings made up of individualised elements in which on looking at them it is not possible to suspend one's gaze on any of the images, one has to *incessantly wander* over the different rectangles – the same as we do when we go through a city and our eyes leap from a cornice to a tower, from a balcony to a plasterwork structure, from a tile to a lock, from a door to a window"⁶. The different size of the surfaces of his paintings (the parallelepipeds he uses and which he has often called "boxes" are only painted on their front side) forces the gaze into a never-ending game so that ordered reading is made impossible and thus tends towards the static. In his mature works, the simultaneity that has been referred to becomes more complicated. At times because the scene takes place on a pattern of surfaces between which he has placed precise intervals. A practice of object installation that forms one of the strategies of minimal art and which may have Andy Warhol (himself

inspired by the iconography of comics) as its most rightful precedent in the serialisation of motifs in reticules. But the minimalist-inspired mechanism is interrupted and perverted by Calapez. If Rodney Graham inserts books into the gaps between the canonically minimalist parallelepipeds that seem to give rise to an interpretation that is at once ironic and profound (as in *Standart Edition*, 1988), Calapez's response lies in the profusion and warmth of a painting that shelters the cold and aseptic aluminium surfaces that he uses (he sometimes uses an industrially pressed wood, MDF). In these cases the simultaneity and the dizziness come from the gaze's impossibility to stop wandering between the concrete surface and the set of which it is a part, in which one cannot find any figurative referentiality. But its complexity, as we have already pointed out, lies in other occasions in which one can discern two spaces or representative fictions on the same surface, two differing scenes; fundamentally a landscape or an architectural fragment stands out over or beneath a landscape so that the two are made transparent and become mixed together. This takes place in the mural piece created in 2002, *Undisclosed Ornament*, a total of twenty-four aluminium plaques laid out with his usual regular gaps, occupying an area of 505 x 545 cm (laid out in a perfect rectangle) on a whitewashed wall in one of the non-worship rooms of the Hieronymite Monastery in Belem. On a uniform, saffron-coloured background, respective scenes are superimposed with red acrylic. In the first place, with a lighter outline the lines of a view of the cloister of the monastery itself, of a view that is repeated, that is duplicated across an invisible axis that does not unmask the fact that the images do not correctly match. In the second place, using lines with thicker paint and doubled and duplicated, as if one's sight did not adapt to the trick of the light, a landscape in which it is difficult to situate oneself. Calapez's intervention must be hailed as a magnificent triumph. Contemplating his mural work, straight after having remained for a few minutes in the monastery church, in which the light plays at fleeing and not allowing one's eyes to make out the details and the shines of the sumptuous building, is a joyful and fulfilling experience. Should the expression not be tainted, we would use the adjective sublime; there is no aesthetic judgement that comes more close to it than that. But there is more. Calapez has disseminated, throughout the generous number of his writings, a reflection upon the spectator's gaze that must be important in a deeper consideration of his production. This is his thesis on the subject's reflection of the gaze and its object, on a bilateral communication that

makes the object abandon its peremptory passivity. In a note in his diary from August 1893, there is no greater indication that “La Roche” reflected André Gide in similar terms to those Calapez would use: “one cannot work on something without there being a reverse action of this thing on the subject who works on it. It is this reciprocal nature that I have wished to indicate, not in relations with others, but in relations with oneself”⁷. His references to Borges are in this sense illuminating. Like Gaston Bachelard, whom he has quoted on occasion⁸, Calapez insists on dreaming the space he adventures and in which one adventures, which he imagines and he looks at, which not by chance is “olhar” in Portuguese (a homophone of the Spanish verb “hollar”, that is, “to tread”). As stated by the title of one of his writings, “we are the paintings”⁹. Its authorship obeys the painter as much as the spectator, without whom one would, like the idealistic Borges, wonder whether painting really existed. The material nature of the artistic object is a mere instrument for the beginning of an essential communication, the fruit of which is that the painting returns our gaze. It is in this sense that there is the producing of one of the greatest contemporary contributions to the reflection and vindication of the aural element. An aura that perhaps no longer appeals to the unknowable Otherness, to the Absolute, yet is related to religious practices. The aural element in Calapez is aimed at the participation of the spectator (the re-creator) with the others. Calapez’s paintings are like the wine and the music at the party, elements that make man look (in order to approach) at his fellows with less shyness or with greater will.

An exemplary illustration of his thesis is presented by Calapez himself in his participation in the Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró in Majorca in 1997. When he accepts the invitation to exhibit, he takes what he considers to be an event as the starting point for his work: the reaction, one might say the aural reaction, the revelation of a presence on one of the walls of Miró’s studio in Son Boter, on which Miró had displayed a whole series of images and drawings that would inspire him in his work. A revelation felt two years earlier when he travelled to the Fundació in 1995 in order to receive the Pilar Juncosa y Sotheby’s Drawing Prize that had been awarded him. Calapez’s interest is thus directed to the shadows that are cast on (and by) that very wall: in the promise of an emblematic and arcane place. For this he created two sets of twenty-four varied sized paintings on two walls in an asymmetrical layout, inspired on the irregularity of Miró’s selective gestures in which there were two- and three-dimensional presences which led to the appearing of shadows that would affect

one's observation of the objects in the range of these shadows. The disparity in the height of Calapez's parallelepipeds thus found an evident translation, but not its origin. "At that moment, those images were fused into the walls of Miró's studio as if revealing "a gaze" that, despite having disappeared, (in my opinion) was not yet finalised", he wrote for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition¹⁰.

The labyrinthine character of Calapez's painting is aided by the dissolving of the limits between human activity and nature that is clearly stated in the paintings, then in oil, presented in his exhibition *Continuous Cities* (Rio de Janeiro Imperial Palace and Sao Paulo Cultural Centre, 1993). On that occasion he showed some drawings on paper, some in traditional black and white and others achieving the opposite effect through incisions on the previously black-painted support. In paintings and drawings, the architectures seem to be threatened by a nature that oppresses them, inhabiting them, leaving them in ruins and abandoned, depopulated, until their becoming in an organism that, like Janus, presents two faces. This occurs in the pictorial in the oils on canvas (150 x 200 cm. each) *Valdrada* and *Olivia*, as well as in the graphite drawings on paper (120 x 160 cm. each) titled *Cecília* and *Pentesileia*. The influences that Calapez has made explicit or that Gianbattista Piranesi's etchings and the tales of the *Le città invisibili* by Italo Calvino¹¹ have exercised over him may be added to by those of Hieronymus van Aecken ("Bosch"). Like the building that is at the same time a tree and a man in the right wing (*Hell*) of the triptych *Earthly Paradise* (Madrid, Prado), or the left wing of the triptych of *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (Lisbon, National Museum of Early Art) in which the legs of a man on all fours appear to be strange, magnificent and bare roots giving on to, as if they were pillars, a cave. All of this, indeed, is brought together in these compositions by Calapez on a single impassable level, in an entangled tapestry like "... the shadows, the dreams and the forms / That unravel and weave this life", seventh and eighth lines of the Borges poem "Limits", with which Calapez accompanied the catalogue published on the occasion of his exhibition of the same name¹². An exhibition that, seven years after *Continuous Cities*, carried on the dual recourse to drawing on paper with outline and incision and in which the spatial and thematic setting out of his compositions was just as complex, when not barren.

It is evident through what has been stated that Calapez's painting deals with visibility. And it reflects on this (in the dual sense of pondering upon and reflecting

visually). His is a particular treatment of the tradition of the idea of the window as the nature of the object we call "painting", a popular ascription codified by Leon Battista Alberti and since then accepted¹³. Through an opening, the inhabitant or visitor to a space can gain access to contemplation of the outside. And vice-versa, a passer-by or a guest may contemplate from inside the place where or where, in another manner, one or more people have taken refuge. In his 1998 writing "Through the Window", Calapez discusses the joins in the bricks inside a room that are not completely hidden by the plaster. The painting occupies the space of a window, substituting for it. The experience of man's contact with the (his) other is questioned. The opaque nature of the painting is aimed at a loss of the traditional communication between the inside and the outside, which are now confronted with each other, and thus leads to a frontier experience in the wound of the gap, which unsuspectingly reveals that which the skin covers, as he states in his free verse poem ending with four lines from Borges, the fifth verse of his "Poetic Art"¹⁴.

The interstitial lines of Calapez's painting make his pictorial surfaces a constructive image in that they are like bricks in a wall, set out in rows. But it is a wall that does not isolate, and instead, according to his research and vindication of the aural element, encourages communication, with the contemplator being lost between awareness of being inside or outside, whether he sees or is being seen, whether he reflects or is being immersed and whether he is alone or with something other. But the interstitial lines of Calapez's painting thus seem to be the possibilities of the labyrinth, or the code to a destination written on the palm of one's hand.

For his first exhibition in Madrid, Calapez has brought together a set of paintings carried out in acrylic over the last two months, two works from the series *Locais (Sites)* carried out on MDF panels, as well as ten works on aluminium parallelepipeds from his series *Places*. They all present, between the different parts that make them up, his personal interstitial lines that as far as I have been able to establish are always of a distance of four centimetres. Some of the works are made up of a minimum of two elements, the most complex, *Place 04 or Place of the Subtle Difference*, has seven. In this one, an element from the upper part breaks the symmetry (in order to confront the automatism of the rest with a drawing configuration), which is established diagonally. In almost all of them there is a different height of the support, except in the *Places 07, 16 and 17*. The latter two,

identical in format and height, stand out due to their symmetrical formal composition inscribed on respective regular rectangles that repeat the configuration of the parallelepipeds on which the pictorial surface is marked out. *Place 07*, subtitled *Place of the Two Paths*, is a work that is surprising due to its symmetry; the two panels are of the same format (60 x 75 cm.) and height (10 cm.), and on the left one we see the chromatic combination of green, dark and bright yellow, and on the right panel we see a drawing of what appears to be a precipice carried out on a monochrome background. Abstraction and reference are the two paths (referred to in the title) of the experience of an impressive nature, synthetically established in one, empathetic in the other, neither of which seems to have a privileged place in a systematic manner in Calapez's plastic creation. Samples of Calapez's drawing work also appear on the upper right panel of *Place 12 or Place of Illusion*, in what seems to represent the vapours of narcosis or of illness, or in the upper part of the diptych *Place 09 or Place of the Winding Path* in which is presented the sinuous path leading man to refuge in his winter landscape, to the hope of an encounter in the place in the middle of an icy cold.

Italo Calvino, in a conference presented at Columbia University (NYC) on the 29th of March, 1983, defended the view that a book ought to be like a labyrinth into which the reader penetrates in order to find a way out at a given moment, or perhaps ways out. Perhaps this should be underlined: the book ought to have if not one, at least multiple exits. In the goodness of creation beats the undaunted, fleeting, Protean and untameable search for meaning, but the pursuit of which moves and stirs us. Calapez's painting aims at the dissolution of limits, at the promise of a destabilising communicational operation, as takes place between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, interlocutors of *Le città invisibili*, who do not know when one is listening and when the other is telling a tale, and whether when one is listening and the second one is telling a tale they are, indeed, Kublai Khan and Marco Polo themselves. They do not even know whether they inhabit the space they believe they inhabit, as also happens in Borges's tales. Calvino defended the existence of a number of books that, like the original by the traveller Marco Polo, and not of his own sequel, are "continents of the 'beyond', today when one could say that the 'beyond' no longer exists and the whole world tends towards being made uniform"¹⁵. One could not better define the condition of the artistic that Calapez contributes towards

bringing up to date. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau stated (*Essai sur les origens des langues*, XVI) on referring to music, if art exists it is because another sensitive man is nearby. Although for the moment he might remain invisible.

¹ As he stated in the interview granted to Delfim Sardo in September 1996; *cfr. Pedro Calapez, Involuntary Memory*, Lisbon, Chiado Museum, 1996, p. 50. By the term “Involuntary Memory”, adopted from the essay “On some issues in Baudelaire” by Walter Benjamin, and in turn taken from Proust, Calapez is referring to the establishing in his painting of a communicational vocation with the other. An aspect that includes a double phenomenon; firstly in relation, as we will see, to the concept of the “aura”; secondly, through the development of images that themselves carry memory. Images that he receives from and takes from different origins, landscapes, reproductions of works of art, comics, etc., on which he has insistently worked. Among these references are, for example, the comic *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, published by Winsor McCay between 1905 and 1911, or different compositions by, among others, Fra Angelico, Titian, Gianbattista Piranesi, or the late impressionist Portuguese painter José Júlio de Sousa Pinto. An analysis of the relationship between the source and its subsequent re-creation goes beyond the scope of an essay such as this one, primarily aiming at introducing Calapez’s painting.

² In the autumn of 2002 Calapez’s essays were published, along with some of the critical texts dedicated to his work, in a single volume, *Pedro Calapez* (Lisbon, Bore&Mallo, 2002). Calapez’s written production goes beyond the interest of mere personal reflection on his own work. We will refer to it over the following pages, indicating it by *Pedro Calapez*.

³ In both cases the later application of acrylic paint needs the laying of a previous coat of acrylic plaster, which in the case of the aluminium support must be preceded by an insulating treatment.

⁴ For *Zerlina*, a stage show based on *Die Schuldlosen (The Innocents)* by Hermann Broch (Lisbon, Dona Maria II National Theatre, 1993) and *The Dispute (La Dispute)* by Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux (Lisbon, Teatro da Trindade, 1995).

⁵ The exterior of the panels, facing each other following an effect of unstable symmetry, exposed its structure as carpentry with four large laths set out obliquely as buttresses. An unstable symmetry as the reflected images in each other as in by mirrors, and thus inverted, reveal details that do not go together, whether through the impression of the work of the artisan or obeying a deceitful will, which is the motif of some of his works such as the double set of eight paintings (1994, alkyd and oil on wood, 111 x 125 cm.) titled *Inventions, caprices, architectures*. An instability in the symmetry that, while obeying the layout of the panels, was not totally parallel but decentred, which would provoke a certain uncertainty. Was this a real trick or was it part of the game of simulacra of Calapez’s perverse mirrors? If the entrance space was 140 cm., the opposite end opened up to 180 cm. In a text dedicated to *Wall against wall*, Calapez presented this Borgesian question: “Is the notion of place connected to that of repetition, to symmetry?” (*Pedro Calapez*, p. 326). On each side of the interior there was a set of nine paintings in alkyd and oil (240 x 120 cm. each) which alternated in the never flat tone of their backgrounds, one red, the next dark brown, as well as in their size. The paintings came forward (the brown ones) and went back (the red ones) in regular intervals in relation to the ones next to them. As on other occasions, the figurative motifs, once again architectures and uninhabited landscapes, emerge through incision on the pictorial surface. The sculptural sense of Calapez’s later painting is thus presented as emergent, although it is different to the development of his mature works.

⁶ In his text “From the other side – on the other side” (January 1998); *cfr. Pedro Calapez*, pp. 347 and 348. Note the use of architectural examples in Calapez’s prose, so close to his pictorial imagination. The italics are ours.

⁷ GIDE, André: *Diary (1889-1949)*.

⁸ As in “Studiolo” (1998), which opens with a passage from *La poétique de l’espace*.

⁹ “Os quadros somos nós”; *Pedro Calapez*, p. 340.

¹⁰ “Field of Shadows” (1997), in *Pedro Calapez*, pp. 337 and 338.

¹¹ Each of the works in *Continuous Cities* has a title as one of the cities in Calvino’s book of tales. Of the four works referred to, Calapez respectively illustrates the cities of which he speaks in “The Cities and the Eyes, 1”, “The Cities and the Signs, 5”, “The Continuous Cities, 4” and “The Continuous Cities, 5”. Valdrada had been built on the edge of a lake, so that the symmetry of the water seems to show two cities; a symmetry that is not merely visual, but objective: there are two Valdradas, but one is the inverse of the other. Olivia serves Marco Polo as an example for announcing the impossibility of a literal and definitive description; it is not words, but things that are deceitful. Cecilia is a city that is expanded by law, so that the man who goes into it will necessarily be lost. Penteseila is a labyrinth of ringlets without a centre.

¹² Belonging to his collection *The Other, the Same* (1964), the author's favourite. Not to be confused with Borges's poem of the same name included in *Museo*. Both can be found in his *Obras completas* (Barcelona, Círculo de Lectores, 1992), respectively in Vol. III, pp. 37 and 38 and Vol. II, p. 445. The exhibition of Calapez's drawings was held at the Bores&Mallo Gallery, Cáceres, in 2000.

¹³ This is the case of the passage in which he explains his pictorial approach to the reader: "firstly I sketch a rectangle on the surface to be painted, as big as I feel like, which then serves as an open window through which one sees the story, and I determine how big I want the men in the paintings to be". ALBERTI, Leon Battista: *On Painting*.

¹⁴ *Pedro Calapez*, pp. 349 and 350. The quotation from Borges is: "At times in the afternoon a face / Sees us from the depths of a mirror; / Art should be like that mirror / That reveals to us our own face". BORGES, Jorge Luis: *Op. cit.* Vol. II, p. 440.

¹⁵ Calvino on his book of short stories *The Invisible Cities* at the above-mentioned conference.