

Life in the small space between things

Interview by João Sousa Cardoso

April 1999

Published in n° 4 of the magazine “desvio 256”

Calapez is a painter who paints. Paintings you would hang on your walls; an artist who produces concrete objects for the contemplation of the viewer. He is guided by an intimate, individual and incessant dialogue with the quality of his materials and stands for the currency of an eminently poetic artistic project.

In his studio in the Graça district of Lisbon, we talked about his experiences in the revolutionary period and the way he sees this agitation today. We tried, however, to focus our thinking on the career and work of Pedro Calapez, outlining almost by chance, some of the principal lines of his artistic production over the last three decades.

What was your experience and participation in works of art and architecture in the fervent, post-revolutionary artistic period, as a university student and professional photographer?

I think it would be better to go further back: I experienced the events before 25<sup>th</sup> April. I was a student at Instituto Superior Técnico [Lisbon’s Technical University], where there were always police agents. Surveillance was very tight, including a camera which was destroyed on 26<sup>th</sup> April.

I experienced these events when I was doing some photographic work. I was linked to the Sociedade Nacional de Belas Artes [National Fine Arts Society] because while I was at Técnico studying Engineering, I was also taking a drawing course with Sá Nogueira and Rocha de Sousa. It was, in fact, the revolution that changed my life: I spent a year doing cultural work (I’d never done overtly political work before, apart from some anti - military posters support anti-fascist groups in the district). That was the same year I decided to give up Engineering and go to the Escola de Belas Artes [School of Fine Arts ], although I didn’t finish the Fine Arts course either.

My photography work was, on the whole, survival work. I set up a studio with some friends, but never with the idea of research, simply trying to make a living. Photography has been very useful to me, however, because I still do it to record my things, my exhibitions.

In the year of the revolution, I was doing some photography work, and giving lessons in the Sociedade Nacional de Belas Artes (because I’d done a course there and people liked my work) and it was precisely this year that I met José Ernesto de Sousa, although it was only when I had begun to get involved with *Cooperativa Diferença* (as from 1979) that our relationship developed. So I was never part of the demonstrations he organised in the period, such as *Alternativa Zero*.

Bearing all this in mind, what were the decisive factors in your option to leave Técnico and go to the Escola de Belas Artes?

In addition to this background to the revolution, 25<sup>th</sup> April definitively brought a tremendous relief. All the tension that existed in Técnico, the spectre of having to do military service (and be sent to the Colonial War), together with other unpleasant situations, disappeared. 1974 and 75 were, on the other hand, years in which I did no studying at all at Técnico, I was involved in too many other things with friends. We showed films in a small town (in central Portugal, between Tomar and Castelo Branco), we invited theatre groups etc. All this meant a lot of organisation and connections with people, which made it clear that there were a lot of common interests.

25<sup>th</sup> April didn't create a revolutionary consciousness in me, because I'd already had it in Técnico as a student, before the Revolution. It acted as a solid structure to take full advantage of, but in a way that was perfectly natural in those years, years of tremendous freedom, when it was possible to do anything.

Disorder.

Disorder, certainly, but extremely healthy disorder. That's the way my life has always been, with transitions that were never great leaps: I was studying Engineering, I became interested in photography, drawing and painting, almost without noticing, I got involved in other areas that were more fulfilling and meant that other things had to go. Later, I gave up photography too, and focused on drawing and painting.

What we have, then, is a fluid career, without major ruptures. This, I feel, is clearly reflected in your work.

A short time ago, I was invited by Universidade Autónoma to give a talk about my work. I deliberately looked for connections between works from different times. It gave me great satisfaction to find links between pieces done at very different times, although in terms of form there were significant disparities. The work I do today, when I do groups of small paintings – which doesn't mean they are abstract, as they maintain a spatial connection among themselves – there is a relationship with the drawings I have done and do, and both are ways of thinking about space. I'm not interested in choosing one of them. Looking at my career, I think that there is the sense of a meaning, a relationship between things can be understood.

A career can, however, be made up of ruptures. Philip Guston, for example, had a more complete Abstract Expressionist phase and, later, that representation phase linked to comic strips. Nonetheless, it couldn't be said your works are not related to each other. Baselitz at a certain point in his career, and for other reasons, turned his figures upside down. These options, of a more formal character, are down to individual choice, there are no rules.

Whilst still a student, you witnessed the introduction of the neo-avant-garde languages in Portugal. 20 years later, how do you see these movements in 70s Portuguese art? Were they extremely naive, only justifiable through the context in which they originated and developed or were they experiments not only valid in their time but also, even today, able to encapsulate a great creative potential?

I think there is a group of people who are still working, and who produced very interesting things at that time. In performance art, out of everything that I saw (perhaps more in Lisbon, because in Oporto I went to a lot of shows at the Espaço Lusitano, although this was in the 80s), the various works of great quality at the Galeria Quadrum deserve a special mention, including pieces by some foreign artists. In that period, Ernesto de Sousa, João Vieira, Alberto Carneiro, Ana Hatherly, Luís Noronha da Costa really experimented with situations that were not limited to their time: they were influential and remain so today, as references in the History of Contemporary Portuguese Art. If, for example, we think of the *Alternativa Zero* exhibition, there were many things in Ernesto de Sousa's party that have not stood the test of time. At the moment, I think there is an attempt to create a parallel between what happened in the 70s and some groups of 90s artists. I don't want to appear conservative, but I think that they only constitute a simple *décalage*. This has nothing to do with the fact that older works have become framed by time: I think there have been important experiments carried out by Ana Hatherly, Noronha da Costa and Carneiro. The present, almost a memory – in which everyone is free to use references as they see them – may be just as productive as unproductive. The rethinking of earlier movements may not always bring a new attitude. I believe anything you do is work, and that work always relates to everything that has gone before: art is only art to the extent that it relates to the History of Art. The way in which individuals pick up previous givens, transforming and developing them is the individual's artistic art. But when that work is merely producing a little of what has already been said, I find it uninteresting and there's no shortage of people (both here and abroad) whose works are nothing more than pastiches of pieces that are ten or twenty years old.

With the coming of the 80s, nevertheless, we witnessed a return to **impulse painting**, to figuration, to the order of forms, the material excellence of the artistic object. You were one of the protagonists of the “return to order” movement in Portuguese art.

I would say there was, above all, a group of people who weren't concerned in the least about critical opinion. Compared to previous years, there was greater relaxation in creating theoretical foundations for what you were doing. What mattered was to exhibit what you did in the best possible way, in the most interesting way. That was the starting point. There were common interests, in terms of quality (large series of works, big dimensions, long term, highly developed projects), with a certain group of young artists (Ana Léon, José Pedro Croft, Pedro Cabrita Reis and me) which continued some of the most characteristic features of the 70s, such as performance or sculpture-installation. Various journalists then began to refer to us because the exhibitions were really...

...Effective?

Yes, really effective because they were well organised and had good catalogues. Even when there wasn't much money available for them, we always managed to put catalogues together by photocopying and serigraphy, like the one for the exhibition at the Galeria Metrópole with Cabrita Reis and Rosa Carvalho, Ana Léon and José Pedro Croft.

Furthermore, a large mailing list was set up to publicise the exhibition with the public we thought should see it.

What kind of public? Only a specialised one?

Specialised, potential collectors and that whole group of people who became interested in the plastic arts in the 80s. From 84 up until the end of the decade and the beginning of the 90s, there were newspapers that systematically appeared with reviews: João Miguel Fernandes Jorge wrote for *A Capital*. *Sete* and *Expresso* also had their columns, as did *Jornal de Letras*. There was a great desire to write about art, quite different from the situation today. Newspaper column space for art criticism is getting smaller all the time and the texts end up being pretty repetitive. This could be because of editorial policy, of course, because it's thought that readers are no longer so interested in art. Despite this reduction in the offer, however, there is still a public interested in what's going on culturally. When we - Ana Léon, Rui Sanches, Rosa Carvalho, Cabrita Reis and I - opened the exhibition *Arquipélago* at the Sociedade Nacional de Belas Artes (1985), there were hundreds of people in the room, something that you don't see at openings today.

During the 80s, however, there was a much greater audience for the arts which, today, has diminished.

Yes, the public has withdrawn. The work I do is work I have to do. I'm not going to change it because of audience reaction. Nevertheless, I'm in no doubt that the situation has changed. Even between Lisbon and Oporto, there's a significant difference, with Oporto being far more dynamic.

Tell me more about your relationship with the general public and the way you see your fellow artists' relationship with this public.

Like me, the other artists who appeared on the artistic scene in the 80s developed their line of work without thinking "now we're going to do photography" or "now we're going to do painting because it's the best received medium". There are people who think like this, and the attitude can even be seen from a positive perspective. This attitude can be a guide in terms of "how can I reach a certain kind of audience?" Artists can depart from their working premises to use a more fashionable technique. In my case, changes are made within the logic of looking for results in my work. If I did an installation with Ana Léon in 82, the painting I presented in 86 at *Diferença (Palavras Seladas)* is connected to the environment of that installation: *Le Travail du Peintre* has a spectacular side to it, everything is related to a special concern in how works are presented. The spectator's relationship with the work has always been an area of interest and research in my career. In this sense, the attention given once again to drawing and painting in the 80s, coincided with what I was doing but this doesn't trouble me. The point is that there are more things that touch me, than the fact that I touch things. There is, from this perspective, a parallelism with what could be perfectly established between my practice and the context

in which it develops, more than me accommodating myself to a practice. I don't think my work shows that.

The generation I belong to is a generation that is not abroad, like the 70s generation (Sá Nogueira was in England, Eduardo Batarda too). We decided to work in Portugal but travel as much as possible. I've always tried to keep abreast of ideas abroad through specialist magazines. One of the first magazines I bought was the *Art Vivant* (when it was run by Jean Clair) dedicated to the 1972 Documenta Kassel: it was one of my first contacts with what was going on abroad. I remember going, in '72 or '73, to see an exhibition by Joseph Kosuth in Paris. Obviously, all these things stay with us and build, at an unconscious level, a memory. I tried to keep up through reading as widely as possible. I also tried to balance this "view of magazines" with trips abroad, because you can only be aware of artistic material by seeing the object itself, 'live'. Of course, we aren't Paris or Cologne. We're a long way from everything and that presence of art magazines is the only reference point some artists have and the temptation to work according to what appears there is great.

And what about you? What magazines and visits abroad have most influenced your career?

I've always been fascinated by video. As an art student, I did some pieces that used video and I really enjoyed seeing the early work of Nam June Paik, Dan Graham and James Coleman, as well as pieces by the now extremely well-known Bill Viola and Gary Hill. Despite this, I've never done much video work. This doesn't mean I won't in the future. Above all, you have to have a very open attitude: there are things that only with time are shown to be very bad or uninteresting. It's fundamental to see the broadest possible range of artistic manifestations, and you have to go well beyond the scope of the plastic arts and come into contact with other disciplines. For instance, there are various artists (Julião Sarmiento is an example) who work on the idea of cinema.

The incorporation of optical disturbances in your painting is linked to your photographic experience. Might this not also lead you to the video-image?

Yes, possibly. But it was those who have written recently about my work, particularly after the 94/95 series of works (in which I first drew with my left hand and then repeated the drawing with my right), who began referring to it in terms of video-image (the question of the screen had already come up) but I have never associated these attitudes with video and photography. There's certainly an awareness of a space closely linked to photography. I believe in the space of the look which I think is fundamental, today, for the artist. Art depends on the reading of minimum spaces, reading spaces that are unimagined because they are between things, undefined, obscure zones that allow us to develop the work of painting. I have been seeking small stratagems that are to do with trying to find this zone "between". The other day, I was talking about a work of mine called *a janela aberta* and was asked if it was looking out or looking in. I said "in and out at the same time", as if it was the meeting of impossible states of visual consciousness which can intervene in a way of looking that manages again to be poetic and profound:

the drawings I do, for example, with the left hand and then repeat with the right, in search of symmetry – which is a concept born over fifteen hundred years ago – are a sign of this search.

Some compare the image of certain paintings to the image of video games. Does all that arrhythmia, all that fervent movement and undefined image refer to a great awareness (and willingness to think) of the world of images nowadays, or is it only a consequence of living in their midst?

I think it's a consequence. My texts about my exhibitions are written at the moment I'm working or shortly afterwards. Never before. At times, I use quotations I've found in poetry, some text, because it rounds off a text that interests me.

The concepts that have been underlying my work are those I've referred to, linked to the comprehension of the space that surrounds us. How do I relate to my surroundings? In what space am I living? How do I represent that setting? What setting that I am offering there can represent my piece, make my show? That creation of spaces, of developments has led me, since 82, with *Azulvermelho* (a space totally occupied by the painting which the spectator is invited to enter) to compare these environments with a Studiolo, a Cabinet d'amateur. They are spatial representation devices that I find interesting.

The video machine has introduced many other elements of a time that is not lived or that is being lived through the vision of the video. There are, of course, artists that use video with painting time. My liking for Bill Viola comes from that, from some of his video-installations that work as developments of images that are authentic paintings with movement. They are paintings in which the senses are still called upon in a complete way, not only in terms of sound but also visually. That relationship with the spectator is very carefully approached and it's an aspect that interests me, more than the projection of the video itself. I wouldn't rule out making a video, but I think there's a lot of work to do in the field of temporal relations (hence the crucial importance of editing, in cinema and video, and I think many video-artists are unsuccessful because they don't know anything about editing). If I think about doing something in video, I'm going to spend some time getting comfortable with the technique. I always get right inside a work; I really have trouble using assistants. I do everything, from the beginning right up to the end. It has to be me doing it! Perhaps it would be the same with a video.

The only work I can contrast with painting is set design. I haven't done any theatre work lately; I find it exhausting. I have to dedicate myself to it completely; I can't paint when I'm doing it. I've worked with João Perry and Nuno Vieira de Almeida. With Nuno, so that the staging wouldn't be very complicated (they were shows with only one actor on stage), the register of the set design was found quickly. The last theatrical experience I had was at Teatro da Trindade, *A Disputa*, with João Perry, where the design was a constant source of argument. Set design, in fact, doesn't remotely give you the kind of freedom you've got in the studio.

On the subject of freedom, a fulcral moment in your career was, it seems to me, the *Campo de Sombras* exhibition at the Fundación Pilar y Juan Miró a Mallorca. There seemed to be a clear change in the approach to painting, in the opening up of new perspectives on the problematics of your work. Referring to this in particular, Alexandre

Melo considers that "the first of Miró's teachings learnt by Calapez was the learning of freedom that allowed him to abdicate from any determined formal or thematic criteria in selecting the departure points for a series of works." Freedom, then. Do you feel you achieved that with *Campo de Sombras*?

In that, the freedom was total, I could do whatever I wanted. But I wanted to maintain a relationship with Miró. I liked certain of his periods; his final phase interested me considerably less. There are groups of works I consider important and others I find very uninteresting, inconsequential and unattractive. I visited the Pilar and Juan Miró Foundation, a foundation created by Miró and his wife at the end of the artist's life, which includes an area with Miró's studios. I visited two spaces and there was a situation that immediately touched me: a small chair in the corner of a room, where he would sit reading poetry. There was a hole in the wall, where Miró projected shadows on the wall: I had an impressive image of Miró before me. This could be a starting point. Later, I found the concept I wanted to develop - a concept concerning an issue I'd touched on in the *Memória Involuntária* exhibition at Museu do Chiado: the memory you can have of any object. How that object could be the starting point for something and how those memories could develop. On the studio wall, Miró had stuck newspaper cuttings and bits of images that he had found and I did drawings based on what was there. The interesting thing is that Miró had also done drawings based on the images. My point of contact was not, therefore, Miró's work, but the fact that we'd had the same starting point. I tried using these impressions as if Miró's memory had come to trouble me - or not - when I had been doing my drawings. There is this poetic side, reflected in the two series stuck on walls, one in front of the other (*Muro 1* and *Muro 2*). I worked on a symmetrical presentation, or rather, the arrangement of the images is repeated from one wall to another. It's a work that also refers to a series produced between 94 and 97, in which I contrast groups of works that lead the spectator to create some relations between what you see from one side and what you see from the opposite. And there are some difficulties in this perception for spectators, in distancing and managing to include the whole work in their visual field.

Right, at the Miró Foundation, it wasn't possible to see both walls at the same time. Or, at least, it could only be done with difficulty, like on a tennis court: you either look at one side or the other. The arrangement of the paintings was the same, but no drawing was repeated, some of the wood paintings were absolutely abstract, the play of form and colour related clearly with the coloured environment of Majorca itself. Melo also talks about this aspect: *O Sol de Maiorca*. Indeed, that exhibition is an explosion in terms of using colour. In my last exhibition in Bonn, I exhibited one of these works from the Miró Foundation on one wall and on the other, a work from the Museu do Chiado. This was a deliberate attempt to understand in space how they related with each other. And, with *Memória Involuntária* and the *Campo de Sombras*, there is a similar structure, but they are, in fact, very different. Something had changed in the tonal relation and the play of colours. Alexandre Melo realised this. In spite of also using reasonably thick, differently coloured wooden rectangles, the Chiado works are much more tonal, more pastel due perhaps to my initial reference point, the pictures of Sousa Pinto. The use of vibrant backgrounds has, I think, to do with my stay in Majorca.

The search for freedom is a constant in your work - in a text, it's enough to say there are only two key words: "stop" and "recommence", let the movement of the hand flow. In Majorca, we have such a vibrant array of colours before us that the step seems to have been taken to achieve complete freedom.

Complete freedom? I think we only achieve that when we die.

There was a passage to another stage; a new freedom was exalted.

It freed me to have to decide between "Am I only going to do painting with drawing on top?" or "Am I going to do more abstract paintings?" I said to myself: "No! I'm going to do both because both involve what concerns me!"

In my exhibition last year, in Witten, Germany, I exhibited drawings and paintings. This year, in Bonn, I'm going to do the same. The same will apply to the exhibition at Galeria Presença. Everyone has to give himself the freedom to present the registers thought necessary for the logic of a construction. However, returning to the question of places, if you go back five years, what made me decide to begin the series *ramos cérebros - folhas tubagens-circuitos* and later the series *Cidades Contínuas* has a lot to do with lines: a delicate white line that appears on a black background. It was my stay in Ireland, where I sat in the clearings of woods, watching the sun set between the trees. The development of a new environment helped me create a new phase in my work. After the objects and the *Histórias dos objectos* (for which I won the Latin Union Prize and was the theme of an exhibition at the Gulbenkian), a way of working came to an end as if the weight of objects had ended up leading me into something completely different and austere: black planes with white lines.

On the other hand there was, in this period, a cut in time in which in spite of drawing all the time (in a month when I lived in a way that we have to every now and again: if you want to draw, draw, if you want to sleep, sleep, if you want to read, read etc.), I did it in a very relaxed way, which actually opened up paths to other things, other projects.

Despite the continuity in your career there have been some moments which, whilst not being ruptures, were turning points in your work.

Making a quick retrospective; in 1982 there was the exhibition with Ana Léon, which was linked to my leaving the Escola Superior de Belas Artes. Another moment would be 84, when I became aware of drawings that turned into paintings. They were the first drawings and paintings on wood. In 87, I returned to these drawings on canvas and *Le travail du peintre* appeared. The trip to Ireland and, later *Campo de Sombras* at the Miró Foundation were, undoubtedly, turning points. Perhaps there were other moments. But these, certainly, were to do with changes in my work.

All your work has, on the other hand, an unsayable dimension, a permanent search for the sublime, a project based on a logic of re-establishment and salvation. Would you say your painting was recovering a magical/mystical dimension of the aesthetic experience?

I would rather say a poetic dimension. I believe that it's in the unsayable, in the small space between the things we know, that there are still moments in which we can live. That search for a living space takes place on the side of the unattainable, of the unsayable. It's a search that, perhaps, is connected to my memories and training. My mother loved reading poetry and was always suggesting texts for me to read. That experience didn't bring a literary reference to the work of painting, but generates a reference in the visual work, a development that functions as a kind of search for the aura that the objects might still have. Nonetheless, I don't believe in the "end of aura" as a natural process in the "end of art". I believe that it is still possible to live among the objects I make. Neither I nor my objects have a mission.

I talk a lot about the spectator, but probably, I'm the spectator. Or I'm the first, and it's only afterwards I see how the other spectators are and how they function. But I'm always trying to find me, in these short distances between each painting I do. Maybe what I produce when painting aren't the paintings I do, but the space between two lines, the space between two thicknesses.

You work (and ask the spectator to think) in terms of attention to detail. In *Memória Involuntária*, for example, you take details from a Sousa Pinto painting and develop them through a new pictorial language.

The fragmentations I make, in a "wall painting" rhythm, brick by brick, in different sizes, relate to the idea of us always seeing details. And, in fact, when I see a picture, I go through it detail by detail, which gives me particular enjoyment. There are pictures I can't remember as wholes, but only as details. This "seeing details" dimension is, certainly, materialised in some of these more recent works. They are made in bits as if the look was leaping. In fact, I force the look to jump around in the compositions I do. I don't accept that each one of the pictures can function alone. Alone, I run the risk of them seeming banal! My work is based on the relations between the pictures.

You could say then that the attention given and demanded to detail calls for an individual and intimate experience of a work of art from the spectator, an attitude that already exists in the moment in which you give it form?

That's my choice. Developing the work and doing it based on a logic where one thing brings another. There's almost a process of total forgetfulness, when I change from one group to another. And, at times, this makes itself felt in such a way that I put the previous group beside what I'm painting at the moment and try to copy it, but the result is completely different! The uncanny and challenging feeling that the finished work has is marvellous, asking to do other things. The work is a closed circuit, but one that is always irradiating other works. These are my concerns and I think that art is to be found there. I also think that it involves many other things. It's a characteristic of our time; we have this notion of diversity. I wouldn't exclude an artist like Hans Hacke, for example, who produces surprising work. Nonetheless, works following a highly intense political or sociological line lose the field of poetic individual experience and, generally, turn into something else. I'm not very interested in merely descriptive work. There are artists doing ecological and ethnographic work, but we end up reading more about the works

than attending to what they are in themselves. I believe works are to see and physically experience. There have been others, however, that were made so that their descriptions were read. When the intention to be political or support a cause becomes more important than the work itself, generally, the work becomes uninteresting. I think it's possible to talk of the person, the individual, society in any type of work, of different ways and different situations. In art, there is living and looking: nothing can replace them.

So, despite Neo-Situationism being one of the pillars of 90s art, you clearly distance yourself from it because your work is essentially poetic.

Of course. I'm completely separate from it.