

## Fissure

Delfim Sardo

On the wall is a fax, duly framed, bearing the phrase 'Everything disappears'. Standing as a testament to itself, the words fulfil this very destiny on the thermal fax paper. It could be a response to one of Lawrence Weiner's statements, 'As long as it lasts.' Everything is like this. Everything lasts for as long as it lasts and then disappears, like this sentence Onofre faxed to himself, a form of communication technology which also no longer exists and will inexorably disappear. It is a message the artist needed to confirm as clearly as possible, literally sending himself confirmation of the inevitable disappearance of words on paper. As Richard Wollheim wrote in 1965<sup>1</sup>, if describing the anguish of the blank page requires a great effort on the part the writer (thinking of Mallarmé in particular), for the artist it is only necessary to place that blank sheet on the wall. Displaying its progressive fading with pride, the fax framed on the wall seems to confirm this apparent ease: in order to speak of death, it is only necessary to show the path that leads to its inevitability. To expose oneself.

João Onofre's video work began with pieces that seem to express exactly the opposite of one another, but which always present the actions of one body over another, or the impossibility of this action being completed. In these initial works, the protagonists of the actions presented never find themselves facing the camera or, by extension, the spectator. On the contrary, the protagonists perform actions with and for each other in the image, and find themselves engrossed in these gestures. As if illustrating an 18th-century aporia by Denis Diderot about the need for characters to have an absorbed nature to generate credibility in pictorial work and escape the trappings of theatricality, thus the characters in Onofre's early videos also act for the other, either in an inconclusive way (as is the case of the couple who, facing each other on two treadmills, walk without ever materialising their encounter)<sup>2</sup>, or in the form of

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Wollheim, "Minimal Art", in *Arts Magazine*, January 1965, pp. 26-32.

<sup>2</sup> *Untitled (we will never be boring)*, 1997, SD video, colour, no sound, 60', 233 x 308 cm

physical action on the other (in the two works in which a body falls on another, or projects itself from one side to the other of a projection screen).<sup>3</sup>

These first videographic works established a set of data about the relations between bodies: rhythm, repetition and time are the tools that occupied the artist's creative universe in this period of his work, and not only in the field of videographic images – as is the case of the interlaced stethoscopes that allow two people to simultaneously hear each other's heartbeat. Of course, rhythm, repetition and time are characteristic of many contemporary artistic expressions, but in the case of Onofre they become a thick fog that fades in parts to reveal the melancholy of an action without conclusion or destination. Perhaps for this very reason his next videographic works are manipulations and appropriations of melancholic cinematographic memories (a fragment of Antonioni's *L'Eclisse*<sup>4</sup>, an excerpt from Fassbinder's *Martha*<sup>5</sup>, a shot from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*<sup>6</sup>), systematically converted into loops and transformed into circular movements. Although using fragments appropriated from famous cinematic works, in contrast to the three previous works, these works from 1999 are doubly circular (both in their temporality and spatially), and are converted into rotating dances that repeat themselves indefinitely, confirming the importance of the process of repetition.

In a way, the rhythm that guided the previous works, both visual and physical (the steps on the treadmills, the synthetic sound of the impact of the bodies), is replaced here by a fluid and rotating movement, in which the manipulation of the image and its temporality is completely absorbed by a circular narrative coherence. A waltz that twirls as the camera rotates around it, demonstrating, in the most graphic way possible, the interlacing of beginning and end that, no longer distinguished, stages the turns of an eternal process of return. A return which, in the universe of the moving image, has come to be called a loop by association with the circular movements of aerial acrobatics.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Untitled*, 1998, SD video, colour, sound, 3' (loop), 190 x 210 cm

<sup>4</sup> *Untitled (L'Eclisse)*, 1999, video, b/w, no sound, 20" (loop), 400 x 300 cm

<sup>5</sup> *Untitled (Martha)*, 1998, SD video, no sound, 16" (loop), 160 x 130 cm

## loop

The circularity of the loop gradually becomes a fundamental device of Onofre's videographic work. Even beyond his use of video, the successive repetition inherent to the loop, or more generically to that which eats its own tail, which is installed as a coming-and-going between two bodies, takes over his work: in his sparse photographic works, where the images re-confirm the titles (as in the case of *Your closed hand makes the size of your heart and together they make the minimum distance that it could be from another one*, made two years later, in 2001), or in objects such as the double stethoscope that blends the sound of two hearts in real time. This ongoing persistence of the loop deserves some reflection.

The loop is a persistent mechanism of contemporary art that makes use of recursion in the fields of sound, film and video. Its relevance, however, has been present since the 19th century in the mass phenomenon that was the painted panoramas, as well as in proto-cinematographic mechanisms such as the Phenakistiskope, the Zoetrope, or in the various types of Magic Lanterns, mechanisms that invariably work in a loop from mechanisms which are themselves circular.

The panoramas, huge painted canvases installed in specifically designed cylindrical buildings, were invented (and patented) by Robert Barker in the late 18th century and quickly spread to London, Paris and from there, virally, to the rest of Europe and later to the United States. The inherent circularity of these great landscape and/or narrative events raises a structural problem, insofar as that within these great landscape scenes, these visions of cities and episodes of battles, at a certain part of the scene unfolding before the astonished eyes of the spectators looking from a central platform – as it is still possible to experience in the Bourbaki panorama, Switzerland – the present inevitably runs full circle to meet up with the past (isn't this the very nature of eternal return?).

The stopping up of this temporal gap was one of the great challenges of panoramic builders. Along the various dilations and contractions of the painted

---

<sup>6</sup> *Untitled (2001)*, 1999, SD video, colour, no sound, 14" (loop), 400 x 300 cm

canvas surface, which could measure more than 10m high and 100m long, the meeting point before the spectators' eyes between action past and present – a military column taking a city, a confrontation or skirmish, the reinforcements arriving to a situation that is already lost at another point of the pictorial narrative – the moment when time establishes an autophagic circularity, this is the loop point. This is the secret and, simultaneously, the limit of the panorama (the precondition of its possibility).

The loop is thus the precondition which enables the narrative, eschewing the devices for the suspension of disbelief that build cinematographic diegesis (the suspension of disbelief of which Coleridge spoke), and building the scene where the event can unfold. The circularity instituted by the loop therefore dissolves sequential time – the time of narrative – for a primacy of space in the form of a stage, or any of its avatars, presenting action in a permanently renewed present.

This process, however, is also intimately connected with the use of the mechanism of repetition. Repetition is inherent to circularity – although it is not necessarily exhausted by it – and is established in Onofre's initial works as a time marked by sound (or punctuated by it), proposing what all repetition proposes: increased attention and acuity to difference. Repetition, so important at the beginning of Onofre's career – and I refer to both mechanical and represented repetition – has a double origin: on the one hand, it is tributary to the hypnotic character of repetitive music (from Steve Reich and La Monte Young to Rock 'n' Roll or Kraftwerk<sup>7</sup>), but also to a notion of seriality that is omnipresent in the critique of the individualised artistic object present in the conceptualisms of the 1960s and 1970s, a field from which Onofre realises his permanent *frottage*.

Onofre, however, uses the loop with two distinct meanings: in the early works he repeatedly uses the “seamless loop” (a process in which the end and beginning are so close that it is impossible to detect their point of union with precision), and he continued to use this even when a work exists within a kind

---

<sup>7</sup> *Instrumental version*, 2001. This is a video in which a choir performs “The Robots” from the 1978 album *The Man-Machine* by German group Kraftwerk.

of narrative that transcends circular action. This is the case of works such as those already mentioned, using footage collected from cinematographic works (sometimes manipulating time and crossing the normal direction of the action with its inverse). The use of the loop is also fundamental in pieces that do seem to have a beginning and end, as is the case of *Untitled (N'en Finit Plus)* from 2010-2011, made twelve years after the early pieces, and in which a teenager sings a song by Petula Clark (or, rather, her version of The Searchers' "Needles and Pins" of 1963). While the song marks the time of the film, the movement of the camera resumes the circularity of the melopoeia, making it endless and building a space-time unity that materialises the lyrics of the song itself, which sing of an endless night. At other times, however, João Onofre's videos are not constructed in a seamless loop but return to the initial film credits, as is the case with *VOX*, from 2015, in which the camera moves in rotation around its subject, a musician playing on a cliff by the sea. Even in these cases, the works proceed continuously, and it is not possible for the viewer to choose the moment of the action, because, apart from the credits, there are no pauses.

An extreme case of this type of procedure is the work *Untitled (zoetrope)*, produced specifically in the context of this exhibition. It is worthwhile to dwell a little on this recent work, which is almost a corollary of the processes of circularity and recurrence that typify Onofre's video production. The work starts from a complex structure: in an enclosed space – the Culturgest auditorium stage, though this is unimportant because the lack of spatial referentiality is the work's fundamental characteristic – a band of four members (keyboardist, drummer, guitarist and bassist) and a gospel choir of eighteen singers perform "I Want to Know What Love Is", the 1984 hit by Foreigner. Completing the circle around a microphone hanging in the centre of the space are two dozen rugby players (both male and female). For almost two hours and forty minutes, the band and the choir perform a version of the chorus, repeating it to exhaustion, while the rugby players fight to approach the central microphone to intone the line of the chorus that gives the song its title, a cry of adolescent perplexity. The players never succeed in their task because they are tackled by the other players in a process which is repetitive, frustrating and exhausting, filmed in a carousel around the large group of players. The work references the 1968 film

by Jean-Luc Godard *One Plus One*, in which the Rolling Stones are filmed at the mythical Olympic Sound Studio during the recording of “Sympathy for the Devil”.<sup>8</sup> The enormous shot sequence taken around the group was not edited, thus capturing all of the actors' movements and failures, their progressive exhaustion and eventual abandonment of their purpose. Although it has a narrative of fatigue and progressively exhausted bodies, the film is indeed also a loop, in the sense that the circularity of the shot and its unrestricted length, the repetition of the chorus and the situation of failure, create (again) an autophagic situation that outlines, inescapably, a place and not a time. Onofre's encounter with this process – at least in those works using the loop as a device – transformed his work into a permanent process of circumscribing a place of temporal suspension, in which the very gesture of circumscription – and the circularity lurking in every corner – proposes a certain notion of theatricality.

### **theatricality**

If initially the circular movement is literally drawn as a loop around or in front of a character – or of a small group of agents of an action – a situation progressively arises in João Onofre's work in which a group of characters performs an action, sometimes collectively, in front of a fixed shot perspective (which is not to say “in front of the spectator”).

The temporal recursion in his proposal of an expanded present draws a space that is the place where an event unfolds. This place begins to be defined as a stage, a scene that, by its very presence, defines a space of action. Contrary to his earlier works, in which the characters are engrossed in the development of a task or an act (walking, doing a handstand on a traffic light at night in Lisbon, eating flowers), from 2000 onwards – and especially from *Casting* (2000) – it is not the loop that establishes the space of an action, but a frontally placed group of agents who face the camera performing that action. From this work, a new process begins to emerge in which the action is directed towards the spectator

---

<sup>8</sup> Stan Douglas' film *Luanda-Kinshasa* (2013) also references Godard's film, capturing an Afro-Beat band recording in the mythical Columbia studios where Miles Davis recorded *Bitches*

and performed for him, but not in front of him – indeed, it is in front of the camera. This typology of performance in real space, from the space of representation to the space inhabited by the spectator, affirms a theatricality of the performative process, not only because of the frontality, but also because the agents are performers of a script guided by the nature of the action unfolding in time.

It is not, therefore, temporality that defines the space, but the design of a "stage" – of a scene, with its spatial hierarchies, backdrop and proscenium – that enables the presence of the performative gesture, that is, the gesture that is performed or presented. From this transformative work onwards, video as a process finds a new function, which is to enable a theatricality performed for the technological device, itself a redeemer of the theatrical gesture insofar as it acts as a mediator of representation. With the imposition of this new representative layer, a field of paradox is opened: what is performed for the spectator is only possible because the spectator is not there; in his place, there is a camera, a film crew and the entire apparatus dedicated to the development of this second instance of representation. This line of work would continue with a set of pieces, including the already mentioned *Instrumental version* and *Pas d'action* from 2002.

Perhaps the work that would materialise this theatricalisation of the performative process in a more intriguing and simultaneously assertive way is *Untitled (Original orchestrated ersatz light version)* from 2010-2011, in which an orchestra performs an iconic song by Adelaide Ferreira, "Dava Tudo", from 1989, on a theatre stage in full pomp and circumstance. The song is performed by the Portuguese singer in her poignant and dramatic style, and by João Onofre (in his sole appearance as a performer in a video), the latter exhibiting his inadequacy and ineptitude for the task he has undertaken. The result, between the professionalism of the orchestra, the satin-like musical arrangement, the theatrical lighting of the stage and the clear uneasiness produced by Onofre's vocal incompetence, transforms the action into a painful metamorphosis of a moment of parody into a tragic, incongruous and

---

*Brew.* While Godard and Onofre's films surround the scene with a rotating and exterior shot sequence, in Douglas' film the rotation is performed from the centre.

contradictory drag, as each one of the protagonists stages a process of self-representation, permanently re-signifying the lament of the chorus ("Dava tudo para te ter aqui..." [I would give anything to have you here]), epically repeated to exhaustion. A representation of a representation, the video proposes a paradox: while it is a truth that is revealed here, it is an ironic one.

## **irony**

In rhetorical theory since Quintilian, irony is described as an utterance which means the contrary of what it says. According to Konrad Feischenfeld in his analysis of romantic irony,<sup>9</sup> this can be understood (again from Quintilian) as a figurative or metaphorical use of a word or expression. As a figure, irony can apply to or emanate from a greater completeness – from a situation, or even an entire life – and, in this sense, the fragment is the proper instrument of irony, insofar as its (precisely) "fragmentary" character prevents the possibility of a totality which its apparent exemplarity seems to intuit. Romantic irony, as defined by Friedrich Schlegel in the late 18th century<sup>10</sup>, implies a 'recognition by the artist of the paradoxical character of his position'.<sup>11</sup> In the visual arts – where the question of irony has a much smaller resonance than in the field of literature – it is possible through the romantic understanding of visibility as a language: an encrypted language for sure, but a language in any case, which can arise in the form of the arabesque, of a drawing in space.

It is this possibility of understanding which allows the use of stylistic resources as devices that establish a second instance discourse based on the recursive use of work processes and methods developed by artists who have established a field to simultaneously generate a distance – that of the quotation, or paraphrase – and an affective proximity. Ironic play becomes more complex when the stylistic (or rhetorical, or conceptual) field defined is itself an ironic field in relation to its context or object.

---

<sup>9</sup> Konrad Feischenfeld, "Romantic Irony", in *The Romantic Spirit in German Art, 1790-1990* (Edinburgh and London: The Scottish Gallery of Modern Art, The Hayward Gallery, 1994), p. 179.

<sup>10</sup> In several texts and fragments.

<sup>11</sup> As described by William Vaughan, "Landscape and the Ironie of Nature", in *The Romantic Spirit in German Art, 1790-1990*, *ibid.*, p. 184.



This procedure is central to João Onofre's work methodology and, in some cases, it seems to become a procedure almost in the field of comedy. Perhaps the most obvious example of this would be *Catriona Shaw sings Baldessari sings LeWitt re-edit Like a Virgin extended version*, 2003. In this video (part of a trilogy), the pop singer Catriona Shaw sings the 1968 Sol LeWitt "sentences" over Madonna's 1984 hit "Like a Virgin".<sup>12</sup> In fact, the singer does not even perform LeWitt's 35 sentences, but rather the version sung by John Baldessari in his 1972 video. The ironic *mise-en-abyme* of successive interpretations proposed by Onofre has multiple resonances, inasmuch as its object is Baldessari's version (already ironic) of the LeWitt sentences. Converted now into an updated version with an iconic pop song, a little *démodé* already at the time of its appropriation, and interpreted by a professional singer, they return the interpretation of the original work (though we might ask, which one?) to the domain of vocal proficiency, suggesting the strange suspicion that LeWitt's sentences are, in themselves, ironic.

This circuit of successive appropriation and paraphrase only makes sense because it is part of a "will to paradox" which approaches the romantic irony of Schlegel, taking the conceptual field as the possible "nature" of the artistic work. The trilogy of which this work forms part has the artist's own studio as a common denominator, a choice that, in itself, is the result of a metaphorical operation. By the time Onofre realised this cycle of works [which also include *Untitled (vulture in the studio)*, and *Believe (levitation in the studio)*, both from 2002] the artists' studio had long since ceased to be a place of material transformation to become – especially in the artistic imaginary of the late 20th century – a mix of archive and conceptual laboratory. The reference to Bruce Nauman in *Believe (levitation in the studio)* occupies an exemplary place in the treatment of the studio: Nauman, at the beginning of his career in San Francisco, when he settled in a studio in the Mission District, formulated the endlessly repeated syllogism that everything the artist does in the studio is art. Of course, the test of this proposal would have to be carried out using impossible tasks, at least in terms of the physical possibilities of the body. It is in this Beckettian sense – of developing an action persistently doomed to failure –

---

<sup>12</sup> "Sentences on Conceptual Art", originally published in *Art-Language*, Vol. 1, no. 1, 1969.

that Nauman made his attempt at levitation in 1966, failed as such but clearly successful in Duchampian terms: the documented failed attempt at levitation (*Failing to Levitate in the Studio*, 1966) has no other purpose than to demonstrate ironically that its only meaning is to be art.

João Onofre's reformulation makes a second irony about the first (which was a small tragedy) in the form of farce: he hires a conjurer who, with the help of his assistant, stages a kind of obviously farcical levitation show in the studio.

Another case reaffirming the idea of romantic irony is present in the second work of this period, which includes a vulture – and a good dose of detachment from the materials in the studio. The tragic and heartbreaking character of the destruction that the enormous animal causes in the cold, professional environment of the artist's studio (so far from the cliché of the studio as a demiurgical place) is, of course, a serious joke, as Goethe refers to in *Faust*. This contradiction, or this paradox between the predatory character of the artist himself, whose work stirs in the bowels of art history itself, and his exposure to a scavenger who moves mercilessly in the bowels of his own work, can be understood as a serious yet tongue-in-cheek commentary on his own creative activity, or as a punishment for its permanent state of predation. In any case, the ironic nature of the work is only understandable if it is framed primarily as paradox and not as a mere inversion of meaning, going beyond the rhetorical field of irony to propose it as a figure, that is, as an emanation of life. This figure, however, is only understandable as a Romantic figure, that is, as a fragmentary representation of an axiology of the great themes of Art History (death, love, failure, memory and epiphany), an *ersatz* of life.

### **finitude**

Life can only be represented through its finitude.

In 2006 and 2007, two works by João Onofre directly address the inevitability of finitude and its representation. In *Thomas Dekker, an interview*, the situation created by Onofre results in an almost perverse game about the production mechanisms of fiction. Dekker is an actor whose most noteworthy role was as a perverse and alien-like child in John Carpenter's *The Village of the Damned*, an iconic 1995 film. The character played by Dekker is the only one who escapes

death in the film, disappearing. From this opening of the narrative, Onofre asks the actor a set of factual questions addressed to the character he played years before and to which he answers with a candour that suggests he does not understand the mousetrap in which he is caught. In a way situated in the sequence of *Casting*, a video that also involves a game of disappointments performed by teenagers, in *Thomas Dekker* the dual relationship with the interviewer places the question of life as representation at the centre of the decoy produced by Onofre. This operation also reveals the fascination his work has had with childhood and adolescence as moments in which death seems to hover without shadow.

It is precisely from the ghost of death summoned by the artist that the tragic dimension is evoked, something done even more markedly in *I See a Darkness*, 2007. In a recording studio, two children aged 11 and 12 play a song by Will Oldham from 1999, popularised by Johnny Cash the following year. The song is a thick fog that heralds death, but the joy of the children playing it, focused on the difficulty of the task itself, comes to the surface when they reach the end of a difficult song, whose words are beyond their understanding. In contrast to the darkness hanging over the song, an increasingly intense general light consumes the image until only one flash remains, the white of the screen with the echo of the last chords.

This evocation of death, established in a contradictory game in relation to the candour of youth, closes the piece with the open possibility that youth can only be represented in terms of its opposite, the spectre of death or the rapture of will. In the first case, one of the works that materialises the irony of death in a more determined way is the already mentioned *Untitled (N'en Finit Plus)* from 2010-2011, in which the song interpreted by the teenager from the bottom of a hole which we inevitably associate with a grave is also about the night, closing a cycle with *I See a Darkness*. It should be noted, however, that in the same period (from 2006), Onofre produced two works directly associated with death: a survey, duly marked on a map of the Lisbon Regional Development Plan, of the places where deaths are legally registered (morgues, hospitals and cemeteries), and a photographic work producing collective portraits of the

gravediggers of Lisbon cemetery.<sup>13</sup> This last work, formally executed as a classic group portrait with a cyclorama in the background, has the particularity that all its subjects are unified in their use of sunglasses, a feature that simultaneously robs them of their individuality (and gives them a collective agency) and inscribes a certain decorum on the images.

This seems to be a procedure of some importance. Like Velazquez, who in his extraordinary portrait of the jester Juan Calabazas, known as *El Bufón Calabacillas*, 1637-1639, blurs the face to obscure the subject's extreme condition of esotropia – which can be recognised as a refined gesture of ethical representation – Onofre too protects the gaze of those who care for the dead, allowing the theatricality of their frontality and allowing the spectator to confront those who, more directly and ultimately, look death straight in the eye. In this double protection (of the portrait subject and of its spectator) we see the decorum with which Onofre deals with the perception of finitude, but also the recognition of the difficulty and fragility of the representation process that is always present in his work.

In other words, his proposal that the artistic process, in its permanent attempt to deal with finitude, has no other recourse but to situate itself within the threshold of failure: to show the inconclusiveness of the proximity between bodies, the finitude through what never ends, death through youth, the attempt as necessarily doomed to failure.

## **failure**

In 2016 Onofre made a sound installation based on edited fragments of the five studio albums recorded by Portuguese guitarist Carlos Paredes<sup>14</sup> (1925-2004), specifically the moments in which the musician's breath is audible. Throughout his life, due to his peculiar way of holding the guitar, it was impossible to make recordings of Paredes without also capturing the noises of his breathing. Although the musician hated this parasitic noise, the audience always appreciated this trace of the guitarist's physical presence – as happens also

---

<sup>13</sup> *Every Gravedigger in Lisbon (Ajuda Cemetery, Alto São João Cemetery, Benfica Cemetery, Carnide Cemetery, Lumiar Cemetery, Olivais Cemetery, Prazeres Cemetery)*, 2006

<sup>14</sup> *Untitled*, 2016

with recordings of Glenn Gould, Abdullah Ibrahim and Keith Jarrett. Onofre made a sound collage of all the moments when Paredes' breathing is audible, a palimpsest formed by the back and forth of that breath which transposes the technical attention, the delicacy of Paredes' embellishments and his virtuosity, to create the haptic physicality of a ghost.

In many of Onofre's works, failure is the engine of intensity: in the video that presents a duet between the artist and Adelaide Ferreira, in *Casting*, in *Untitled (vulture in the studio)*, and finally in *Untitled (zoetrope)*, from 2018-2019.

There is a fissure that opens in this repeated interest in failure and it is in this fissure that the fragility of life and of the human penetrates like a thin stream of air, the inevitability of loss and the impossibility of totality. It is also within this fissure that irony is installed, that the fragment fails in its auspicious exemplarity, that youth is lost and extinguished, and that a rumour of a pop song, repeated until no more than an echo, seems to condense a total meaning.

On the wall is a fax, duly framed, bearing the phrase "Everything disappears". As a testament to itself, the words have now fulfilled this very destiny on the thermal fax paper, faded and melancholy.