

## GRIDS AND FILTERS

Porto - Lisbon, August 2023

I share with Ramiro a short stay in Berlin, where I had arrived two years earlier, but having our stays not coincided in time by little. I took with me a proposal based on Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, on the mystics of ecstasy and on a programme of study on architectural decoration. My intention was to bring all these elements together in a plan to escape the claustrophobia I felt in my native place, however, without success. When we talked about Berlin more recently, we disagreed on the quality of the experiences we had, certainly because we attended different spaces, because in our daily lives we have made divergent circuits between the abrupt changes of that city, which changes radically from one day to the next, and because we have been welcomed by new communities.

Before we were introduced and became friends, I was told that Ramiro had studied architecture at the "Porto School". I'd already seen images of his body's occupation of places, in catalogues dating from that time, which for most of us would be negligible. And since I've been following him and his work for so many years, I believe that he continues to study, with the exemplary dedication of an artist-architect, relying on meticulous methodologies, to convert theory into practice.

In fact, I think Ramiro "raves" about architecture. Raving about architecture and inhabiting this delirium, confronting it, is - in the sense I'm giving it here - freely and compulsively invoking historically disparate references, reordering them, and giving them new meanings. This is where I situate my thinking about Ramiro's work. He encompasses both the History of the buildings - the structures erected on the ground, vertically, in their utilitarian, residential aspect - and also that of the "skin" - the name given, of course, to both our dermis and the external cladding of buildings - which is decorative and

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standardised. And if I'm starting with Berlin, it's because it's there that architecture best demonstrates it is "power", and it's one of the best European cities to witness the succession and overlapping of ideological powers and their architectural affirmation over which the artist was able to exercise his reverie - perhaps as a liberation exercise - and because it's there, in that common experience, where we've never met, that I find an affective orientation to begin this brief dialogue about the work currently exhibited.

**Isabel Carvalho (IC):** Your work involves materialising architectural references in different media, crossing them and proposing reinterpretations through your plastic reinterpretation. What references can we find in this *Grids & Filters* exhibition?

**Ramiro Guerreiro (RG):** For this exhibition, I'm concentrating above all on certain plastic elements in the composition of the façades of buildings associated with the so-called *International Style*. These are examples chosen in a particular area of Lisbon, which I value for various reasons, and which I've dealt with in other ways in the past. For example, in one of the first works I presented publicly, *Entalados* (2005), I already had several photographs taken in Av. dos Estados Unidos da América, which I have now returned to; later, in 2009, I had an exhibition entitled *Verdes Anos*, in which I returned to that area of the city, this time to focus on other types of elements - sculptures integrated into the architecture of the 1940s/50s that do not belong to the vocabulary of the *International Style*, but are closer to an aesthetic associated with the Estado Novo, which became known as *Português Suave*.

Here, based on photographic records and drawings, I propose compositions with other plastic elements, including materials that were used for design drawings in a pre-digital era.

**IC:** In Lisbon, too, there are overlapping ideologies evident in the buildings...

**RG:** Absolutely. This area of the city - Alvalade, in general terms - has always interested me precisely because of this: the regime decided to expand the capital of its empire (let's not forget that we're talking about the Estado Novo) in the biggest urban planning operation to date. The aim was to continue the city in a *modern* way, linking the existing one to the new airport, but it was important to maintain a certain regime aesthetic. The vast majority of buildings are not public - they are mainly collective housing, or "income buildings", delegated to private investors - and this allows a certain freedom of design compared to public works, where there is necessarily a "State representation".

The axis of Av. de Roma that starts at Pç. de Londres and ends at the Júlio de Matos Hospital is an example of this overlap because

we have a series of already modern buildings (collective housing, schools, etc.), which correspond to a *Portuguese Style*, but at their back they also built in the *International Style* (for example, the Bairro das Estacas, designed by Ruy d'Athouguia, with less visibility from this main axis). Further north, there's the junction with Av. dos Estados Unidos da América, which is strikingly modern, with the four towers designed by Filipe Nobre de Figueiredo and José Segurado. Av. dos Estados Unidos da América is also entirely designed in a modern style, unlike Av. de Roma.

Paulo Rocha's film *Verdes Anos* (1963) shows this newly built part of the city in an exemplary way, as opposed to the still rural and suburban Chelas hill. Perhaps that's also why it has become one of my favourite Portuguese films.

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**IC:** I believe that your revisiting of architecture doesn't just take place in an abstract dimension but comes from a reality experienced by your body and your physical interaction, which reminds me of some of your early work. Is this something that has remained constant in your career?

**RG:** I think so, although sometimes this approach to the body and the experience of space can seem more distant or be approached in a less direct and more abstract way.

**IC:** You are extremely methodical in the way you work, using grids, nets and webs (e.g. Mecanorma), and using geometric compositions, which as a whole reflect the way you reorganise and make known other dimensions of architectural space (and its representation). These graphic resources give structure to your thinking and translate the complexity of your studies. This is how your process expands and consolidates even when you choose forms of presentation as different as sculpture, drawing, *performance*, and photography. Do they all converge in the same direction?

**RG:** There are many different issues that interest me, and they can (almost) all fit under the giant cluster of problems that is

the discipline of Architecture. I don't think the approaches to the different challenges I face are always convergent, but there is probably a line that can be understood as a "guiding thread" or, perhaps better, as a parallel concern that has accompanied my practice over time, even though sometimes it may even seem absent or manifest itself in a more subtle, almost invisible way.

**IC:** The invocation of "skin" in buildings - the grids - reminds me of breathing - materials breathe, they are not inert, just as our dermis perspires. There is a parallel, not just metaphorical, between us and spaces. A film comes to mind, *Un chant d'amour*, written and directed by Jean Genet in 1950, and a short story, *The Completion of Love*, by Robert Musil. In both, the walls are elements present in the erotic game in which something or someone can't or won't be touched/grabbed and desire is prolonged through breathing, present both in the exchange of cigarette smoke in Genet's prison and in the anxious suspension of the self by Musil's character Claudine. Games of desire, seduction, love, and power mediated by materials are present here, as if this was not only what separates us from each other, but also what drives us closer. I know you're going to make a window with a grid in the gallery, which is also a filter. So as not to risk overlapping my impressions with yours, I'd love to know what kind of eroticism you're talking about.

**RG:** The first time someone invoked an erotic quality in my work was Ricardo Nicolau, in a text he generously wrote for the exhibition *Resto*, which I did for the White Pavilion (Lisbon, 2011). Ricardo's text, entitled "*A Luva e a Manga*", drew attention to the things not shown, but left to be guessed at, to be imagined. For me, it was a great (and pleasant) surprise because I needed this external gaze to realise qualities in what I was showing, which, without it, were not at all obvious to me - I don't even know how long it would take me to discover this potential quality. In the same way, your question also allows me to look at this grid piece in a way that I haven't done before. I don't know if I can explain or tell you what kind of eroticism this "grid work" is about. There is a formal play of transparency and opacity that filters and permeates this entrance space with the gallery's exhibition room. A composition full of rhythm, whose perception varies according to the direction and position of the gaze of each person entering or leaving that

space. We can guess what lies beyond that opening, without the subsequent space being completely visible or comprehensible. It is perhaps in this enquiry that the erotic quality of this piece lies. It's not an opaque or completely transparent wall, but it allows for communication between the two sides, wider than the straw that runs through the wall between cells and allows the two lovers imagined by Genet to share the smoke of a cigarette...

**IC:** From what you say, eroticism can be perceived in architecture and certain works of art, including those that you produce, through the ability of these constructions to arouse desire by simultaneously revealing and concealing meanings. That's why the "window" you're going to build seems to me to be a proposal that directs the public towards a more sensory than intellectual experience. In other words, this piece seems to have been designed as an invitation to be experienced rather than interpreted or explained. And perhaps even to be touched or pierced. The way I personally interact with your work is precisely through this sensory approach. However, I don't feel that you have a deliberate intention to distance us from your premises (which you're always willing to talk about), but there's always something that leaves us in suspense (in desire) because it's not fully clarified...

**RG:** In general, I'm interested in an experience of the body as a vehicle for intellectual speculation. Inhabiting any kind of space always involves the physical experience itself before the gaze. This experience can be all the richer when it is accompanied by different perceptions throughout space/time. What we can observe facing this piece varies when our body moves a metre to the left or to the right, when we experience it from the outside in or from the inside out, when we look at it from the bottom up or from the top down. And then there's the very tactile quality of the material used, which in this case is terracotta, with some faces painted in two colours and others left in the natural colour of the ceramic used. I think we often forget that the body also has a pre-rational, pre-mental *intelligence*. These sensory perceptions can be very rich and, from them, ideas can emerge that are constructed and/or translated by language, which give shape to our rational thinking, but this "translation" comes later. This isn't to say that the sensory is more or less important than the rational, but I'm

interested in emphasising this aspect, which often seems to me to be overlooked or at least underestimated.

For all these reasons, I think I am, as you say, available to talk, but I'm not interested in "explanations" (either as an artist or as a visitor to an exhibition). If everything could be explained, what would be left of the mystery and imagination?

**IC:** Still about the "window", why did you choose it to have this range of colours and this specific configuration? This question arises from the desire to turn the direction of our conversation towards criticism, not only institutional, but above all as an attitude and way of being that are constant in you.

**RG:** Ever since I was preparing the *Resto* exhibition (2011), I've been compiling photographs of these types of elements as I come across them (whether in Lisbon, Porto, Beirut, Istanbul, or any other city). At the time, for one of the rooms in the White Pavilion I imagined a large piece that was never made, but which was designed. It would be a wall, all made in a grid work with this kind of design. Simply *tilting* one side of a rectangular piece provides a very dynamic rhythm - almost unbalanced. The module/pattern game is completely transformed by this very simple change, in addition to having never seen a grid work of this type before - probably because it will be less stable than other solutions and could entail unnecessary risks if it were used as an element for building façades.

The colours were an almost intuitive choice, based on the terracotta chosen for the purpose. In a way, they could have been present in a palette of colours that some modern architects often used based on a *Corbusier primer*. In addition, and despite all this dialogue with the *International Style*, there is also a certain closeness to the vernacular and to the territory - whether that closeness is to the south of Portugal or to a whole stretch of Mediterranean sites, with the enormous wealth of cultural exchanges that this sea has allowed over the ages.

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**IC:** Can you tell me what your perpetual (architectural?) "project" is? In other words, one to which you return countless times, and which remains open enough not to run out...

**RG:** Difficult question... Perhaps a certain idea of Humanism and Universalism recurs in my concerns and that's why I'm so interested in the *International Style* (already in a rationalist, post-functionalist revision) - in addition to certain aesthetic characteristics that have always attracted me. This aesthetic reference is important to me. It seems to me that this is *where I come from* in some way, but the attraction to the discipline doesn't end at that moment, it goes back a long way, and the past serves to make me think and question our present and our future. From an anthropocentric perspective, architecture should be made by and for people, never forgetting the various environments of each place and how they can be transformed to *elevate* those same environments (in their climatic, social, and urban qualities, etc.). It's an immense sea that's difficult to exhaust because we come across new problems all the time. Even though I'm not an architect, nor is my practice exclusively limited to this discipline, I believe that art can also contribute to these issues, which also encompass individual experiences in collective spaces. Between *The Right to the City* and *The Poetics of Space* there are many constellations that I'm interested in continuing to work on.

Isabel Carvalho