

Água viva [1]

for Gregory Bastos

“Let me tell you: I’m trying to seize the fourth dimension of the instant-now so fleeting that it’s already gone because it’s already become a new instant-now that’s also already gone. Every thing has an instant in which it is. [...] I want to possess the atoms of time. And to capture the present, forbidden by its very nature: the present slips away and the instant too, I am this very second forever in the now.” [2]

Eight blocks of carbon steel occupy one of the exhibition’s rooms. The seemingly identical sculptures in the *Apparently Still* series foreground what Bastos proposes as a questioning of the certainties produced by stable systems. In apparent calm, within the thin film of water resting atop each carbon-steel cube—monolithic in both matter and idea—subtle disturbances emerge: discreet flashes of light or delicate movements disrupt the placidity of the still surface. Gravity itself causes the body of water, *living water*, to return to apparent immobility, giving form to an unsettled matter. To observe the installation is to follow this slight disjunction between what the optical apparatus apprehends, what actually occurs on the material plane, and what is subsequently produced on the cognitive one. A minute alteration in an apparently identical element may be registered by sight, inscribed in matter, and yet remain uncertain in the mind—as though the work produced a play of reflections among what happened, what was perceived, and what could be apprehended. [3]

It is precisely here that Bastos insists that artistic experience takes place within the realm of the visible—or, more broadly, that of sensation, as his sonic and thermal works likewise demonstrate. It is also constituted by the estrangements, surprises, and paradoxes generated by the reflection, attention, and duration that orbit perception. Certain phenomena occur beyond what we are able to see, unsettling the systems through which we ordinarily organize things. When there is too much information, too many singularities, the very idea of perception as a system collapses. What remains is experience in its unstable form.

It is at this juncture that an Augustinian impulse opens up once again: the aspiration toward a system that exceeds what is given, toward a more intricate reality commensurate with reality itself. [4] Such a reality cannot be fully apprehended through human simplifications; it can only be glimpsed obliquely, when in fact it is operated upon by entities of far greater magnitude—whether, in Augustinian thought, theological and divine ones, or, in particle physics, physical and quantifiable ones. A thing is never merely what it appears to be in a given instant: it is also the potential sum of what it has been and what it may become, entangled across space, time, and ontology, traversing the ideal and the physical. The present, always uncapturable because it has already passed, thus appears, in its immediacy and ephemerality, perhaps more abstract than the past or the future themselves. From this condition emerges an axis of symmetry—or, better, an operator of reflection capable of transforming matter into force and force into matter.

Bastos thus finds a point of evidence from which to bring the temporal experience he proposes into proximity with the concept of supersymmetry: a hypothesis in theoretical physics that establishes a correspondence between particles of different types, extending the symmetry described by the Standard Model. [5] The idea interests the artist because it suggests a reality in which apparently distinct entities and states may participate in a common structure. The entanglement of past and future likewise obeys none of the representations of Euclidean geometry. The present, in turn, seems to answer to a nongeometry, to the coexistent and intricate algebraic varieties of differential geometry. At stake is a way of thinking reality beyond the categories that organize it, making the very attempt to explain it an operation that produces new modes of understanding. Scientific methods, then, in attempting to explain reality, necessarily entail the production of a new reality.

Bastos's intentions extend in this direction. They seek to bring two apparently antithetical categories into proximity: matter and dynamics, the static body and the dynamic, incorporeal forces that exist without a body and act upon elements of undeniable corporeality. We can thus glimpse how the nature of the form we apprehend also derives from the forms of thought through which we categorize and explain it. We understand the world through methods and practices that are necessarily limited. The habitual reduction of scientific systems to the scale of human cognition, grounded in a Eurocentric, linear, binary, evolutionary, and categorial system, produces its own excess: propositions that exceed conventional hierarchies and structures when these prove insufficient.

The dialogues that compose *I See Her, She Saw Me*—the exhibition's sound work—take up this question from another angle, understanding the ephemerality of time as the formative condition of memory, always shifting and therefore incomplete, while at the same time exceeding anything already complete. They encounter the Cartesian notion that human experience occurs at specific points in time and space, blurring the pasteurized, desensitized reading of experience by honoring each of its singularities. Symmetry remains suggested here: the two parts it connects, like the axis itself, do not, strictly speaking, share the same ontological status. The differentiation between these states—matters and forces, the now and the not-now, the natural and the artificial—reinforces their intimate proximity without implying a relation of equality.

Whereas the events in *Apparently Still* unfold over an exceedingly brief duration, in *Drift* Bastos opts for a duration diametrically opposed. Droplets of water, formed through the condensation of humidity in the air, gather at the center of a refrigerated corten-steel plate. The work challenges the viewer from another angle, again putting the very idea of duration under tension: one must remain before the work for an extended period to perceive its mechanism. More than deciphering that mechanism, what matters is that it become fertile ground for the viewer to coexist intimately with the work. In this sense, Bastos enters into dialogue with a tradition of conceptual art that also feeds on the accoutrements accompanying the work—its title or technical specifications, for instance—which can help an anxious mind unravel the intended workings of each piece. At the same time, he distances himself from using these elements as explanatory devices, insisting that sustained attention, a focus on experience, and the relation established between work and viewer are sufficient to complete the artistic experience. The impulse to propose structures capable of explaining how everything works and where everything comes from thus reveals itself as

ineffective. This way of seeing the world—attempting to apprehend everything, so much, all at once—also results in seeing nothing.

The images that seem to recognize themselves within the paintings are likewise called into question: do they occur at atomic or astronomical scales? Are they images of material bodies as seen, or diagrams demonstrating their forces? Are they fictional, or so real as to disclose physical systems? The distinction between them—between paintings and nonpaintings, between the microcosmic and the macrocosmic—could hardly matter less. More than symmetry as a tool through which one knows what will appear on the other side of a point, axis, or plane, Bastos is interested in its capacity to produce opacity, to form unforeseen and incalculable zones beyond the singularity of experience. What interests him is the expansion of material and physical limitations to the point at which these things come undone—or undo what has already been made.

—Daniel Thun

Notes

[1] *Água viva* is the title of a novel by Clarice Lispector, first published in English in 1973. When translating the book to English, some translators—as Stefan Tobler—choose to keep the title in its original language, keeping its mystery, sound, and fluidity; while some others—as Elizabeth Lowe—propose an indirect translation as “the stream of life”. As an asymmetrical gesture, I chose to keep the original language of the title on the text’s title, and to also refer to it as “living water” in the text.

[2] Clarice Lispector, *Água viva* (Translated by Stefan Tobler. New York: New Directions, 2012), 13.

[3] The dialogues between Bastos’s perspective, Marcel Duchamp’s (1887–1968) concept of *inframince*—designating the minimal, almost imperceptible differences produced between two apparently identical things—and Walter De Maria’s (1935–2013) notion of an artistic experience amalgamating object, action, and aesthetic sensation are far from coincidental.

[4] “If one could conceive of a time that could not be divided into particles and instants, however small, only such time could be called the present, yet this instant flies so swiftly from the future into the past that it has no duration. If it had duration, it would be divided into past and future, but the present has no duration whatsoever.” Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI, Chapter 15.

[5] In more complex physical contexts or models, the Standard Model is insufficient because, although it describes particles and three of the four known fundamental forces with extraordinary precision, it does not account for phenomena such as gravity, dark matter, and dark energy, thereby indicating the limits of its capacity to describe physical reality in its entirety.