



"Disorder": about the creative process of an experimental film

Susana Mendes Silva

Disorder is a short film that Maria João Guardão and I created together in the summer of 2014. We have been friends for quite sometime, and about three years ago we also became neighbours which allowed us an enormous degree of proximity not only physical but also intellectual as we discuss our projects, go to exhibitions, to the theatre, to the cinema and other art events together. As in my other solo or collaborative art projects I tend to work with people with whom I find common interests and that I have developed a degree of empathy, trust or friendship. For me it is very important that to know (even if just intuitively) that I can rely on that project partnership. Although this was not the first time that we collaborated with each other, it was the first time that we decided to create something together: a film.

The point of departure of the short film *Disorder* was firstly the installation "Square Disorder" that was exhibited at Appleton Square, in Lisbon, in 2008; the installation "Rectangle Disorder" and the performances created for it in co-authorship with the dancer and choreographer Miguel Pereira — "#1 [preview]", "#2 [instruction manual]" and "#3 [finissage]" — with the collaboration of the sound designer Jari Marjamäki — that were all presented at Leal Rios Foundation, in Lisbon, in 2014.

Square Disorder was installed at Appleton Square in Lisbon, which is a perfect white cube gallery: 9 x 9 meters. Once at the door of the space people would be confronted with an apparent void. Many of them would ask if the exhibition was already on display.

The room was totally occupied with an almost invisible installation that was constructed with fine hair strands. The structure was made by an orthogonal grid of 30 x 30 cm at 220 cm from the floor. In each intersection a hair was knotted and was suspended vertically. Therefore entering the space was simultaneously entering on the artwork, because as soon as one passed the door threshold one was already being touched by and touching the installation.

And one were also altering the shape of the installation just by passing through it and with all their interactions. For the artist João Seguro¹ it was a performative act:

In this operation one can find reverberations of performative and theatrical gestures that have questioned the reputation of the white cube in the last decades and it seems permissible that we can related this art work with the installation of Melanie Counsell for Matt's Gallery in 1995 or a "Coats of Asbestos Spangled with Mica" in 2002 by Liam Gillick. These interventions extract their architectural vocabulary from the metaphorical value of the ceiling and profit from the figurative quality of an element that is simultaneously a protection, a cover or a set. On this probability Susana Mendes Silva's intervention projects on the gallery space the repeated disorder by insinuating that the grid that we acknowledge as ceiling can intermit between being an object or an environment. It also tries to catapult that experience mediated by the scarcely visible structure to the one of a bodily understanding that is both provocative and disturbing contradicting the process of value comodification by common tactile or visual interventions.

The total occupation of the space denied the possibility of a distant gaze, because you could not contemplate it from a distance. The body of the viewer was a body that had to experience and participate in the work and therefore in the space. But our eyes could not encompass all the structure simultaneously: you would focus on part, and then the rest would be a blur, or even become invisible.

On the opening night I realized that the work had a very strong performative potencial, which I was not aware when I first did some testings on the studio. And as it was summertime the feeling of the hair strands touching or caressing gave some visitors a playful, relaxing or even erotic sensation, as Pedro de Llano² remarks:

(...) the work of Susana Mendes Silva can be viewed, taking into account its sophisticated combination of tactility, eroticism and intimacy, as a *caress* whose effect varies depending on the person who receives it: from tenderness to possibly some kind of farfetched sexual perversion, as those we sometimes hear about from Japan. Pursuing this thread, there would be another way to experience *Square Disorder*, in which its serenity and softness would suddenly be transformed into something obsessive, compulsive. The gentle loving gesture of these endless fingers would

¹ - Seguro, J. (2008), *Square Disorder*, Lisboa: Appleton Square.

² - De Llano, P. (2014), *A Labyrinth of Hair*, In *Rectangle Disorder* (cat.), Lisboa: Fundação Leal Rios.

metamorphose into a jealous embrace that resists our departure.

The hair that I used is made of a synthetic fibre called *Kanekalon*, which is very similar to human hair. I chose to work with hair that resembled my own: dark brown and straight. I was very interested in self-referential dimension, and in using a material that looked so fragile and organic, but at the same time was aseptic, industrial, and that each strand length was exactly the same as the another one.

The installation became part of the Leal Rios collection and in 2013 I was invited to show it again. The space was quite different: instead of a cube, it was a long rectangular parallelepiped with 20 meters long by 5 meters wide. I couldn't simply replicate it because I made *Square Disorder* as a site-specific, in the sense that it was specific to a square parallelepipedic space with all its idiosyncrasies.

So, I reformulated the project for the Leal Rios Foundation space and the work that was presented had a rectangular grid (60x40 cm) and was suspended at about 254 cm from the floor. The installation that was presented was titled *Rectangle Disorder* in accordance with the new structural grid.

The Foundation space had three different spatial features:

- As the space is so long the artwork constructed long corridors;
- It does not have any source of natural light, which had a slight effect on the visual perception;
- And it has a *mezzanino* floor from which people could contemplate one another moving through the installation.

This time I was interested and aware of the performative dimension of the installation, so I invited the choreographer Miguel Pereira to work on these issues with me and create a performance that would revolve around it. I was very impressed with *Op.49*, a show that Miguel presented in April 2012, in which he approached questions related to the duality between invisibility and visibility, and also working with sound as another form of space and presence. Departing from the installation *Rectangle Disorder*, Miguel Pereira and I created in co-authorship a series of three performances that allow the public to experience the work in a sequential mode: in #1 [*preview*] we unveiled a moment that the public would never have access to, just before the opening of the exhibition; in #2 [*instruction manual*] the participants had the opportunity to explore the perception and the interaction with the piece. Each session, was for a group of a maximum of four people and had approximately 15 minutes; in #3 [*finissage*] it

was the closing moment of the exhibition: a finissage that encompassed the work, the space and the audience.

We also invited the sound designer Jari Marjamäki, that had already worked with Miguel Pereira, to collaborate with us regarding the aural questions. That allowed us to explore the sound that our bodies made whilst moving through the space, the sound of the installation and of our interaction with it.

Late January 2014, just before the first performance at Leal Rios Foundation, I thought about Maria João Guardão to film the performances. We did a first *réperage* session, in which we analysed the qualities of the space, its light, and we also did a rehearsal of the first performance in the installation space — but I did not give her any precise directions. I knew that it was a challenging process to film the installation and our interaction with it, especially because she would have to be inside it most of the time. At first I only wanted to have an interesting documentation of the performances, and there wasn't any other intention. She was fascinated by the possibility of making the installation visible or invisible by a slight change on the camera diaphragm, and by the visitors' interactions with the work. In April, Maria João did a short preview of the documentation material of the three performances and we both became aware of the potential of that footage. Later in June we started to talk about making a film.

What we became interested in was not in a documentational process, or in creating a document, but rather in constructing a new visual object, especially because of the idiosyncrasy of the artwork: the scarce telegeny of the original installations, the visitors movements that most of the time resembled to mimic or improvised dance, or of what could be translated in images — as they seemed to be another form to experience something that was so physical and less visual. We first viewed all the footage material separately and taking notes that we would later shared, I showed her some photos that I made since 2008, and shared texts and other related material. Then in the editing process we were very in tune and worked in a very open and constructive way.

We tried to enter the uncanny territory of this giant, yet almost invisible, web to address the white cube space as concept, as an experiential endeavour, and the way it controls us. Through it we question unresolved dualities: the fine lines between disorder and affection, geometrical order and disturbance, rationality and magical thinking, discipline and eroticism, void and pregnant, organic and artificial. The final result is a combination of an intense co-authorship

project that was developed almost as choreography between a film-maker and a visual artist.

We were aware that the film would resonate differently for those who have visited the exhibition and those who haven't been at Appleton Square or at Leal Rios Foundation. And we ended the project with as many questions as we started it.

Can the film allow us to experience the work if we haven't been there? Does it change our perspective on the work if we were? Or simply exists in its own autonomy as an artistic object born from a common proposition?

Susana Mendes Silva (Lisboa, 1972) is a visual artist and a performer. Her work incorporates elements of research and archival practice that leads to the creation of works whose historical and political references become visible as exhibitions, actions and performances that employ a wide variety of media. Her universe considers and reframes different social contexts without ever losing track of the individual's uniqueness. Her psychological intimacy and her voice are often the means for the diffusion and reception of poetic and political messages that call upon them. Susana studied Sculpture at FBAUL (Lisbon, PT), and in the MPhil/PhD Fine Art (Studio Based Research) at Goldsmiths College for which she was awarded a grant from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. She has a PhD based in her practice — "Performance as an Intimate Encounter" — by the College of the Arts of the University of Coimbra. Susana is also an Assistant Professor at the University of Évora, where she lectures, since 1999, in the Landscape Architecture MA.

Maria João Guardão (Mozambique, 1965) is a journalist and a film-maker. She has worked as a cultural journalist since 1988 for newspapers, magazines and television. In 2010 she founded the production company *DESMEDIDA filmes*. Among other projects and documentary film work, she has directed *B7* a series of films on seven Portuguese visual artists working in Berlin (in co-direction with Edgar Massul and Hugo Barbosa, 2007), *Álvaro Siza Vieira, 13 palavras e uma frase*, on the Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza Vieira (2008), *As Lágrimas de Saladino*, on the choreographer Rui Horta (2010), *O Povo é quem mais ordena* (featured on the Festival Cris du Monde, La Ciotat, 2013), and *Cinematógrafo alkantara*.