

A Céu Aberto

There is much to see – large outdoor sculptures, large indoor structures, installations, small pieces for interiors, works on card, paper and board, sketches, proposals, books and small objects, documentation of performances, and architectural commissions. And after I have studied and discussed all of this I am shown a drawing. In its essentials it is little more than three lines. The lines are in more or less the same orientation: they move across the paper from side to side rather than from top to bottom. In so doing they exemplify the physical sense of what it is to be horizontal, what it is to lie down. They bend and curve as a body bends and curves for they are indeed a body, or to be more accurate, two bodies. One lies on top of the other, as bodies do. The lines are the bodies, and they are also the zone of contact between one body and another, and between the bodies and what surrounds and contains them. They are the contact between the ground and a back, between torso and torso, and between back and sky. The image carries the truth of what Heidegger means when, in his essay *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, he refers to the condition of humanity as the four-fold state of being on the earth, among men, before the gods and under the sky.¹ In delineating the boundaries between ground, body, body and sky, the lines of Carlos Nogueira's drawing mark the condition of our separateness and in doing so reveal the twin, conflicting impulses we cannot shake that would have us both maintain a sense of personal integrity, and see our individuality find common ground with that of others. Distinction, as Roger Caillois noted, is the ultimate problem, whether between the real and the imaginary, between waking and sleeping, between ignorance and knowledge or between 'an organism and its surroundings'.² Nogueira states the inescapable contradiction inherent in wishing at one and the same time to assert and erase one's autonomy with a succinctness equal to the graphic economy and concision of his drawing: 'I live with a certain solitude', he says, 'but I would like not to live like this'.

Let us begin, then, with the wish to connect, and with the promise of a simple coming together. Place one thing next to another. Do this again, and do it again. Things placed next to one another lie next to one another. Through their juxtaposition a ground is made. This is not relation, not yet, but it provides the

circumstances for such a thing, a space to be physically occupied or imaginatively inhabited. It is the space of the work, part of the work, and the possibility of the work. One thinks of the cement bonded particle boards lining the floor of the installation *Neither Shadow, Nor Wind*, and of the spread of floor tiles forming the base level in several layered structures such as *Like an Immense Column of Air*, and *Square House with White Floor*. In these latter instances more of the same tiles rise in multiple layers to form open enclosures. Separated from each other by square section metal rods, the layers rest upon their lower neighbours while at the same time lifting off from them. Placement again. Place one thing upon another. Is this now where relation, where connection is established through the simultaneous bearing down and rising up, the merging and emerging of the sculpture's elements?

Active: lay one thing upon another. Passive: one thing is lain upon another. One thing lays upon another. Where does impulse, intention and desire figure in this coming together? Can the wish to make a connection, to form a link, or to establish a relation between things, or between people and things, or between people and people, assert itself without at the same time becoming an imposition? Can a connection be accomplished without also instituting a demand? In the summer of 1970 the art magazine *Studio International* published a book which functioned both as an edition of the magazine, and as an exhibition. Highlighting various modes of practice within what was broadly thought of and described at that time as Conceptual Art, the journal gave over several pages each to six different critics as a space within which they might curate a small show. One of those six, Lucy Lippard, set up a round robin whereby the first artist in the chain sent the next a set of instructions for a work, which, when realised, would act as the prompt for a set of instructions to the next, and so on until the last sent back to the first. It was Lawrence Weiner's task to instruct On Kawara, though when it came to it all he felt able to send was this:

Dear On Kawara,

I must apologize but the only situation I can bring myself to impose upon you would be my hopes for your having a good day.

Fond Regards,

Lawrence Weiner³

On the face of it this could be seen as an abdication of responsibility, a tactic to avoid coming up with what in some circumstances we might want to call an idea. But to interpret it this way would, I feel, be constricting and inadequate.

Inadequate because Weiner's invitation is a positive one. In refusing to impose, in electing not to lay out conditions and expectations beyond those supplied by the world itself, and by the people and the things we encounter in the conducting of our lives, Weiner is acknowledging the restricting effect of any action that would have things fixed and decided upon before their time. I often think of the openness and generosity of Weiner's gesture, the compassion of that gesture, when contemplating Nogueira's work. Having a good day is not the easy option; it is a hard task for most of us most of the time. There is a darkness to things that cannot be brushed aside. Leaving us free to acknowledge the presence of that darkness, to taste it and to manage its burden is more than enough for anyone. Nogueira knows this. He makes a box, a *Box for Keeping the Dark*. It is an elongated rectangular container, painted white on the outside. Displayed on a bracket that holds it away from the wall, its lid is left open to reveal a dark interior. Pandora would recognise a box like this and the possibilities it contains. Intense, but not unremitting, the interior certainly is black, but there is red and blue too. In the socially discursive, conversational performances made early in his career, Nogueira would offer us the option to become actively involved and to address the possibility of alleviating the gloom for ourselves. He did this by presenting us with a collection of crayons, each with a label attached indicating that it could be taken up and used to add colour to what might otherwise be a grey day (*Crayon for Colouring the Grey Days*). And just as the greyness is mutable, being for some perhaps meteorological, for others economic, psychological, emotional, or political, so the crayons and their colours are in this context at one and the same time not only implements, but also material, agents of action, figures in the landscape of the exhibition space, and social glue.

Make a connection, make another, witness a community. Nothing complicated. A crayon will do it, or maybe a toy bird, its wheels connected by a short length of wire to its wings so that they flap as you push it around the floor. The bird is on the ground, but it's flying, so it is in the air too. There are lots of birds so many of us can do this together, our criss-crossing paths around the gallery floor at once

free and subject to negotiation and mutual accommodation. What is more, the handles are made of fairly short sticks. They're just the right length for children, but not long enough for an adult to use without bending down to the children's level. There is no place for disingenuousness here; we can't pretend a lack of familiarity with the world or shed our knowledge, but at the very least participation requires us to see things from an unusual perspective and encourages us to imagine that knowing things need not dampen curiosity. Remain open to what is outside, as if wearing the garment Nogueira proposed in his study for a pattern for a shirt without pockets. With a shirt like this on our backs nothing can be hidden or stored and postponed for future use. Everything that is needed must be kept in the hands. If you have a pencil, it cannot rest but must stay at the ready. If you use the pencil to make a drawing or jot down a note, the note cannot be folded, put away and forgotten, the drawing cannot be set aside. The pencil, the note, the drawing must of necessity remain active players in the larger dramas of daily life. If you have a pencil, make a drawing; if the note is a reminder, keeping it in your hand will ensure that you have no chance to forget or to misremember what it says. Don't theorise and interpret. Act.

Time and again in Nogueira's work we see revealed what could be described as a disinclination to assert a final form. Whether in the work itself, in the way that it is made, or in the manner of its subsequent treatment, we meet with this same disinclination. Things are not definitively finished and signed off as the work of the artist until the time comes to exhibit them. And because Nogueira chooses just this moment to write his name in the bottom right hand corner, or on the reverse, or wherever, his signature acts less as the mark of a conclusion, than as a licence for the work's release into the new context and environment of the exhibition; not an ending, but a beginning. Closing off and finalising nothing, the signature accomplishes a shift from one state of ambiguousness to another. Where he does speak of providing a finish it is with reference to chipping the edges of the floor tiles in those works that use them. One in three are chipped from the outset, but he invariably roughens the edges of more, a process of completion that perversely involves rendering something incomplete.

In the light of this tendency to withhold resolution, when Nogueira confides that he has a 'preoccupation with permanence', it signals a concern with the underlying persistence of the fundamental attributes of a world that is in endless alteration. 'The world is made of change', he quoted in 1980, painting the line - from Camões' sonnet, *Mudam-se os tempos - unevenly* onto a wall in Sao Paulo in the manner of a revolutionary slogan. On the adjacent ground he prepared and sowed a flower bed before approaching onlookers to offer them an opulent paper blossom. A gift in the form of a concrete image of what is promised for the future.

In thinking of relation, of connection, even something as straightforward as a postcard can become a challenge, being as it is a sign of displacement. *Wish you were here*, we say. And what those words convey is the wretched message that I am here and you are there. You are not here. At the same time, the postcard is a genuine and uncomplicated way of signalling the presence of a thought. I am thinking of you. But as Nogueira realised in 1980, how genuine, how uncomplicated can this signal be if the card you send is not one in which you yourself have faith? As a way to overcome what he felt were the inadequacies of the available merchandise - the mawkish content of cheesy images - he made his own. But rather than starting anew, he took cards that were commercially available and used them as the material from which to collage his compositions. What should we say of these postcards? Collectively they are postcards, yet individually, each is also plural. Although the size of a single standard card, each is built from three, four or five strips cut from a number of identical cards. In any one card it is the same strip that's used, so there is repetition, and yet because of the vagaries of mass printing processes there are differences in the colour of the ink, or in the way that it has faded in the light as the card rested on a display stand in the shop waiting to be purchased. This leads to variations from strip to strip, with the result that each repetition is also a displacement. And as our eye slides across the card from one strip to the next, experiencing the same thing and yet not the same thing, our disquiet only increases as we struggle to square our expectations of what a postcard ought to give us with what we can actually see. A postcard invariably gives us a view. It knows that we are not where it is, so it allows us to stand at a slight distance and take in the scene. If the sea is calm, it is calm as it laps onto the shore in this place, and if the sky is blue, the sun is

shining in that place, and if the grass is green and the lake is placid, it is in another, equally particular location that we can enjoy those gentle conditions. But Nogueira's cards give us only the sky, or just the water, or merely the foreground. We are brought close, but close to where? Not to a specific somewhere else, which anyway might just as well be some other somewhere else. We are, rather, brought close to the sense of a world – to the sky from where the light comes, and across which drift the endlessly becoming forms of the clouds, to water, whose restless surfaces continuously adapt themselves to the colour, weight and shape of things reflected in them, and to the ground which is always and inescapably the ground of all things. We can get no distance from this world because it is the only one we have. Pessoa describes an object as existing at the intersection of three lines representing, firstly, the material from which it is made, secondly, the idea we have of what it is and how it can be used, and thirdly, the surroundings in which it exists. It is the third vector, the environment, that he sees as being the soul of the thing, and it is the same for people:

Everything comes from outside, and the human soul itself may be no more than the ray of sunlight that shines and isolates from the soil the pile of dung that's the body.⁴

Nogueira's postcards offer the light and the soil by means of, and against which our socialised bodies can discover and distinguish themselves.

The shifting repetition we see in the postcards appears in other guises throughout Nogueira's work, in his use of multiple units such as tiles or overlapping planks, for example, or in the many drawings he made to be seen in pairs, or in the several propped glass panes that form part of *Beyond the Very Edge of the Earth* and reflect back fractured reiterations of their surroundings. There are, too, a number of drawings early in his chronology, but more significantly, youthful in their nature and style. They are reminiscent of schoolbook exercises for elementary pupils who are learning how to write – patterns such as lines of repeated ascending and descending diagonal strokes. They are not letters, but existing as they do on the borders of language they carry the raw strength of the mark, the elemental gesture of drawing that at once asserts its own presence as mark, and at the same time carries the promise of expression and representation. And what they express and represent before all else are the characteristics of

drawing itself – the movement of hand, arm and wrist, the contrasting feel of the pen as it is pulled or pushed across the paper's surface, the varying pressure of the nib, the loose or firm grasp of the fingers, the play of occlusion and revelation as the hand necessarily covers the area it works on.

So much of what Nogueira does, in fact, can be encompassed within his generous view of what constitutes drawing. The breadth of his definition can be grasped if we consider the two sequences of wall works, *Building with White Floor from Within*, and *Night and White*. Both of these series are described as drawings, though they might equally be understood as either paintings or sculptures. While of varying thickness, the plywood panels that provide the ground for the compositions are all substantial. The paint laid onto those panels, often within taped borders, has frequently been generously applied so that the meniscus that forms against the tape remains once it has dried and the tape has been removed. Furthermore, the panels are mounted on Nogueira's characteristic deep steel frames, making it impossible to ignore the object status of the works. Yet the compositions, which might almost be seen to chart the intuitive development of a basic pattern of elements through a number of permutations, and the range of materials employed, including matt and gloss paint (some old and separated), lacquer (which, not having been fully brushed out, has a surface pocked by escaping air bubbles), and thin steel and graphite dividing strips, give the works a sense of their being ground plans or proposals. As always with Nogueira's work, architecture is close by. So many buildings, ever open to the skies. *Night and White*, the title of one of these drawing sequences, is an essential pairing for Nogueira. Neither white and black, nor night and day, it assimilates both oppositions while alluding to the profound physical and psychological differences between our experience in the presence or absence of light. Where there is light, space exists as an environment to be populated. In darkness, as Caillois reminds us, space penetrates us and we dissolve into it.

What that word, drawing, speaks to is the significant degree to which things remain for Nogueira, if not exactly unfinished, then certainly unfixed. The problem, perhaps, is to engage with materials in order not to put them into a decided form, but rather to achieve through that process of engagement, manipulation and

arrangement, a state of potential – which is to say, not a potential for some particular thing or other, but potential pure and simple. We are with Frank Stella, wishing to keep the paint looking as good as it did when it was in the can. One of Nogueira's tactics for arriving at a similar point of exorbitant promise is sometimes to paint with his left hand as a way of bypassing received ideas of how to proceed. It's a way of avoiding the traps of muscular habit. Talking about this way of working he first says, 'the hand wants you to forget how to paint', but then more forcefully insists that 'I want that you don't know how to paint'. Don't theorise and interpret. Act. Each time it is a new task. A shirt without a pocket, a handle that is too short, a paintbrush held in the 'wrong' hand.

'I have a vocabulary', says Nogueira. His recourse to that term, it seems to me, indicates the directness of his attitude towards materials and processes. From a vocabulary of words we take the ones we need at any given moment and place them next to other words to make sentences. And as we take and place we know very well that those words we choose to use are not our property; we do not own them. Looked at benevolently, we can say that we borrow them for a while; judged more harshly, we see that the possibility of expression rests unequivocally upon acts of appropriation. Nogueira's vocabulary, like the toolbox of language that Wittgenstein imagines, contains elements of varied kinds and differing potential. We can list some of them: wood, board, plaster, paint, floor tiles, steel, card, brush, glass, pen, ink, ...⁵ None of these is rarefied. Overwhelmingly, they are the commonplace materials of industry and construction, put to his own use by Nogueira, but nonetheless used in such a way as to leave the feeling that they would be free to return to their original purpose should it be deemed desirable. In all instances, moreover, Nogueira understands this vocabulary as a roll call not just of matter, but of colour, too. Most obviously there are, say, the coloured flakes he chooses for the fabricator to put in the tiles, different for each sculpture, or the red of the Canadian Cedar shingles covering the house of *Open House with Patio* that will weather to silver grey. But more subtly there are chance circumstances such as the rust on a can that has imparted a pink tinge to the white paint inside it or, more prosaic still, the plain fact of a material being just what it is. Plaster, a favourite, has both a good surface and a good colour. Its

softness absorbs the gaze while its opacity resists it; its whiteness shines while its density snags light and holds it.

And in any such list of Nogueira's preferred materials we would need to include light. It is everywhere present, shining off the reflective floor upon which the slatted wooden structure of *Casa com Esquina . A Céu Aberto* stands, filtering through the translucent, figured panes of the West window of the chapel at Casappella, Worblaufen, reflecting off the propped panels of *Neither Shadow, Nor Wind*, and glinting through the glass slabs that provide the base layers of *Square House With a White Floor*, and *Like an Immense Column of Air*. The latter work, originally shown at the Pavilhão Branco in Lisbon, can now be found in the garden of Almada's Casa de Cerca. It sits on higher ground so that anyone approaching along the low path towards it will have their eyes level with its base. They will thus, with the greatest of ease, be able to catch sight of that plane of sunlight upon which the entire sculpture rests and they will witness the considerable weight of its many layers hovering, trembling, just above the earth.

Michael Archer

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter, Harper & Row, New York, 1971, p 145ff

² Roger Caillois, *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, *October*, vol 31, Winter 1984, p 16

³ Lawrence Weiner in *July/August Exhibition Book*, Studio International in association with Seth Siegelau, London, 1970, p 36

⁴ Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, translated by Richard Zenith, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2001, §58, p 58

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1978, §11, p 6