SPHERE AND LABYRINTH

JOSÉ CAPELA
(EAAD-UM / LAB2PT / MALA VOADORA)

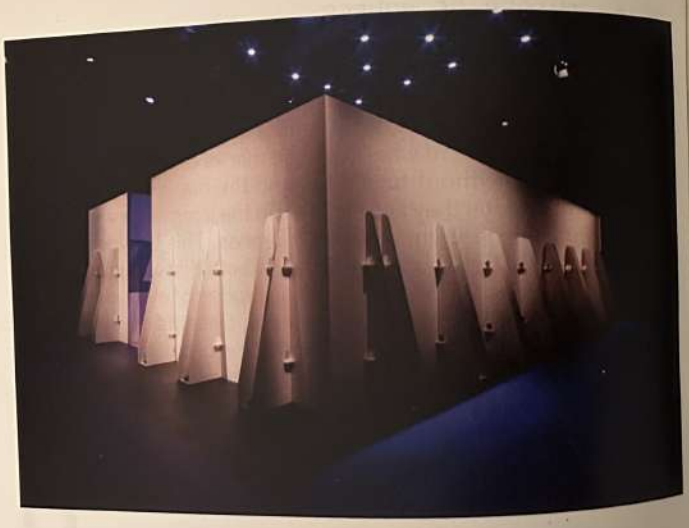
There is much to be said about Raquel André's collections — about the boundary between privacy and public exposure explored in them, about their hybridity as a work of "performing arts", about the act of collecting as art, about collections of people made by artists (I remember Douglas Huebler, for example), about the relationship between events and recording, and about many other things that this work entails — but I'm not the best person to do it. To respond to this friendly invitation from Raquel, I will limit myself to referring to my experience as the scenographer of the installation 'Collection of Lovers', in which I was accompanied by António Pedro Faria, and above all to the relationship between this installation and architecture.

1. IMAGES OF HOUSES

The images that architects publish of their housing projects are often contrary to the very idea of "inhabiting". The spaces appear emptied of what could be marks of human experience, often even without furniture, and the human figures, on the rare occasions they are included in the images, are reduced to moving, blurred, almost ghostly figures. This fact highlights the antagonism between the way architects think about spaces — desirably aseptic — and the vicissitudes of everyday life, thus relegated to the realm of adversity. Dreams of an unpolluted world, for which unpolluted forms are created.

When Raquel invited me to make a house with the thousands of photographs that she collected as evidence of her encounters with "lovers", I remembered this space/experience dichotomy.

Raquel's photographs invariably show domestic spaces, but, unlike the architectural photographs that I was referring to, spaces here are presented as they really are: as supports for what happens in them. They are shown being used for eating, bathing, sitting or lying down and talking, for intimacy, for fun. They're behind what happens.



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Using these photographs from Raquel to, with them, assemble a house meant, therefore, putting two different types of spaces into dialogue: those of the houses where the encounters took place, represented in the photographs, and the new spaces that we would create to be enjoyed by the installation's audience. Through the latter, people would have access to a visual testimony of the former, meanwhile sent to the field of memories of Raquel and her lovers. Strictly speaking, what resulted from this work was not an "exhibition", but an "installation". A device was not created to show photographs on it; what was created was a house made of images. Walls, floor, furniture, dishes, mugs, napkins, bedding, pillows, the shower curtain, the kitchen counter, the fridge, lamps, sanitary items... — everything was made from photographs.

2. CHECKERED AND MEMORY

Although the raw material to build this house is visual (as far as it is possible to separate an image from its support), we had to confront the construction itself — with a type of construction closer to that of the architects. It was important to ensure that it was easy to assemble and disassemble the exhibition, as well as transport it, so we decided to build all the walls using a modular system, that is, a system in which the shapes are composed through the variable combination of elements, like a "Lego". We chose to use panels measuring one meter wide

and two meters high, stackable and packable, and linkable on a floor organized into squares measuring one square meter. We resorted to a way of creating spaces with multiple historical backgrounds, including: (1) tatami mats (from the 8th century) from which the shape of traditional Japanese houses can be deduced — a practice that dates back to the 16th century; (2) later, in Europe, the adoption of checkered matrices within the scope of the neoclassical systematization of architecture; and (3) industrial-era prefabrication systems, initiated at the end of the 18th century, with a view of creating large spaces and infrastructure in the nineteenth century, and explored by modernist architects in democratic housing programs in the twentieth century.

These are stories of rationality. It should be noted, however, that the rationality of the modular system did not aim, for us, at the creation of simple, far-sighted spaces, but rather a labyrinth. The panels were used to invent a space that alludes to the traditional functions of a house — kitchen, dining room, living room, bedroom, bathroom and office — which, as a whole, were linked in a continuous and labyrinthine path. The system is mathematical, but the use of the system aimed disorientation. For the 'Collection of Lovers', a triangle resulted between the rationality of the modular system, rigorously Cartesian, the emotional quality of the images and, finally, the spatial experience of the labyrinth. At the same time, a parallel can be found between the labyrinthine nature of space and the hundreds of photographs — (1) they also cause some disorientation due to their excessive presence and (2) all of them part of a universe as labyrinthine as the memory.

Although this project cannot be identified as "architecture", it seems to me more interesting to think of a house from this spatial and emotional complexity, than from any formal purity.

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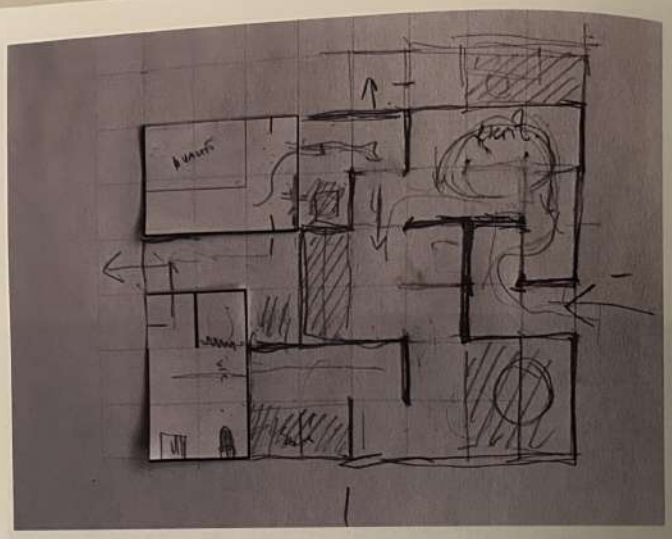

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3. SCENOGRAPHY

Perhaps as a reaction to the virtualization of photography typical of social networks and image editing programs, or perhaps because digital technology has evolved in the sense that 3D virtual phenomena can be created in space, the discourse on scenography became full, since a few years ago, with the word "immersive". It is a return to an "entertainment scenography of the senses", in many ways similar to the height of the scenic illusionism of the Italian stages, that is, a return to what Brecht called "bourgeois theater". Personally, I am more interested in rethinking images in the face of this new context of virtualization and, namely, in what has been called "post-internet photography": the return of photography to its material and spatial condition. I think I can inscribe this work experience with the photographs of Raquel and her lovers in a similar scope to this one — that of "post-internet" photography. And that led us to an ambiguous object, made of images (like classical scenography) and, at the same time, immersive.