

EFFECTS AND AFFECTIONS OF THE ARTISTIC PRODUCTION: A RETROSPECTIVE LOOK AT MONICA ALONSO'S ARTWORK

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Any retrospective look at a series of events (artistic ones) is located in the confrontation of two different temporalities; on the one hand, the transient nature of the event linked to the past; on the other hand, the action itself of looking or reading the event that obviously belongs to the present and naturally projects to the future. In this sense, the hindsight or evaluation of the past is related to its antonym, that is to say, to the forward-looking approach at the same time that the present analyses the past willing to influence the future. However, the retrospective slant, or what psychologists call the hindsight bias, is a cognitive trap implicit in this kind of reconstruction of the past. It is the characteristic illusion of the eye we cannot escape from. This means that the reconstruction of the story lies in the selective interpretation that the reader or the viewer makes of the past, simplifying the conditions that gave rise to the questioned event. This cognitive trick results in being held to a high standard in court, mainly when the story to reconstruct establishes a clear relationship of dependence with the evidences adduced in litigation and which directly affect the decision-making of the court. The hindsight bias also has its place in the artistic context especially when the works are read as evidence of a story aiming to cover an entire career. In the exercise of hindsight on an artistic production, as in a lawsuit, the eye also selects the evidences which are subjected to a dynamic of reconstruction in favour of the homogenous and global story. Therefore, this kind of interpretation and reconstruction of the artistic practices of the past is always considered from its own process of elimination. Therefore, some qualities are taken apart from others and even, some of them are eventually eliminated when opposed to the global picture of the work. It is also one of the common evils of hindsight the subjection of the work to the condition of object, thus rejecting its relationship with the artistic procedure which has intermittently offered the artist the opportunity to create its own aesthetic lexicon, but which is often left outside the retrospective story due to its imprecise nature.

But, how to escape from this diagonal look inside the own format of the retrospective exhibition? Which are the evidences and testimonies to avoid the reduction? Which is the story to construct? How to make traps become opportunities to foster new encounters with the work of art in this reading as well as in the ones to come? In short, how to expand instead of compressing the limits of hindsight?

Perhaps we should start stating that a retrospective look should mainly question the evidences from which to reconstruct the past. This way, the exercise would not focus on evaluating the passage of time in the work of art, but quite the contrary, on analyzing the work throughout time. By this I mean that a retrospective look should note not only the changes seen in the work of art but the various correspondences established with the artistic and social context it has emerged from. This way of looking back would mean to rewind, metaphorically speaking, some of the lines of the time which have been interwoven along the artistic career. Therefore, this would mean to pay attention to the evolution of the work in itself as well as the development of the aesthetic themes and concerns it is

based on, the relationship established with the current artistic discourses, and the encounters with the audience and its way of managing the exhibition space.

Yet, this text should start by accepting that the transient nature of a retrospective exhibition is placed inside the own temporary uniqueness, as it is through the own presentation that it updates the various lines of time involved in any artistic production and places them momentarily in unknown temporary coordinates through which it can undertake new looks.

The exhibition *Mónica Alonso Works (1993-2011)* is featured within the contradictory frame of the hindsight aiming to turn problems into possible virtues. Some critics may think it is still early to make a retrospective analysis on the work of such a young artist, although we face a career running nearly for two decades and a vast production throughout this time. It is important to clarify that the proposed look on Mónica Alonso's artworks has not been structured in chronological order but has followed a series of vector maps which have aligned her works of art according to different criteria not only aesthetic-formal but also conceptual and theoretical. In this catalogue, the works of art have also been grouped according to those maps which, in short, work as open clusters proposing a relational system among the works. This does not mean the arguments here presented are the only ones, but quite the opposite, the aim of these connecting lines is to enhance new ones and get the hindsight to become prospection in every moment.

Third space

Since the beginning of the 90's Mónica Alonso's artwork is part of a line of artistic production that investigates the concept of space not only as an exclusively physical or mental entity but as a reality defined from processes of subjectivation. This concept of space as a cross between real and imaginary processes had been intensely discussed through the theoretical contributions of some of the most relevant thinkers of the 60's and 70's. At that time, there appeared some terms that reflected this new way of conceiving space, such as the concept of *heterotopia* Michel Foucault explained in his lecture *Of Other Spaces*¹ or the *other space* Henry Lefebvre introduced in his well-known book *The Production of Space*². It was in the 90's that the American geographer Edward Soja proposed the new term *third space* with the intention of recovering and re-activating this debate in the contemporary context.

It is odd to observe the connection this debate has established with the artistic practices in each time. In the case of Henri Lefebvre, for example, his proposal coincides with the close relationship he establishes with the Situationist International, in particular with Guy Debord and the subsequent break-up and ideological division between both of them. The debate was initiated by the conclusion they both reach on the idea that history has always been dominated by a capitalist conception of the space. Their concept of the social space and its urban manifestations as fundamental to the reproduction of society, hence of capitalism itself led to irreconcilable positions from both sides. In an interview to Henri Lefebvre carried out by Kristin Ross³, the French sociologist exposes the confrontation of both positions: on the one hand, the rediscovery of time is the key to the liberation of space, or on the other hand, the

re-appropriation of space is the key to the liberation of time. This discrepancy will cause two different ideological lines. In the case of the Situationist practices the theory of the spectacle will replace the theories of the psycho geography, diversion or *la derive* (the drift) and in the case of Lefebvre it will mean a theoretical commitment with a differential formulation of space promoting processes of subjectivation and collective empowerment.

In the 90's Edward Soja tried to update this project of Lefebvre with the term *third space*, an idea of space beyond the duality of the real and the imaginary space. In this way, this new concept emerged from the confrontation between the material conditions of the space and its symbolic representations. In Soja's opinion the *third space* is the lived space, the space constructed from the subjective experience of inhabiting it in contrast with the space conceived by the urban planners.

I would like to relate this concept of the *third space*, that is, the idea of space through the different subjective ways to inhabit it with a series of works that Mónica Alonso produced mainly between 1993 and 2001. From my point of view, it is a kind of work that would determine a distinct line of work throughout her practice and that would be active beyond those years. In most cases, these proposals of habitability are framed in a series of imaginary scenarios represented through the model as a sculptural format of its own. Thus, the models lose their functionality within the architectural space as, in no way, they are meant to be produced at real scale. The proposals of habitability Mónica Alonso features in her works, aspire to transcend the critics of the contemporary society to deeply analyse the processes of awareness and subjective perception that give shape and produce both the private and the social space.

The bedroom in these works is the triggering element in the investigation. Its peculiarity lies in its relationship with the oneiric activity of the subject. In this sense the bedroom and more particularly the bed, favours the rest as a state of inaction needed for the sleep to occur. It is therefore an interruption with two influences; on the one hand, it is a repairing vital process of the daytime activity; on the other hand, it is an unconscious system capable of interrupting the sensitive system with the intention of facilitating a new phenomenological perception. The first models of the artist are focussed on rest through the bed as its representative object and are dedicated to examine its qualities and potentialities. In this sense it is worthwhile pointing out works such as *Espacio Infinito (Infinite Space)* (1994) where a small yellow bed gets lost on a large flat surface of the same colour. In this work of art, the reference to yellow and its metaphorical relationship with madness creates a sense of distress in relation to the feeling of rest. *Construir el descanso 1 (Constructing the rest 1)* (1994) is the first model of a series that presents in a critical way the construction of the space for an optimum rest. In particular, this series sets out the construction of the rest not only as an exclusively spatial question but as an activity of mayor social significance. In *Construir el descanso 2 y 3 (Constructing the rest 2 and 3)* (1995), the artist hangs the bed from a flimsy structure made up of elastic rubber bands. In both sculptural works the confrontation between the individual and the collective rest is reinforced, adding fragility to the bed and the support holding it. The series *Construir el descanso amarillo, verde y gris (Constructing the yellow, green*

and grey rest) (1998) starts from a same surface of bedroom where three beds are placed in the same position in relation to the plan of the bedroom, lying its peculiarity in the fact that the intermediate space between the surface of the plan and the support on which each bed rests, is occupied by some aluminium springs. These bases likely to notice any movement not only cause instability in the platforms designed to the rest but they become sensitive structures through which the sleep can be conceived as a contagion of the own awake state. Finally, *Somniurizado 1 y 2* (1998) attempts to suspend time between the rest and the sleep, that is, both sculptures are made as perfect spaces for the rest; however, being shaped as protective containers they favour the sleep at the same time as they isolate the subject from its environment. This artwork is an introduction to *Dormitorios Terapéuticos (Therapeutic Bedrooms)* (1999), where the artist starts focussing on the therapeutic quality of the sleep. In this series, the formal variations are visible through the introduction of new constructive elements inside the room designed for the perfect rest; a window or a door are thus included as a way to connect the rest with the daytime reality; however, the most significant change lies in the introduction of the therapeutic quality of the proposed spaces. It is actually the first theoretical proposal on the therapy represented through the format of the model which will take the audience through an inspired rhetoric into the business world materialized in the fictional company *ComfortWorld* which Mónica Alonso depicts as a scenario from which to develop her new therapeutic products.

It is interesting to analyze this new fictional scenario, *ComfortWorld*, on the basis of several questions as on the one hand, they foster the apparition of the theories and their public presentation through a series of brochures that copy the format of the patient information leaflets; and, on the other hand, they endow the work with a new theoretical dimension through which the models are no longer mere sculptural objects but they articulate as another element within a more complex artistic proposal. Eventually, they establish the bases to develop a way of work focused on the reflection of the habitability of the space through the production of affection.

The work *Terapia Lugar de Felicidad (Therapy Place of Happiness)* (2000) is in this line of work. From the sculptural point of view this work establishes a non-hierarchical relationship between the three-dimensional model and the two-dimensional one. With this gesture the representation of the space is simplified in the flat model as a way to strengthen the link between the sculpture and the painting. Mónica Alonso mentions as an example the idea of *Total Installation* of Ilya Kabakov to reinforce the relationship. The artist puts it this way:

Painting is for the Russian artist, Ilya Kabakov, the mother to the *Total Installation*, the installation makes possible an old desire of the painting, the access to the interior of an image. The model takes all the qualities developed by the installation, comes back to the space of the painting, and represents a reduced space that makes possible the vision of the totality⁴.

The imaginary scenario proposed by *ComfortWorld* in this occasion features an idyllic place to spend a holiday by the sea. However, this dystopian scenario seems not to want to be understood as pure social criticism, but as a tool through which to devise a set of reflections and analysis on the way our emotions, perceptions and affections give shape to our

experience of the space. From this work on, the artist focuses on the control of those affective and perceptive attributes as criticism and transformative potentiality.

Terapia lugar de felicidad (Therapy place of Happiness) is a fundamental work to understand other kind of related proposals such as *Terapia lugar de vacaciones (Therapy place of holidays)* (1999), *Gran Hotel (Grand Hotel)* (2000), *Cápsulas MAMA (MAMA Capsules)* (2002), *Cinco terapias combinables (Five combinable therapies)* (1998-2002) and *Cápsulas terapéuticas individualizadas or Cápsulas TI (Individualized Therapeutic Capsules or IT Capsules)* (2003-in progress). The latter stands out from the others by its interactive character with the viewer. As the other theories, this one is based on the acquisition of happiness through the construction of the space and it includes a questionnaire made up by the artist to get the model adapted to the subjective qualities of the viewer. In the questionnaire the subject can construct its own space and decide the organization and colour of the constituent elements of the models. This work of art started in 2003 and developed continuously up to date has aimed to go beyond the critical quality of the theories and investigate its applicable therapeutic capacity. This does not mean that *Cápsulas TI (IT Capsules)* attempts to function at an exclusively real level thus aspiring to be conceived as a more psychotherapeutic technique, neither otherwise, that is, that they want to hide themselves in the symbolic field of the setting of the exhibition. In this sense, this ongoing work wants to give shape to another field of action which combines both real and symbolic processes showing the diffuse vital field characteristic of the processes of contemporary subjectivation.

Under this idea, there is a most recent work *Terapia Habitación de Hospital (Therapy Bedroom of Hospital)* (2011), a project conceived for Santiago University Hospital in collaboration with the Department of Education of the Galician Centre of Contemporary Art, CGAC. As the rest of therapies, the project responds to a treatment of the living space. In particular, it focuses on the Paediatrics Area and tries to mitigate the "hospitalism", a pathology associated to hospital admission⁵. The therapy consists of delivering to the patient a model which represents at a lower scale the room where he is hospitalized and which he can freely manipulate by changing the colour and arranging the furniture however he likes. With this therapy Mónica wants to insist on the mental representation of the room with the intention that the patient inhabits such idea and constructs an individual space for his experience in hospital. This new constructed space is a third space placed between the room in the hospital and the ways it can be inhabited by the patients. The habitability the artist proposes with this therapy focuses on the perception and experience of the patient with the intention of creating another kind of differential space.

Community of affections

To contextualise how the artwork of Mónica Alonso influences the field of the affections, it may be needed to place conceptually the type of elements and aesthetic decisions related to this field. The work of this artist has dealt with both affirmative and negative affections as a constituent element of the perception of reality. The first term proposed in this essay, the *third space*, was meant to analyse the subjective capacity to create a differential space through the lived experience, thus

opposed to the space constructed and designed beforehand. The term *community of affections* tries to embody the way in which Alonso's work analyses how the affections would not only such vital experience, but also the own body and its relationship with the social environment surrounding it. The result of this interaction among the bodies created by the affections gives as result a series of works that gradually analyse the positive or negative tendencies to build a community.

In recent years, some thinkers of political philosophy have taught us to pay more attention to the collective potentiality characteristic of the affections. Such is the case of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau who presented the concept of passion as the driving force of a likely change in the social imaginary based on reaching a state of individual and collective emancipation and liberation. According to Mouffe and Laclau passion works as a formula to reject rationality when it comes to understanding subjectivity, but also as a way of transcending the established social order⁶.

One of the key contributions to the understanding of the relationship between the affects or affections and the political thought is deeply rooted in Spinoza's practical philosophy, which has so many times been read under this idea of emancipative potentiality. Authors such as Gilles Deleuze, Peter Pál Pelbart or Toni Negre found a committed way of creating new communities in the Spinozian definition of the affects-images or ideas, that is, the way in which we understand reality through such images and affects-feelings or actions, that is, the way in which the bodies relate to each other.

The set of works I would like to introduce in relation to this political dimension implicit in the field of the affections establishes a close relationship with the use of colour and its function within the work as a symbolic representation of such affective attributes. I am referring to some projects of the artist focussed on the vital need of the human being to live collectively and in relation and communication with each other. These include: *Comunidad en rojo (Community in red)* (2002), *Comunidades en verde (Communities in green)* y *Comunidades en azul (Communities in blue)*, a project developed with Carlos Quintáns and Pablo Gallego for the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2003 o *Urbanización TI (IT Urbanization)* (2003). The colour is used in these works as a tool to represent the different relationships and affective clusters.

However, Mónica Alonso is known for the use of colour not only at a symbolic level but at what she calls a therapeutic level. In fact, her theories on the therapeutic qualities of colour have been evolving in parallel with the space ones. We must not forget works demanding interaction with the viewers such as *Cápsulas TI (IT Capsules)* or her most recent project *Teoría Habitación de Hospital (Theory Bedroom of Hospital)*, where the artists wants the users themselves to give shape to the inhabited space by arranging the furniture within the established limits and the definition of colour.

The influence of colour in the work of Mónica Alonso can be seen in early works such as *Aséptico (Aseptic)* (1997) and *Adosados (Semidetached)* (1997), where through yellow the artist shows two spaces learned from her own experience, the first being the house of her childhood and the second a 12 storey-building in Lugo where the artiste lived for two years.

Both spaces are very closely connected to the artist through her experience of inhabiting them and the memories of these experiences. This interest in yellow, which at first she identifies as the colour of madness, will take the artist some years later to deeply study the sadness in works such as *Transplantes de Amor (Transplants of Love)* (2004), *Transplantes de Fantasía (Transplant of Fantasy)* (2004), *Fríos* (2008), *Solos* (2009), *Locos* (2009), *Calientes* (2008) and lastly *Campos de experimentación de suicidio (Fields of experimentation of suicide)* (2004-2008). This work puts the end to her investigation on the tendency of life within the pulsion of death. However, as I will later explain in detail, this series of works will be the prelude to a new production where the colour will no longer focus on the space but on the body.

Yet, before mentioning the way in which the artist works with the body, I would like to analyse the space through the colour and its relations with the affections. In this sense, we could distinguish two different ways of understanding colour within the work of Mónica Alonso. The first shows the relationship colour establishes with the particular qualities of the proposed space to be inhabited through the models; in the second place; colour shows the way it affects directly the exhibition space or any other institutional spaces where the colour helps the artist to create encircling atmospheres through which she can present her work. The artist calls this type of environments *bubbles*.

In relation to the link between colour and its influence on the space of the models, once again we must mention the work *Terapia Lugar de Felicidad (Therapy Place of Happiness)* to deeply analyse the influence of colour in the definition and organization of the space used to enhance happiness. In this particular occasion the colour helps the artist to define the different qualities of happiness such as the pink bedroom which will represent the unproductive happiness, or the red one which will amplify the intensity of the emotions diverting them to passion and enthusiasm. The influence of colour in its direct application on the exhibition space to create an encircling atmosphere can be seen in all and each of the installations that Mónica Alonso produces when she exhibits her artworks. Yet, it is worth mentioning the work *Clínica de Percepción (Clinique of Perception)* (2003), an installation conceived for the Centre Torrente Ballester in Ferrol. This proposal was designed to highlight the specific qualities of the exhibition space as a space that enhances a kind of particular perception through what the artist calls *SAP Programme (Programme of Spatial Activation of the Perception)*. The installation attempted to intervene on the space as little as possible, only through the use of colour. The exhibition space was thus made of three complementary spaces: a previous purifying space, a room of expansion and another of contraction. The space was thus limited by the division of colour among the different rooms and followed the leisurely rhythm of breathing. This installation works as an example model applicable to any exhibition space through which the artist can once again set this theory of perception, only applicable to the exhibition space as a sensitive space through which the perception of the viewer can be enhanced.

Another outstanding work in relation to the application of the theories of colour of Mónica Alonso on the spaces outside the exhibition is the intervention in the Day Centre in Maceda, Orense (ongoing). This project starts from an invitation by the team of architects who have designed this building to develop

a chromatic specific theory based on the different uses to be carried out in the building daily. The colour is applied to the architectural space trying to get the best of each inhabited unit, taking into account its therapeutic qualities, that is, establishing a fluent pace among the different spaces and their functions⁷.

A body-without-organs

In this last section, I would like to focus on a series of more recent works from which the body appears more frequently in the work of the artist. So far this had not been so much outstanding, as most times it had been rather latent and had worked as a mere virtual container of the own mental activity. However, from the work *Los colores carne (The flesh colours)* (2006) the artist starts to pay more attention to the body and its flesh like quality. This work consists of a range of flesh colours comprising its various variables which are presented as laboratory samples, making reference to a previous process of tests and eliminations. The artist obtains the different hues of the flesh through her own body and from there she starts to get interested in other kind of flesh colours which directly reflect the way the body is affected by the different experiences and emotions. This is the case of *Carne Triste, Carne Fría, Carne ruborosa o Carne caliente (Sad flesh, Cold flesh, Flush flesh or Hot Flesh)*. From this work onwards the flesh colour and its influence on the rest of colours seems to fill the installations and the work of the artist. So, one of the first proposals is the installation designed ex profeso for MARCO in Vigo 2002 entitled *Máquina de color carne en un día de sol intenso (Machine of flesh colour in an intense sunny day)*. The artwork conceived to occupy the whole of the room of the panopticon of the museum makes use of the great flood of light coming down through the dome to offer the viewer the opportunity to experience and feel the colour of their own body.

The idea of a machine and body (without-organs) refers to the philosophical proposal Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari presented through their work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*⁸ in 1980. This volume related through its subtitle to a previous work by both authors entitled the *Anti-Edipo* (1972) meant, according to the Canadian theorist Brian Massumi, a less critical work but which managed to consolidate the *nomad* thought first introduced in the *Anti-Edipo*. This work has implied a theoretic space through which to understand the contemporaneity through a new critical phenomenology opposed to the structuralist thought which was able to shake the foundations of some unquestionable philosophical proposals so far.

The concept of subjectivity is introduced by these authors through the idea of machine or that of body-without-organs. In *A Thousand Plateaus* the machine draws our attention to the assembling process as a process characteristic of the own subject through which their subjectivity takes shape right through their constant relationship with other subjectivities. This kind of entanglement of affections experiences and desires will make impossible retain the subjectivity in just one body. From here thus emerges the image of the body-without-organs, a body which contains the multiplicity of the relations and affections that stimulate the processes of subjectivation in everyday life.

When the body appears in the work of Mónica Alonso it is through the printed trace on plain, polished, colourful sheets. Therefore, this kind of presence shows us a reality which makes viewers doubt of its intention. Usually, the plain supports where they are installed cover the corners placing the body shell in an unstable position in relation to the space. This somewhat marginalized presence attempts to occupy the space through its own trace, that is, through its absence. This type of shapes are seen in works such as *Frío 1, 2 and 3 (Cold 1, 2 and 3)* (2008), *Frialdad (Coldness)* (2008), *Tristeza Profunda (Deep Sadness)* (2008), *Calor 1 (Heat 1)* (2008). All of them emerge from the interest of the artist to materialize sensations through colour. It is therefore an attempt to keep a sensation or the memory of a sensation through the sculptural shape not only to be represented but to have it registered so as to have the opportunity to go back to it and study it.

This attempt to grasp the thermal-affective sensations through the body is reflected in the installation *Angustia Fría y Angustia Caliente (Cold Distress and Hot Distress)* (2008-2011) first presented in installation format within the retrospective context of this exhibition. The installation occupies one of the rooms of the Provincial Museum of Lugo where the artist has created one of her environments or *bubbles*. In this case, the walls and the floor of the room have been covered with painting of the colour *Carne triste 2 (Sad flesh 2)*, a shade from the range of *Los colores carne (The flesh colours)* (2006). The artworks *Angustia Fría (Cold Distress)* and *Angustia Caliente (Hot Distress)* have been installed in two of the corners of the room facing each other, thus claiming the opposition between both sensations though in this occasion being contained under the sensation of distress. Both pieces are rather abstract where the shape of the body has no room as they try to settle it in their folds. They look like rigid curtains housing the distress through the cold and hot sensations they liberate at the neck level of the viewer who enters in them. This work is part of a long researching process from which the artist has been taking notes and studying her own sensations of cold and heat in various countries and continents. The pieces depict the intensity of these sensations which have firstly gone through the body of the artist.

Finally, I would like to highlight the intervention in the rooms of the provincial Museum of Lugo containing the work of the retrospective exhibition and which the artist has featured for the occasion. This intervention of modest character consists exclusively of the application of the colour *Carne rosada 2 (Pink flesh 2)* on the floors of the rooms with the intention of activating a new environment to house the retrospective context of the exhibition. This gesture can be understood as a way of inhabiting and constructing a personal space inside the museum. At the same time Mónica Alonso places the viewer inside an encircling context through which the sensorial perception is going to work as a guide within the retrospective tour of her work.

NOTAS:

¹ Original title: "Des espaces autres", lecture given in the Centre d'Études architecturales on 14th March 1967 and published in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, n^o 5, October 1984, pg. 46-49. Translated into Spanish by Luis Gayo Pérez Bueno, published in *Astrágalo* magazine, n^o 7, September 1997.

² In English: *The Productions of Space*, Henry Lefebvre, Blackwell Publishing, 2005 Oxford UK.

³ Interview to Henry Lefebvre made and translated by Kirtin Ross. Published in *October* magazine, n^o 79. Winter 1997

⁴ In the lecture *ComfortWorld: Therapeutic Products (Comfort-World Productos Terapéuticos)* given by the artist in the framework of the post-graduate program: *Advanced Architecture and Digital Cities* organized by Fundació Politècnica de Catalunya and Instituto Metápolos, Barcelona, 2001. Published in *Monica Alonso catalogue* by MACUF (Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Unión Fenosa) A Coruña, 2002, pg. 102.

⁵ In conversations with the artist, 2011

⁶ In *Hope, Passion and The New World Order*, Mary Zournazi in conversation with Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, Sydney, September 2000.

⁷ In conversations with the artist, 2011

⁸ In English: *Gilles Deleuze Felix Guattari: A Thousand Plateau: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, The Atholone-Press, London, 1988.