

Home Is Where The Art Is

APROPOS AND AROUND THE WORK OF LEONOR ANTUNES

— Dieter Roelstraete

My wife, who, like myself, thoroughly enjoys looking at Leonor Antunes, often likens her dazzling features to those of a Picasso model: here is a woman who, without a doubt, would have been painted by Pablo Picasso, if only he'd laid his eyes on her. I realize this is a dubious qualification: many of his portraits of Olga, Marie-Thérèse, Dora, Jacqueline or Françoise are not necessarily flattering, nor are they exclusively expressions of the artist's love for his subject or admiration of their beauty—many of these portraits depict "his" women in tears, lacerated by anguish. Dora Maar—Jewish-French, of Croatian descent, Argentine by temperament—has become especially famed as the "woman of sorrows": she was the most gifted, the most beautiful, the most enigmatic, and even a protracted treatment by Jacques Lacan (Picasso's personal doctor in the immediate post-war years) could not help her digest the humiliating end of her affair with the protean painter—ditched, inevitably, for a much younger blonde.

Dora Maar lying on Lacan's couch in Rue de Lille, number 5—that certainly is a potent image. But what did this couch look like? Let me briefly leaf through a book I bought at the Sigmund Freud Museum in Vienna some years ago: *Die Couch. Von Denken im Liegen*, which features a series of photographs, made by one Shelburne Thurber, of empty consulting rooms occupied by psychoanalysts around the globe—well, mostly Massachusetts and (indeed) Buenos Aires. Certain elementary motifs recur: portraits of Freud, unsurprisingly (but none of Lacan), archaeological trinkets, an Eames chair, a clock and a box of tissues (!). As for the couches themselves... Well, some are covered with oriental rugs, quite a few show the sagging traces of long hours of maieutic silence, but none even remotely resembles what I take to be the standard, genuine article—the couches manufactured by the Seattle-based Analytic Couch Company: \$3,500 a piece, excluding transportation expenses. And come to think of it, it strikes me as rather odd that none of the twentieth century's great, iconic designers—Aalto, Breuer, Eames, Gray, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe—ever conceived of a couch made especially and specifically for psychoanalytic practice, that highly "theatrical-

ized" form of *dialogue intérieur*, which has done so much to shape the psychological, therapeutic imagination of that very same century. An unfortunate symbol, perhaps, of interior design's ultimate inability (and in this respect it is clearly distinct from art) to truly grasp, penetrate or shape the only "interior" that really matters in life—that of the lone individual's inner or "mental" space. Indeed, nothing mars most twentieth-century design more thoroughly than its poor psychology, or at least its poor insight into the fundamentals of the human psyche (the corresponding "problem" in most twentieth-century architecture concerns its poor understanding of *mass* psychology). This is probably the reason why Freud himself, although an inexhaustibly adventurous, unrelenting explorer of the darkened inner recesses of the mind, was a man of robustly old-fashioned tastes when it came down to interior decoration. Very little in the famous photographs made by Edmund Engelman of his ornate home and office in Vienna shortly before the old man's escape to London in 1938, helps to remind us that Freud had spent his entire life in the same city that had produced the likes of Josef Hoffmann and Adolf Loos, that had seen the building of Ludwig Wittgenstein's fabled house for his sister in the Kundmangasse as well as the publication of Loos' widely-read proto-modernist manifesto *Ornament and Crime*, containing the epochal statement that "the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornamentation from objects of everyday use." If the proverbial insides of people's heads are such terrific messes, the father of depth psychology must have thought, then why can't my office be?

Throughout the twentieth century, the home—the interior of a house that I can call "mine," that we can call "ours"—has often been the theater where warring ideologies meet and battle it out: home is not just where the heart (or the art) is, but also where a certain communal vision of the world is given its shape and form fit for everyday living. Contrary to the nineteenth-century fantasy of a domesticity that is wholly detached from the public world of politics and its continuation with other means in warfare, the modern

interior is essentially porous, unable (or unwilling) to withstand the meddling pressures from the outside world. Hence the abundant use of glass and other materials suggestive of total transparency in so much groundbreaking twentieth-century architecture (hence, conversely, the profusion of "hiding" and sheathing techniques in the nineteenth-century interior, which was always cluttered with curtains, draperies and covers of all kinds). Insofar as Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona pavilion is meant to "say" or mean anything at all, it does so by inviting the outside world to flood its interior spaces—and with the worldly flood of daylight comes real politics, ideologies, ideas, utopias, all vying for our attention and allegiance, all needing our bodily commitment to become actively lived experience. One particularly memorable encounter between two rivaling worldviews intent on penetrating and colonizing the very fabric of daily life contained within the banal domain of interior design was staged in an open kitchen during the American National Exhibition held in Moscow in 1959. Subsequently called the "kitchen debate," it pitted Richard Nixon against Nikita Khrushchev, and signaled the moment when the world-historical battle for global domination between communism and capitalism was finally brought back (after long years spent in the stratosphere of nuclear warfare) to the decidedly human scale of domestic chores and menial house tasks that constitute everyday life. [It quickly became clear to all that the capitalists had the better kitchens, hence the superior worldview.] Yet this was only one instance in the ongoing politicization of interior design for quotidian living, and a rather late one at that. The entire political history of twentieth-century culture is suffused with utopian calls for "better" living that ultimately boil down to *aesthetic* injunctions first and foremost—to an "aestheticization" of everyday life through the production of "good," honest, morally sound and solid objects. This project has long been known as a defining feature of applied modernism: the production of the artful home, an art *of* the home (as well as a home *to* art), as both a *political* and *ethical* gesture. And the rarefied realm of fine arts, finally, has been singularly inspirational to this process

precisely because of its command of such gestures, because of the genial nonchalance of its own mode of production. The magisterial, effortless ease with which, back in the forties and fifties, Jackson Pollock would splash his tears of paint across a horizontal stretch of canvas or Pablo Picasso would weld together a bicycle steering wheel and seat to produce a bull's head, was soon reflected in the art of the deliberate placement of a lamp, for instance, in the spatial art of furniture arrangement, and the laying out of various household objects across the surface of a living space. (It is no coincidence that the likes of Picasso and Pollock were featured with such frequency in lifestyle and home furnishings publications throughout much of the period referred to above—the high-water mark of mid-century modern.)

"The deliberate art of placement" may perhaps not be the best description of Leonor Antunes' practice and working method, but it goes a long way towards explaining the centrality of *gesture* (or *measure*) in the artist's work, as well as of the time and actual (manual) labor spent arranging the various objects that constitute her multifaceted sculptural work, which essentially revolves around the transformation of any given "art" space into a possible or potential *home* or "dwelling place" (as one title of an exhibition organized in Turin in 2007 had it). In this exhibition, which seemed haunted in part by the wary ghost of Eva Hesse, "living" as "dwelling" appeared as Antunes' overriding concern in art: how can we learn to inhabit the world and make it our own? The answers to this question are free to vary wildly, according to the individual's inspiration of the moment, but it is clear that in both my and Leonor's worldview, art is there to help—and to help shape the world into a better, accommodating whole: home.

Some time ago, I published an essay in which I considered the marked rise in interest in all matters architecture- and design-related among a generation of artists coming of age in the midst of the epochal changes of globalization. I speculated that the new reality of incessant intercontinental air travel had led many artists, seemingly doomed to an endless life on the road trudg-

ing from one biennial to the next, to indulge in the melancholy fantasy of homeliness away from home. One reason, I ventured, why some ten years or so ago the global art world was literally awash in huts, houses and adobe sheltering structures of all kinds, why there seemed to be so much cocooning in the gallery and the museum space. Leonor Antunes continues to lead such a life of frequent travel, commuting between an address in Berlin, one in Lisbon and so many road stops along the way of the international art circuit—it is not very different from mine in that respect. I'm not sure which of these places she would call "home" at all—but perhaps her art decides such things in her stead. This is certainly what I thought when I saw Leonor install her work in an exhibition I had invited her to participate in this spring, serenely and measuredly contemplating the various modalities of making this alien environment ours (that is to say, not just hers), if only for the few hours spent inside. And this process of making one's self at home, finally, is ultimately also a manual one—not just an *art* of placement, then, but definitely also a *craft* of placement, of measuring space according to the scale of the human hand.

In the winter of 2008-2009, Antunes' work was also on view at Le Crédac, an art space in the Parisian suburbs, in a solo exhibition titled *Original is Full of Doubts* and loosely based on Eileen Gray's designs for the famous E-1207 vacation house in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin—a well-known example of the existential holism typical of mid-century design as outlined above: an exhibition conceived as a homage in which the homophony of *bomage* and *home* produced a fortuitous complication of meanings.

Now as to this question of meaning: what exactly does the title of Leonor Antunes' exhibition at Le Crédac *Original is Full of Doubts* mean? Where, in this clipped clarion call of modernist anxiety, does the emphasis lie—on the original, the work of originality, or on its doubts and doubtfulness?

It would seem disingenuous to claim that "originality," long deemed no more than a mere "avant-garde myth," no longer matters to us: even if riddled with doubt, even if burdened by the long history of its deconstruction, it is clear that we'd rather aspire to (or plainly *have*) originality than the elaborately argued proof of its impossibility. We'd rather have the real thing first, and doubt its realness later—and the reality (materiality, physicality, *sensuality*) of the thing is of course of the greatest importance here. [I italicize the notion of sensuality here because sensuousness seems to be an all-important feature

of Antunes' artwork—the quality of its *touch*, which is of course not for the anonymous viewer to savor.]

One way in which a renewed desire for an experience of originality and/or authenticity has manifested itself in recent years, is in a return of a notion of *craft* in the expanded field of contemporary art and culture, a renewed appreciation and revaluation of manual labor and handiwork as well as of material culture more generally, made apparent, in Antunes' art, through the use of certain "rich" materials such as rare tropical woods, copper alloys, hand-knotted rope and, above all, leather. And it is the trace or imprint of the craftsman's hand in the production of these materials, whether imagined or not, which is the guarantor of doubt—hence also of "originality," of a certain craft's ultimate, materially embedded "truth."

Doubt, erring, flaw, hesitation—these were the epistemological touchstones of one of the nineteenth century's greatest apologists of craft, John Ruskin, the accidental hero of a recent study published by American social philosopher Richard Sennett simply titled *The Craftsman*: "...for Ruskin, the craftsman serves as an emblem for all people in the very need of the opportunity for 'hesitation... mistakes'; the craftsman must transcend working by the 'lamp' of the machine, become in his or her doubts more than an animated tool. (...) Ruskin, in sum, sought to assert the claims of the work that is neither amateur nor virtuoso. This middle ground of work is craftsmanship. And this figure of the craftsman, as a worker both defiant and doomed, has passed down from Ruskin's time to our own"—to reappear as both a certain *type* of artist and a certain artist, period.