Still, no Velvet on the Ground

Susana Lourenço Marques

In the 1980s, the counterculture movements in New York reacted with great vitality to the conservative policies and socio-economic inequalities that people were experiencing at that time, occupying the streets with anti-war demonstrations and orchestrating demands for racial justice and a change in climate policies. A particularly crucial element was the activism of the LGBTQ+ community in its denunciation of the public crisis that had been caused by HIV/AIDS, as well as the actions of groups such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) or the campaigns planned by organisations such as WHAM! (Women's Health Action and Mobilization) in defence of women's rights.

In music, the intensity of Punk *and* New Wave*, with the Ramones, Blondie and Talking Heads, ignited the atmosphere of protest at their concerts at CBGB & OMFUG (Country Bluegrass Blues and Other Music For Uplifting Gormandizers) and the Mudd Club.* Hip Hop *emerged from the Bronx to become an* intergalactic *phenomenon and the experimental* No Wave *scene could be heard in the sound distortions of Sonic Youth and The Suicide. Lou Reed and John Cale bid farewell to Warhol,*[1] *and the echoes of the Factory resounded over the Pictures Generation in the way in which they promoted the critical blurring of any distinction between authorship, ownership and repetition, thereby definitively linking art to the strategies of appropriation.*

One of the best gauges for studying the dynamics of these movements, especially in Lower Manhattan, was the Chelsea Hotel and the community of artists who, from the late nineteenth century onwards (the building was originally created as a housing cooperative) had found there a shelter and a creative hub that was to influence successive generations. From Mark Twain to William Burroughs, from Andy Warhol to Jackson Pollock, from Chet Baker to Virgil Thomson, this was a place where, according to Edie Sedgwick, "each room guarded thousands of secret stories".

Seemingly unaffected by the mythical reputation enjoyed by the Chelsea Hotel, Rita Barros chose to live in one of its apartments from 1984 onwards, a decision that thereafter was to indelibly mark her artistic practice. Towards the end of that decade, she began to take photographs at the jazz and rock concerts that she attended – ranging from Tom Waits to Mar-

1. On the album *Songs for Drella*, dedicated to Andy Warhol, in which Drella – a combination of Dracula and Cinderella – refers to the name by which the artist was addressed by a small group of friends.

Marianne Faithfull

ianne Faithfull and Led Zeppelin, among many others – and to use her apartment as a studio and a setting for the portraits that she made of artists and musicians, subsequently published in independent magazines such as the East Coast Rocker, Downtown, Details *or* Entertainment Weekly. *Dating from this period are the portraits that she made of Paul Auster, John Lurie and Iggy Pop. This latter figure was already accustomed to the hotel, where he also lived, and she improvised for him the reproduction of René Magritte's* The False Mirror, *as a backdrop.*

At the same time, she was interested in looking at the inside of the apartments and photographing the seismography of the individual lifestyles of her friends and neighbours (both residents and occasional guests), as well as the community of workers who ensured the building's daily maintenance. Translating the sense of belonging, the expression of familiarity and the optimistic chaos *of this exceptional community – as Arthur Miller described it – into her portraits, the moment of those more or less programmed meetings does not so much set the scene, but rather forms an integral part of the singular story of each personality.*

The ballet dancer and choreographer Larry Vickers, the poet Gregory Corso, the underground filmmaker Shirley Clarke and the artist-performer Nicola L. are just some of those portrayed subjects that she published and exhibited in different contexts, later gathering them all together in the book Chelsea Hotel: Fifteen Years *(1999). These photographs announced part of the firmament of personal relationships and the momentary history of these meetings that were repeated over the years: "Pink wigs, red beds, yellow doors, green couches.* No Velvet on the Ground. *Lots of sweat. Some blood and tears."*[2]

In her well-known self-portrait, made at the request of Zoom *magazine to accompany one of the first publications of this series, Rita Barros positions herself on top of her table, with her collection of pop art originals and reproductions on the background wall, between her cat Manuel and the silver telephone, guided by the shutter control that she holds with conviction in the centre of the image, in a premonitory gesture of her subsequent photographic incursions.*

From the 2000s onwards, she turned the camera upon herself, assuming the role of model in her images and adopting her apartment almost exclusively as the privileged space for the performative actions that she realised, in order to promote the stereotypes of privacy, familiarity and self-representation.

Using the presence of the camera as a playful element that takes the place of a mirror, it is, above all, the ambiguity between the belonging and

2. Rita Barros, *Chelsea Hotel – Quinze Anos*, Lisbon, Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, 1999, p. 8..

the absence of her body in the private space of her home that forms the interconnection between the various photographic series which she conceived in this period. Simultaneously both the orchestrator and the spectator of her images, it is through the subjective expression of her body, based on the space of the house and her acts of performance*, that she insistently recreates the condition of flight, isolation and the illusion of presence.*

Room 1008 *(2000-2003) is one of the first series that confirms this shifting of her documentary gaze to the artistic and authorial affirmation of her photographic practice. Choosing the number of her apartment as the title, in homage to the place where Arthur C. Clarke wrote the screenplay for the film* 2001: A Space Odyssey *(1968), directed by Stanley Kubrick, and, as Barros ironically comments, a possible "explanation for my silver shoes and telephone", she uses this series to explore the narrative dimension of everyday gestures and stories, in a crossover between the "immanence of movement"*[3] *of photography and the narrative duration of cinema and* performance.

Presented at Galeria 111, as part of the events organised under the scope of Porto 2001 European Capital of Culture, the series was originally composed of eight artist's books and photographs, exhibited without any fixed order and organised by generic titles identical to the markings on a hypothetical stage – Red Door, Window, Kitchen *or* Green Couch *– in which her home clearly plays a leading role as a place of seclusion and creation, mediating the tension between the public and the private and serving as the ideal setting for the projection of multiple characters and too many ghosts.*

The variation of the colours on the covers of the books – red, yellow, gold, blue, orange or lilac – seems to chromatically abbreviate the reliquary of private stories that gradually adapted to and became settled in the space. As the artist herself makes clear, "My room went through various periods. The silver period, in which even my telephone was silver-coloured, then moved on to the red phase, in which I had parts of the wall painted red and various pieces painted in the same colour, Caribbean blue."[4]

In Red Door, *the framing of the picture is fixed on the red door of Room 1008, subsequently developing into oscillating movements of the body that stage a sumptuous exit from the scene, leaving suspended in the half-open passageway of the last image either the prospect of a return or the simple rejection of an ending. In* Spiderweb, *the depth of the shot also remains fixed, while the succession of gestures has a rhythm that is determined by the manual control of the shutter, which frequently dominates and measures the time and the movements. Using irony and humour to depict the character of Spiderwoman, accompanied by her cat, a regular interlocutor, Barros sug-*

3. Raymond Bellour, *L'entre-images: Photo, Cinéma, Vídeo*, Paris, La Différence, 1990.

4. Elsa Garcia, "O excêntrico mora ao lado" (interview with Rita Barros), *Umbigo Magazine*, n.º 27, Lisbon, 2010.

gests a slow crawling movement along the floor towards the centre of the image, which ends in a sudden and unexpected leap outside of the framing of the picture.

There is a more explicit pictorial composition to be found in Green Couch *and* Couch-Vertical*, which pursue this self-reflective dance through a sequence of misaligned and accidental poses on a green couch. These photographs appear as a reference to* Satiric Dancer *(1926) and the ballet dancer Magda Förstner photographed by André Kertész, personalising the response to the latter's wishes to record the "moment when one thing is transformed into another."*

Kitchen, Bed *and* Captivity *show daily behaviours, such as the gesture of drinking water sitting on the kitchen table or getting up from the bed in an agitated manner, adding to them a disproportionate importance and inflection, which call into question the viewers' expectations and their suspicion about the evidence of what they are seeing.* Captivity*, in particular, reveals a succession of objects that are chosen in the domestic space, and which are staged once again in the series* Presence of Absence *(2005-2006), produced after she had completed her Master's Degree in Art in Media at New York University/International Center of Photography. As possibilities of a self-portrait, these still lifes fill the everyday life of the home, displaying the exceptional nature of the flaws that appear with the passage of time. Forcing the objects to acquire an incoherent scale in the space, their minimal existence is accentuated, and the deformities of the flaws are detailed in the space.*

More intimate, diaristic, and presented in a smaller format than the other series, Window*, which is composed of just four photographs, is the only one that takes as its scenario an outline of New York seen from the window of her apartment, simulating the flight or the fall of the character towards the void. The haunting absence of the body in the last image breaks the sequence in a theatrical form, in order for it to be dissolved into the city's night life.*

The theatricalisation of private life, the recurrence of the place, the sensory nature of colour and the performative extension of her way of doing things and of being in the picture were prolonged in the series Wall *(2002) and* The Last Cigarette *(2004).*

In the first of these, composed of a sequence of ten photographs, Rita Barros attempts an indecipherable choreography in which her body, with her back turned to the camera, runs along a red wall like someone wishing to leave or move across the image or, in this specific case, the domestic space that she marks out. Reduced to an indeterminate background, without any adornments, the walls appear without any scale or proportion, thus repre-

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in the last two decades. Despite the imperatives of the digital transformation in contemporary publishing strategies, Rita Barros persists in experimenting with the materiality and specificity of the montage that the manual assembly of books makes possible and, as Allen Ginsberg wrote, thereby recovering the discovery of the illumination of the senses *that the photographs reproduced in them can provoke.*

Handmade, with a maximum number of one, two or three examples, her stimulating activity of self-publishing has so far resulted in more than 70 books, carefully conceived and presented at different exhibitions in order to offer a more tangible dimension of her photographs and an exclusive multisensory experience together with the viewer of her images.

Small in size, and mainly adopting the concertina format, with a variable number of pages, the photographs in her books are individually glued to the centre of the page with a small white margin, forming an extensive and continuous plane that incites readers to engage in their own free and fluctuating contemplation of the images.

Arranged in the exhibition space and conferring a three-dimensional dimension to the images, they formalise a connection with the cinematic narrative – of an image that is dependent upon and corresponds to the previous one – seeking other meanings in the spectator's reading time and multidirectional handling of the book. As proto-cinematic experiences, in her books, the gaps between the images serve as ways of marking time, creating analogies and antagonisms and opening up the narrative to the subjectivity of anyone who draws closer and flicks through them.

Together with the books presented in 2001, the Room 1008 *series continues with* Falling *(2003),* Spiderweb II *(2000-2008),* Door *(2000-2008) and* Mask *(2000-2008), this latter book being a double tribute to* Noire et Blanche *(1926), which Man Ray photographed with the model, actress and painter Alice Prin (Kiki de Montparnasse) at his studio in Paris, and to the metamorphosis of the masks of the transgender artist Claude Cahun: "Under this mask, another mask; I will never finish removing all these faces."*

In 3x3 (2008-2011), Barros sought to flee from the conventional portrait through a grid of nine photographs that form a personal history of associations and elective affinities in a metrics that acts as a kind of to and fro, in which preference is given to images of pieces of life: "Three times three times, breathing, opens and closes the shutter, elastic and firm, reproducing the secret of creation."[9]

Choosing to portray those who are closest to her, such as her mother, the actor and writer António Calpi and the artist/poet and companion Rene

Pág. anterior/Prev. page:
Twin Towers, 1998.

9. António Calpi, "Weightless and furtively...", in Rita Barros *3x3*, Lisbon, Galeria Pente 10, 2010, p. 10.

Ricard, she ensures that those who are being portrayed are involved in composing the narrative of their portraits, in a creation that was shared and accumulated during the time they spent together. In the book, the composition in grid form is abandoned and the photographs of the various portrayed subjects appear mixed together, side by side, with notes written in pencil by the author, adding the first name and short notes about the personal objects and details of the places.

Due to the very nature of the photographic sequence, some exceptions to the concertina format are presented as flipbooks and are thus obliged to be read at a rhythm that reinforces and implies movement and the individual cadence of the images. This is the case with Last Cigarette *(2008),* Silence *(2003), the choreography of an obstinate flight or* Blackout *(2003), produced with the collaboration of António Calpi, following the game of invisibility suggested by the title, and contrasting a troubled return home with the gesture of peeping through the spyhole of the door and seeing nothing.*

There are other important collaborations, as in the book Macbeth *(2002), also produced with António Calpi, in which the latter interprets different moments in Shakespeare's play with the expression of his gaze; and, in particular, with Rene Ricard in* Ice-Cream-Soda Drunk *(2011),* Rene's Flowers I *and* II *(2009),* Snow at Night *(2009) or* Daddy Hand's *(2010), this latter book with photographs of Rita Barros' family, for which Ricard wrote a previously unpublished poem.*

If, as Stephane Mallarmé wrote, everything in the world "is done to design a good book"[10]*, these personal and discreet objects that Barros produces are, as a whole, a panorama in which we can discover a challenging emotional self-portrait based on the place that she has chosen as her home, but also about the absurdity and solitude of the human condition.*

10. Stéphane Mallarmé, "Sur l'évolution littéraire, Enquête", in *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. 2, Paris, Pléiade, 2003, p. 702.

The gentrification of New York, which began to manifest itself from the late 1990s onwards, irreversibly transformed the material and historical memory of Lower Manhattan and forcibly led to its desertification, with the construction of dozens of luxury condominiums and the urban redevelopment of places such as The High Line into mass tourism phenomena. In the case of the Chelsea Hotel, despite the fact that Stanley Bard's management had supported the community of residents and their artistic legacy, it was inevitable that it would surrender to the pressure of property development and a much wider movement of displacement and the loss of the hotel's connection with the counterculture movements that had marked the historical identity of this neighbourhood.

Displacement *(2011-2017) and* Displacement2 *(2012-2014) is a series that was developed in two parallel moments converging on the same initial circumstance: the sale and closure of the Chelsea Hotel, in August 2011, its final transformation and the imperative need to create a more precise and undeniable visual description of its destruction. Amid her feelings of disappointment and stubborn resistance, Barros records and certifies the experience of the hotel's disappearance as it happens, producing documents that will serve as evidence against its ever being forgotten.*

Despite the apparent photographic neutrality with which she records the forcibly vacated spaces – as in Broom *(2014),* Rene's Studio *(2014),* Lola's Room *(2014) and* Pink Room *(2014) – there is an urgency about the perplexity and mistrust of her gaze upon the dysfunctionality and sabotage inflicted on them.*

Resisting the pressure and the different strategies of coercion, Barros assumes a broader gesture of asserting her right to housing, and her perseverance is decisive in amassing a considerable set of records about the dissolution of this heritage, contributing to the public debate and individual defence of those who, like her, decided to continue as residents of the hotel.

In a second moment, in Displacement2*, the response appears as a catharsis to the shock of destruction that she witnessed on a daily basis and becomes a "way of expiating the horror", which began in the summer of 2012, with the devastation of part of the garden that she looked after on her neighbour's terrace and which she represented in* Motherfuckers *(2012).*

This was not the first time that she had made use of video, as previously exemplified by the series Norman Show *(2007), Here, however, in this series, the relationship between the photographic records and the recordings of sound and movement corresponds, in an assertive fashion, to the urgent need to remain faithful to the image of violence and barbarity.*

As a healing and cleansing exercise, some of the performative actions that she develops in this context are shifted outside the home, giving greater attention to the corridors or terrace as improvised stages, as in Chelsea Housewife *(2013), about the sarcasm of cleaning the hotel during the process of its demolition, accompanied by Rene Ricard's poem now set to music – "you walk out of the dust, in this place you must, or you start to rust" – or* Untitled *(2012), as she choreographs a dance of emancipation and freedom against the despair and lack of civility that surrounds her.*

The literary influence of Samuel Beckett and his theatre of the absurd is clearly shown in Barros' earlier series, but it is made explicit in the videos Another Happy Day *(2012),* Labor Day *(2012) and* Waiting *(2012), not as*

an adaptation, but through the unequivocal absurdity and impotence into which her daily life had been transformed. Just like Winnie, the female character of Beckett's Happy Days, *Rita Barros celebrates the absurdity of life and reminds us of the importance of laughter in order to produce this story of ruin and absence. Building a wall of bricks, feeling their weight, throwing them violently, dismantling the walls, watering the bricks and burying the garden is her way of using devastation as a potential creator and reinventing her own existence, because, after all, as she says, "the bricks are the metaphor for the house that is being demolished, as well as my weapon of emotional and political defense"*[11].

The repetition of these gestures reflects her condition of being a hostage, her limited and purposeless existence, made up of disconnected digressions about absence, turning herself into a symbol of resistance and engaging in a conscious act of non-concession.

Displacement2 *is an action of protest and guerilla warfare that enables us to look critically not only at the end of the Chelsea Hotel and its history, over the course of the 19th and 29th centuries, but also, as António Calpi points out in the text from the catalogue, to consider what its end represents as a place of "creative freedom of an era that cannot be dissociated from the imaginary of the city of New York, a unique visual narrative in the history of the Hotel and an artistic document of rare social and political projection"*[12].

In the following series, Room 1008: The Last Days *(2015-2016), Rita Barros creates a sequence of palimpsestic images that reproduce fragments of her space and personal objects. The series begins precisely with the need to store her photographic archive and other personal objects in a safe place, away from her home, and the opportunity of reproducing them just as they were displayed in her apartment. Threat is transformed into irony, absence into replica and everything continues to be an image. As she explains:*

I photographed everything and decided to live with the copies. By living with these copies, they became "real objects". And as they absorbed the energy of the space and time, I felt that I had to document this new phase of my struggle to ensure that my home continues to be my home.[13]

That is, after all, the function and fatality of photography. Not eliminating the condition of the original, but claiming the leading role of the copy in the access to things, in which the original *is only one more source destined for reproduction. The blurring of this frontier, which has been identified as a*

11. Elsa Garcia, "Displacement2" (interview with Rita Barros), *Umbigo Magazine*, No. 44, Lisbon, 2013.

12. António Calpi, "Displacement2", *Le Journal de la Photographie*, 10 April 2013.

13. Luísa Soares de Oliveira, "Viver com as imagens", in Rita Barros, *Room 1008: The Last Days*, Cascais, Fundação Dom Luís I, 2021.

problem ever since the invention of photography, and the omnipresence of copies are acknowledged here and experimented with by Rita Barros at the most private level of her daily experience – as is the case with the photograph of the lit fire placed in the very same fireplace – permanently changing the space of her house into a replica-image, a mise en abyme *of the space within the space itself.*

It was in this context that she produced one of her most extensive books, with a dimension of approximately 12 metres and 76 photographs, in order to register, in all of its plenitude and irony, the moment when the house was converted into a copy of itself and, as Barros explains, because living with copies is the language of photography, everything paradoxically seems to continue to make sense.

The series Walls *(2016-2018), produced shortly afterwards, maintains this urgency and celebration of the vulnerability of the home and, once again, of the irony of its end. Rita Barros photographed the occasional interventions made to the walls of the Chelsea Hotel and all the sediments and spectres of the micro-stories that had been preserved within them, creating small triptychs that perpetuate the remains of this emblematic building, shortly before its complete clearance. The strangeness of a two-dimensional cross section conferred by photographical subtraction removes from them a recognisable referent that makes them similar to drawings, abandoned paintings and diagrams of utopian places.*

They are images about disappearing images, about the last mutation of the inner surface of those spaces that creates an abstract cartography about how to withstand the passage of time and about the possibility of still being able to talk about time.

At the end, which can always repeat itself once again, Rita Barros places herself in front of her red wall to offer the viewer a bunch of flowers, in another pop art *red colour – which is diluted into the shade of the copies and into the silence of that empty apartment.*

– Where are the flowers?[14] – *asks Winnie.*

– Win – *Willie later answers her.*

Win.

14. Samuel Beckett, *Dias Felizes*, Lisbon, Editorial Estampa, 1989.