

PRIMEIRAS
IMPRESSÕES
DE UMA
PAISAGEM

EXHIBITION ↑

JOÃO NISA

CURATED BY NATXO CHECA

OCTOBER 6 2022
TO JANUARY 7 2023
AT GALERIA ZÉ DOS BOIS

First Impressions of a Landscape is an installation created for the Solar gallery space using the first material I filmed inside the Águas Livres Aqueduct. It is part of a broader and long-standing project featuring the aqueduct, from which various works will emerge.

The project was triggered by Diogo Saldanha's investigation of the aqueduct's relationship with the photographic principle, based on his observation of a structural similarity between some of its galleries and the *camera obscura* device. This affinity raises the possibility of enhancing the inverted images of external reality that are projected onto the aqueduct's walls through a very simple intervention in the openings of the structure.

Using such an intervention as a starting point, my project centres upon directly filming some of the images that have been made visible along a specific stretch of the aqueduct located close to the springs, on the outskirts of Lisbon. These images, produced by a series of fixed viewpoints over the surrounding landscape (their framings also mechanically determined by the recesses of the openings through which the light enters), are projected onto the rough stone walls, with which they merge until the two are almost indistinguishable.

The technical process of making this work has proved particularly complex. This is largely due to the faint luminosity of the projections and to their scale within the very narrow galleries, since one of my first and central concerns was to capture the entirety of their original framings. Filming was primarily a recording of all the small events (the wind in the trees, movements of animals, passing vehicles) that take place within heavily layered images of a specific landscape, which are then reworked to hide the method by which they were produced and their inscription within a particular spatial structure. The audio recorded at the same time is predominantly of the varying sounds of the water that still flows through the conduits of the now obsolete aqueduct, but also incorporates all the outside elements that enter the galleries, interior and exterior

overlapping rather as they do in the images.

This project thus centres on the image-generating properties of a unique architectural monument, offering an impersonal study of a landscape characterized by the convergence of natural elements and a variety of clear signs of human presence and intervention. More broadly, it is also a practical reflection on the very possibilities of representing landscape.

While based on the ideas of the series and of the continuous route, derived from the original context in which the material was filmed, the installation presented at the Galeria Zé dos Bois openly departs from this reference, reconfiguring the various rooms in the gallery so as to set up a space of relationships between the images and the sounds that is predominantly abstract.

Through the duration of the projections and their method of presentation, the installation *First Impressions of a Landscape* seeks to create the conditions for each one to be grasped in its richness and complexity, yet also as an integral part of a chain, immersing the visitor in an intense perceptual and sensory experience.

João Nisa

It's as if year by year, month by month, the distance between the moving image and the still image gets smaller and smaller, to the point that it becomes imperceptible to the naked eye. At the same time, it's striking that certain artist-filmmakers conduct themselves as if a distance should in fact be maintained between these two images. They continue to stolidly work with it, to further sharpen it. João Nisa is one of them.

Walking through the various rooms that house the six screens of *First Impressions of a Landscape*, we already know this much: João Nisa has made the choice to use the singular structure of a part of the Águas Livres Aqueduct, a still partially functioning construction, yet now decommissioned after having provided the city of Lisbon with water since the eighteenth century. He does so in order to undertake the clever and radical intervention of transforming a series of openings found in the aqueduct walls into mechanisms functioning according to the principle of the *camera obscura*, such that elements of external reality are automatically projected on the walls of the structure, creating unlikely images thereafter subject to a pure ethic of recording. One thinks of the plan James Benning devised in order to capture, over two years and sixteen trips, the seasonal transformations of Robert Smithson's masterpiece *Spiral Jetty*, so as to make his 2007 film *casting a glance*, which evokes the metamorphic life of Smithson's monument in 78 shots of about a minute each. And one thinks of it all the more given that the images João Nisa exhibits here like so many moving canvases are equally part of the reality of a film on the verge of completion – also named *First Impressions of a Landscape* and which will include roughly twice as many images – and since the filmmaker is planning to make still another, longer film devoted to the Águas Livres Aqueduct.

And then there is of course what one sees in these six screens. These are shots of variable duration, ranging from about eight to eleven minutes, with the exception of the last, which is a little less than four minutes long. They are images against nature – doubly so, since they unfold over parts of the landscape and

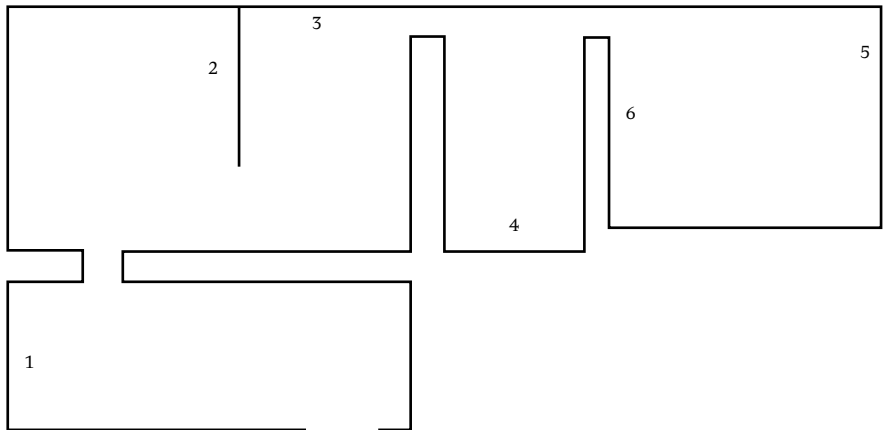
do so against any perceptual realism, according to a material division that splits them more or less equally down the middle. In the first five shots, various elements of a landscape, composed of a somewhat grassy terrain with trees blown by the wind, are found largely in the lower part of the image; meanwhile, in the upper part, which is delimited according to the range of elements present in the lower, the material presence of the aqueduct wall is apparent. It is a febrile, discordant materiality, for which the least worst comparison might be the heavens as glimpsed in canvases by El Greco, Strindberg, or Monet.

Following the order of projections as they are arranged, one is struck by the fact that the shots become progressively populated. Animals appear from the third, dispersed throughout the frame; now and then, one also notices the elliptical passage of cars largely hidden by trees, on a road that only these passages enable one to make out some distance above (a look awry might also reveal an understated rhyme between the tiny trails of light coming from the cars and the flight of birds or white butterflies at the bottom of the frame). Then, in the fourth and fifth images, the irregular outline of shanties appears suddenly, even as the passing cars and trucks gain in frequency and visibility. All this leads to a reversal occurring in the last shot, the briefest: the wall of the aqueduct, clearly recognizable from its stonework, occupies most of the frame, this time in the lower part, while a very thin strip at the top hints at a few branches blown by the wind.

The 'obtuse' fixity of the final shot – stressing that which had been concentrated in the upper region of the frame in the five preceding shots – is the quality that makes photography, or at least a photographic effect, surge forth from beneath a cinematic reality that had been accentuated by the sound of water. The concentration of the gaze required during the long minutes in front of each image contributes greatly to this, as the eye ceaselessly oscillates between the subtle movements accumulating in the lower part of the frame and the turbulent fixity of the enigmatic wall that comprises its upper part.

When all is said and done, it is striking that these images remain as surprising after one has been let in on the process used to create them as when one knew nothing of it. A true perceptual anomaly is presented: a succession of quasi-impossible images unfurling by means of a procedure that exploits the architectural singularity of the monument. This incredible impossibility generates a feeling of suspension which, through the very movement that animates these images, pulls them towards photography. They are like daguerreotypes into which instants and spurts of movement have been breathed.

Raymond Bellour



Video installation, 6 HD projections, 16:9, colour, sound
8'29" / 7'26" / 11'18" / 11'07" / 10'56" / 3'41", loop

Cinematography, sound, editing and production: João Nisa

General assistance: Joana Ascensão, Luna Rebelo, João Farelo

Colour correction: Paulo Américo

Sound mixing: António Porém Pires

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João Nisa

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zedosbois.org

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