

Blow de la Barra

35 HEDDON STREET LONDON W1B 4BP TEL: +44 (0) 20 7734 7477 info@blowdelabarra.com www.blowdelabarra.com

Carla Zaccagnini
Interview by Cecilia Canziani

Prologue

August in Rome, Italy: the city emptied of its inhabitants and taken over by tourists, and I am back home in between the holidays that this year brought me across Italy, from the river Po's delta to the Appennini mountains, ending with the coasts of Puglia. North, Centre and South. I am sure that Carla, whose practice investigates notions of location, travel and translation, will like to know that these questions, were conceived en route. Carla and I met a couple of years ago in Helsinki, Finland, where we both were in residency. Dis-location, it seems, is the key to our relationship.

Cecilia Canziani: One of the main issues in your work has been repetition, sometimes explored through objects or situations that look different at first sight but at a closer look they seem to obey to the same principle, or through things and situations that are supposed to be or expected to be identical and end up being slightly different.

Carla Zaccagnini: I am not sure this is one of the main issues of my work, but it is certainly one of my recent obsessions – if one can consider recent something that started some 4 years ago, at least. Of course after you have mapped an interest it is not difficult to trace its roots a far way behind, this is mainly what Historians do. Anyway, I really like it when repeated actions take us to unpredicted results. And I have been very attentive to what I call "Forking Paths and Crossroads", meaning things that look the same at first sight and end up being slightly different and, on the other hand, those things which are not necessarily connected but end up being somehow the same. To give you some examples of forking paths: different experienced nurses have a specific set of gestures to prepare an injection; the gestures will always be the most effective for each one of them, without being the same. Or think of the way in which identically built houses are renovated and personalized by their owners so that they gradually become very different along the years. On the other hand, what I refer to as crossroads, are those disconnected things that for a sparkling moment and due to a specific point of view and attentive observation can be perceived as connected. The way in which a thorn corner of a sugar bag would match the pattern of a typical red and white table cloth of an Italian restaurant or the way in which – as I recounted a piece for *Gagarin* magazine #14 – a pack of lemons can fall from a trolley in a way which is surprisingly similar to that in which a baby had fallen from his buggy a few meters away and minutes before.

CC: The exhibition *Até onde a vista alcança* (Galeria Vermelha, São Paulo, 2004) explored the concept of approximate symmetry, pivotal in Baroque architecture. Here, as in works as *Duas margens*, and in some of the pieces for your forthcoming show in London, I see an interest in mapping culture, in deconstructing geographies.

CZ: In the case of *Até onde a vista alcança* [as far as the eye can see] the whole exhibition was structured on the idea of approximate symmetry – and here we are, talking about repetition and difference again or already. I think the main focus of that show was visibility as a mean to relate to the world and, also, as an instrument to relate to the so-called visual arts. The departure point was the imaginary scene of a king standing at the highest tower of his castle on the top of a hill, telling his son, the prince, "one day this will all be yours, as far as the eye can see". This idea of dominating the world (and constructing a geography) through vision and what you can reach visually was central to the show. And so were the methods of observation in science and the visual quality of the visual arts. *Duas margens* is a diptych of videos simultaneously recording the water of the Atlantic as it arrives to the land, at both sides of the ocean: Brazil and Portugal. There is a more recent Pacific version of it and I am looking forward to making the Indic one. It is, of course, a play with scale and reconstruction of geographic barriers according to subjective propositions and encounters.

CC: One piece in the exhibition didn't have its double, an etching carrying striking representation of South America. How did the piece work in the show?

CZ: Actually there were two pieces with no *doppelgängers* in that show: the XIX century print you refer to and a photograph placed right in front of it. The print, produced in the United Kingdom by a British traveling artist after his return from Brazil, depicts an interesting composition in which his notes and observations come together in a way that would be impossible in another plan out of the very permissive surface of paper. The photograph is the only piece I made myself on that exhibition and it was taken in Scotland. It shows the very attractive flat surface of a snooker table visually connected to the flat green field outside an open window. It is, so far, my only untitled work, for I thought the meaning was condensed enough in that image. But maybe I should have called it (or start to call it) *La continuidad de los parques* (continuity of parks). Have you read this short story by Julio Cortázar? I think you would like it.

CC: I must read it then! Repetition plays an ironic role in *Calendário*, a calendar that was your contribution to the 2002 December issue of *Planeta Capacete* journal and that you also re-issued for your show in London. It is just one page, the days and seasons change, but the image remains the same. Identical, repeated, oppressive.

CZ: I like the idea of making the same work in a different way. Both calendars were designed together with the same person, Pipa. Her design is very simple, minimal, the initials of weekdays on top and a grid with numbers corresponding to the days for each month. Both calendars have the same structure. And yet, they serve to different moments, they will be filled up with different hours and activities each day and at each home where they are placed. The first calendar, from 2003, shows a photograph of a mountain chain in Brazil, the Serra do Espinhaço, which crosses the whole country from South to North (or backwards). I was then thinking about Cézanne and his repeated attempt to paint Mount Saint Victoire and about the permanence of mountains in contrast to the passage of human time. The calendar we are publishing now, as an invitation for the show, lasts for more than one year (from September 2007 to December 2008) and the image in it is a melting ice cream accidentally dropped on the pavement. In a few words: only a change in perspective, or scale. By the way, any calendar can be used again after 27 years. So, if you keep yours, time might come back somehow – hopefully in an unpredicted way.

CC: As most artists these days, you have developed many works in residency in foreign countries or context-specific works for exhibitions abroad. I noticed that some of your works, as for example *Sobre la igualdad y las diferencias* and the series *Wish* as well as being works per se seem to be ways to make sense of a place.

CZ: I have been thinking a lot about these residencies, which seem to occupy a role that was mainly played by Biennial exhibitions in the past, as the new investment of all art councils or governmental organizations dealing with culture and external affairs. It is not difficult to understand that a Government would finance the exportation of its national culture, be it in the shape of an artwork, an artist or any other product or thinker. What I had some trouble to understand was why would a Government pay for importing art thinkers or art producers. Of course in the case of critics and curators it is a step towards exportation. But what about artists? It took me a while to get what now seems to be so obvious. It is most probable that an artist in residency will be curious about some aspects of the place he temporarily inhabits. Each artist will of course focus on something different: architecture, language, local landmarks or traditions, geographical accidents or other natural characteristics etc. The fact is that this investment results on a wide range of representations that contribute to the construction of a new imagery of the hosting country and circulate internationally in art books, magazines, exhibitions and fairs. Of course from the artist's perspective residencies are incredibly interesting opportunities of seeing your culture, your habits and your work from a new perspective; of finding out unthinkable connections between your interests and practice and those of someone living at the other side of this round planet. But we have to be aware of the roles we are playing.

CC: Mapping does not only apply to the spatial dimension, but also to social and community networks. One could therefore read in the framework of cultural geography some of your works. I remember a work that in a similar way interpreted the notion of translation: you were developing in Helsinki, you were taking pictures of words that have a similar sound in different languages.

CZ: It was more about spelling than about sound, as I was walking through Helsinki and trying to find words I could read and understand. This led to three types of words: those that were similar in Finnish to the ones used in Latin languages, like *Historia*, which of course made me think of the introduction of those concepts in Finnish vocabulary and thinking; those which were adopted as a reference to a Latin idealized culture or place, in general words related to idyllic scenarios and hedonistic behavior; and those whose meaning I could guess by the way they were used, such as *kitos* at a fast-food garbage container. The other work I developed there was also about language and translation, and this one was based on sound somehow. It was a video recording of a conversation between a Finnish and a Uruguayan dancers. They didn't speak each other languages and would normally communicate in English, exactly like the two of us, unfortunately. There was a translator, but she would only translate in one direction. Let's say that dancer A would start the talking in Finnish and this

would be translated to Spanish, so dancer B would reply to that content in her language and dancer A would have to react according to what she understood or guessed by the sound she heard. Her answer would then be translated again and dancer B would continue. We did two rounds of this game, one in each direction.

CC: The exhibition that you are preparing for London is almost an investigation on desire, the series *Wish* literally introduces the theme.

CZ: The exhibition at *Blow de la Barra* is very much based on desire and frustration or, even, in an understanding of desire as structured over constant frustration. It is very much about desiring what you cannot have, even if you know that you won't get it. And maybe also about frustration as a possibility to construct our relationship to the world. *Wish* (the *Antwerp* series) is a group of stolen portraits of people looking at diamonds displayed in shopping windows. The relationship to the object of desire and the obstacle between it and the subject is pretty clear in the photographs. But I have to say I am most interested in seeing the visitors to the show looking at the pictures of people looking at diamonds. It is, again, repetition with a slight detour.

CC: Desire is further explored, in a different connotation, with *Estampa* (celeste) and *Rompe-cabezas*. Both works play with the desire of the collector and to the impossibility of completion that is inherent in collecting.

CZ: A certain sense of this impossibility of completion or of complete satisfaction has been present in many of my works in different ways. There is some degree of failure in most of them. In *Museu das vistas*, for instance, it is about the impossibility of recalling a clear image from memory, plus the impossibility of transforming what we actually remember of it into words, plus the impossibility of making these words sound to the other as we mean them, plus the impossibility of another faithful translation, this time from those words to the gestures that build a drawing. In this exhibition, especially because it takes place in a commercial gallery, this impossibility of satisfaction is mainly focused on consumption, on wanting (and being unable) to have. Now this got me thinking: is desire always a will to possess? Both *wish* and *desire* are translated to Spanish (and Portuguese) as the same word: *desejo*, which makes me unsure of the difference in meaning between these two English words. In both the works that you mentioned it is impossible to own the whole. Either because (in the case of *Estampa*) it is an unlimited print of a series of different images of clouds reconfigured randomly and sold by the meter, so that one can only buy a fragment of a line, of a printed cloth with no pattern; or because (in the case of *Rompe-cabezas*) each interested person can only buy one of the 40 pieces that compose this porcelain puzzle. In this second case, I also like to imagine an attempt to put the puzzle together again, having to find all those fragile porcelain pieces and building again the sky chart of that one night.

CC: Then again a game: *Jogo transparente*. The form reminds me of *Jogo de memória*, in both works the display seems to call for the audience to activate it, in both the game reveals itself slightly perverse.

CZ: Actually, these two works were invented together, at the same time, in 2004. I first thought of them and actually made the *Jogo de memória* for my show at *Galeria Vermelho Até onde a vista alcança* (as far as the eye can see). Both of them are related to vision. On the memory game, the pieces are all so similar that it is really hard to decide which ones make the identical pairs. On this transparent game, which was initially produced for the show *This is not a love song* (*Galeria Vermelho*, São Paulo, October 2006) and has also been exhibited at *Vida pública* (FNA, Buenos Aires, August 2007), the fact of being able to see each other's cards disrupts the usual dynamics of a card game. I really like this kind of perversion in which the rules are kept untouched. Games are the social structures with the clearest rules, I like that, they are the moments in which the scheme of dispute is established among very clear regulations and only makes sense if you follow them. You can still play your favorite game with these transparent cards; they just exclude from competition the possibility of untruthfulness. What happens then? If you are a poker player, then it becomes a matter of luck: whoever gets the best cards wins. For some other games, though, you would have to adapt your strategy to this new arena in which everything is revealed and you just can't lie. The other day someone asked me if the cards were made to read the future, after I have talked about how I thought they could propose a change on how we play our games she insisted "So they are for reading the future". I prefer to think they are for writing it. In the context of this show, the transparent cards include a relation with desire that is established between two (or more) players of the same game. You can see when your counterpart hold the one card you need in his or her hands and you know you will hardly get it then. This is the way in which I have chosen to incorporate in this context the problem of dealing with desire when it involves someone else. Besides, this tension between what you see and what you get is always interesting.

CC: Since we first met, I am interested in an aspect of your work that I have been reading as legacy of Institutional Critique, and then was recently reading an interview to Cildo Meireles and found myself thinking of your work in relation to his. It probably sounds pretty obvious to you, but I guess it has more to do with my Eurocentric perception of art!

CZ: Cildo is, of course, one of my references. A friend (Rodrigo Moura, curator of the *Inhotim* contemporary art center, in Brazil) recently told me that Cildo said once that while his big installations were usually to be experienced individually, his small-scale projects were of a public reach. This is easy to understand if you think about his interventions on ideological circuits. I like it very much, the way he trusts the power of small twists or simple actions inside a structured system. Or the force of a minimum cube, as in *Cruzeiro do Sul*. Another of the things that really strikes me about his work is how he deals with perception, as when he is able to see Coca-cola not only as an already-given circulation system and as a symbol of imperialism, but also as an impermanent black-board in which the white letters become visible and invisible when the bottles are filled and emptied.

CC: I love the fact that he used the system of distribution of normal bottles of Coca-Cola as a media. Works as *Galeria*, and in a different way *Bibliografia* and *Restauração* (Almeida Junior) are to me very close to Cildo Meireles' practice, his specific interpretation of Institutional Critique.

CZ: *Bibliografia* was developed for a show of young Brazilian artists at the *Centro de Arte Wilfredo Lam*, in Havana. We had been asked to consider sending works on paper that could be donated to the institution. The work I proposed consists of the donation of books about Brazilian art theory and history to the library of the *Wilfredo Lam*. It creates a growing nucleus of publications about Brazilian art in that library and it is, at the same time, a permanent installation in the art center. *Restauração* (Almeida Junior) consists of the restoration of a painting belonging to the *Pinacoteca Municipal de São Paulo*, housed at the cultural center where the exhibition it was made for took place; and of a text derived from a conversation with the conservators who made the job. Especially in these two cases, apart from revealing a problem, it is also a matter of finding a constructive way of doing so. I think it is very different to work with thoughts and practices deriving from institutional critique in the so-called developed countries and in countries like Brazil or Cuba. Our institutions are not strong fixed structures; they are vulnerable and thus somehow flexible places. They are not that old, not that sedimented, not that solid, not that steady.

CC: I would consider in this frame also *Percurso ótico*, which is a work that required a very complex installation, and which was ultimately developed to unveil the different layers of significance - and its loss, that an artwork has and gives away, when it is framed by an Institution.

CZ: Beautiful summarizing! Yes. But it also functions as a lure, something that makes you want to find out where that image comes from and search for the original painting in the collection. That is the point, I think, when I somehow get away from Institutional Critique. It is about a critical thinking on institutions and how they frame our relationship to art, but it is not cynic or sarcastic. I really like museums. This work - as well as *Restauração* and *Contorno de exposição* - is a contemporary art piece limited to the proposition of a new look to historical art and its current role in society.

CC: Distribution is another crucial issue in your practice. In *Museu das vistas* for example the original work is given to the person who described the landscape - thus analyzing the notion of author - in *Estampa* it has to do with how and what and to what extent you can own an art work. Natural catastrophes, a series of postcards that you send to friends for the New Year's Eve is produced as an edition, but of course their value as objects of art or greeting cards is determined by the person who receives it.

CZ: You are absolutely right about my interest in distribution. I like works that circulate in ways that don't obey to the logic of exhibiting and observing. The postcards were sold by their production cost (and mainly stolen) in the show they were originally made for, and I really like imagining all those catastrophes traveling by mail. I like the idea of making cards people can play with, a fabric they could make a dress or a curtain out of, books that can be carried in our pockets. Pocket art, I like that.

CC: Landscape has been central in art, and many of your works play with its imagery. Mostly, in order to reconfigure our horizon of perception. I am here thinking to *E pur si muove*, *Sky (?)* and *Natural catastrophes*. I was delighted with the colors of the sea depicted on the postcard that you sent me, until I read, in the back, the title of the work! In all the three cases that I mentioned, the landscape gives way to very different investigations.

CZ: I like the idea of landscape because it puts together nature and representation, in a similar way in which portraiture does to the human figure. In the case of

landscape it very clearly includes a point of view, a perspective, and it is a mean of visually understanding and dominating nature.

In the Brief postcards series, images of natural catastrophes are printed on one side while a pattern silk-screened on the other only leaves space for one sentence besides the recipient's name and address. There are many things I can say about this. At the time, I was corresponding with someone who used to write very brief messages back; I thought these postcards would be a challenge even for him. Also, I had written in a text about public art around one year earlier that I wished art could be as public as a natural catastrophe. I still do. This work was also part of the exhibition This is not a love song, and each of the chosen catastrophes somehow relate to feelings and sensations deriving or hopefully leading to love. But there is also some degree of urgency brought by the images and what they record. What would you say – and it should also function as a signature – in one short line, when a volcano is about to erupt, three parallel hurricanes move in your direction or you are facing a forest on fire?

CC: You are also a writer; you edit a magazine titled Número which is distributed across Brazil

CZ: Número is a project I really like. I was invited to take part of it on its fifth edition and we are now working on the tenth. Speaking of distribution and circulation, the magazine is, for me, another platform (a very wide and outreaching one) in which to develop and communicate thinking. I really like the process of editing it, with the endless meetings to discuss themes and articles and collaborators and approaches.

CC: One of the first times we met we talked for hours of books and literature. How much this influences your practice?

CZ: This is a very good question. I could say that my focus in text and writing is part of my interest in language and discourse (and all the layers of translation in communication), which I inherited from my mother, who was a Lacanian Psychoanalyst. That would be telling the truth, of course, but not all of it. I cannot draw, at least not in a way that makes me satisfied, and writing is thus the easiest or more precise concretization of my thinking, in a more permanent basis than speaking. Speaking could be listed as my favorite, though, not only despite but even because of all the (mis)interpretations and detours that unrecorded discourse can suffer, or profit from. But apart from my use of writing as an instrument, what I really like and learn from in literature, is its relationship to the reader. The amount of information that you give and the trust on the complement or sewing that will come from the other part. The acceptance of (or a bet on) how the text will become a different sequence of images to each different reader and the embracement of all these possibilities. I also like the physical relationship to the book, the possibility of taking it with you and opening it at any time and re-access it, re-stage it, making it alive again. I like art that you can take in your hands. And especially the suspension of time and action that literature offers to the reader. I really like the fact that when you close the book it waits for you. And you can keep it waiting. There is a sharing of power in this that I would really like to achieve. Somehow I believe this is a way of becoming (and making others) conscious of the power of our actions and silences.

CC: So, which book would you suggest me to read now?

CZ: Julio Cortázar: Rayuela, 1963.

CC: Which is a book on repetition. So with this, I think we have the perfect circular end of our interview!