

The Invention of an Island

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In the buginning is the woid, in the muddle is the sound-dance...

Joyce¹

As the sun sets one afternoon in the hot spring of 2015, small groups of people stand talking in the gardens of the Casa do Baile (the Ballroom Building) in Pampulha. There are laughter and smiles, whispers, hugs, and toasts. Such activity might surprise those used to walking around the lake and seeing only dedicated tourists or hardy athletes. The reason is that the revived Casa do Baile is now home to the installation *Ilha Restaurante (Island Restaurant)* by Laura Belém. The subtle bright ring of a simple neon moon rises on the reflecting mirror of the small pond in the garden. It enunciates the circular design of the building, heightened now by delicate architectural interventions: the mirrored ball spinning in the center of the ceiling, the curtain patterned with tropical palm trees hanging from the first coving, and then, draped from successive cornices, sumptuous velvet curtains of a rich ocher color mingle with others, gossamer light with silver fringes. Bistro chairs are scattered across the dance floor. On the walls and external windows, mirrors multiply opacities and transparencies, reflecting the surroundings and suggesting new vistas. The lights of the mirror ball turn, shatter and multiply between the textures of drapery and mirrors that reflect back images and glittering lights. In the small, empty auditorium, a soundtrack plays noises, music and a voice speaking in broken phrases.

*[I]n the muddle is the sound-dance...*² The words of James Joyce, in *Finnegans Wake* (1939), held, in all its semantic-sonic splendor, to be untranslatable, seems to guide us through *Island Restaurant*. The book, in the words of Umberto Eco, is a complex machine of suggestion, which, like any complicated device, is capable of functioning beyond the original intentions of its creator. The strength of the text lies in its permanent ambiguity and the echoes that ring from the

¹ JOYCE, James. *Finnegans Wake*. London: Penguin Books, 1992. p. 378.

² The choreographer Merce Cunningham took the title of his work *Sounddance* from this phrase by Joyce. See the article by Karl Reisman, "In the muddle is the sounddance", available at: <<http://www.flashpointmag.com/reisman.htm>>.

numerous meanings that seem to lead us towards choosing one interpretation or another, while at the same time eliminating none. The work sinks and reemerges in its infinite circularity.³

Island Restaurant is also a complex dream-making machine, putting in motion visual syntaxes in a state of uncertainty, which proliferate and spread in multiple directions without the possibility of the choosing or favoring of any of them. A flood of memory-images that interweave and loop in concentric circles, heterogeneous fields.

When it opened in 1943, the Casa do Baile housed a small restaurant and a dance floor. It was built on a small island constructed especially for the purpose, connected to the shore by a little concrete bridge. It is said that Casino-goers reached the Casa do Baile by crossing the lake on a simple boat. On the artificial lake, the island, also artificial, was home to the humble dance hall of a city that dreamed of being modern.

When gambling became illegal in 1946, the Casino closed its doors, meaning that the Casa do Baile lost most of its regulars and, in 1948, the music stopped playing forever. In the years that followed, there were attempts to sell off the beautiful circular building, it was rented out to private companies, and sometimes simply employed for its space; for a time it was used by the Museu de Arte Moderna da Pampulha as an extension of their exhibition rooms and for storage.

Glimpses of memories of *Sounddance* (1975), by Merce Cunningham, *Café Müller* (1978), by Pina Bausch, and *Le Bal* (1983), a film by the Italian director Ettore Scola, important works in the emotional universe of Laura Belém, who studied contemporary dance for seven years, now inhabit the Casa. In *Ilha Restaurante*, Laura evokes the bleak atmosphere of Pina Bausch's *Café*, which recalls, in turn, the days of her childhood, as a girl hiding under the tables of the bar of the family hotel during the war years (the same era in which the Pampulha architectural complex opened). In the anachronistic spiral drawn by Ettore Scola, war and peace pursue each other in a provincial dance where identical couples reenact identical routines of seduction across the decades of the last century. Merce Cunningham sets on the stage figures that come together, separate and come together again in a spinning metamorphosis in which lives are transformed into dance. The sumptuous, theatrical curtains of *Sounddance*, the chairs that hinder the steps of the spectral dancer of *Café Müller*, the mirror ball that spins endlessly over the dance floor of *Le*

³ ECO, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989. p. 67.

Bal, evoke a sense of absences. The dancers that are no longer there have left the dance floor as empty and silent as their ghostly presence, demanding other presences: of the *habitués* of the Casa do Baile; and of ourselves, who one day may appear.

In “Modern Ruins”, an anonymous text published in the magazine *Alterosa* in 1951 – eight years after the inauguration of the Casa do Baile – an unknown writer described the all too rapid decline of the Pampulha complex: “very few people visit Pampulha to enjoy a Sunday afternoon on the banks of the great lake. And in fact, the great majority of these few are on their way to the Casa do Baile”.⁴ According to the author, it was the less well-off, at whom the project was initially aimed, who frequented the venue, despite the “long bus queues” they had to face...⁵

This circular ruin – after all, the Casa do Baile, now restored, is the intact ruin of a failed project, the traces of which can be seen only in the discrepancy between the original name and the building’s current use – is the ideal venue for such a circularity of imperfect memories.

Island Restaurant announces itself silently with an unexpected neon moon reflected in the small pond. The silence, however, is interrupted in the auditorium, a stolen slice of the original building, separated from the main ballroom by glass that stretches from floor to ceiling. In the empty space, a soundtrack rotates in an endless loop, conjuring up ungraspable, reticent memories that are familiar but also strange; sounds that make us shiver as we try and recognize them. Unidentifiable noises, a popular waltz, the blades of an approaching helicopter, a few bars of French rock, snatches of phrases: *there isn’t a place... there is a place... under construction... still... place... there is a place... still*. The only way to make sense of these breaks is through the words of Lévi-Strauss, “everything looked like it was still under construction and was already a ruin”.⁶

An archival vision pulsates behind the installation; an impulse that manifests itself not only in an attempt to reawaken the magic of one of the most beautiful examples of tropical modernism, but

⁴ Cf. *Casa do Baile 66: uma ilha na história* (“*an island in history*”). Texts by Cida Vivas, Denise M. Bahia, Euler Fernandes and Rodrigo Ávila. Belo Horizonte: Municipal Culture Foundation, 2008. p. 103.

⁵ Idem.

⁶ VELOSO, Caetano. *Fora da ordem mundial* (“*Outside the World Order*”). Cited in LÉVI-STRAUSS, Claude. *Tristes trópicos* (“*The Sad Tropics*”). Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1976. p. 81.

also in the evocation of narratives from other places and other times. Remnants of a heterogeneous mix of archives, films, sounds and choreography separate and come together in unstable, vertiginous space-times, where memories overrun the emptiness of the present. The accumulation of spatiality and temporalities, the articulation of insubstantial remains and materials, cry out for an audience and describe the persistence of such memories.

Neither desolation nor a ruin; what the Casa do Baile was, and was not, what it might be, or may never be, floats amidst the silence of the room. There are discontinuous fragments: a fallen chair, pieces of a broken wooden pole on another chair, another larger wooden pole leaning against a mirror, as though anchoring the interior architecture of the space. On another chair, accessible to visitors, are reams of paper on which are printed two sentences, each on an individual, intertwined sheet: *There is nowhere like an island* and *There is no island*. Meanwhile, overhead, the mirror ball casts handfuls of stars on the curtains of palm trees, while its shadow projects on to them the unexpected circle of a full moon, echoing the other, neon moon, the subtle circle that glows in the night of the garden.

Will the specters of the past appear? Will we see the marks they left behind in this place? Or will those who dance with us in silence be, now and always, our ghosts, those who visit from time to time, at each updated experience of the past?

[Translation: James Young]