

The inside of the outside of the inside

The outside and the inside are inseparable.
The world is wholly inside and I am wholly
outside myself
Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

In 1976 Helena Almeida made herself a white monkey-suit, attached a blank canvas to the front, put everything on and strolled onto the street. From this action came a photograph that portrays the artist, caught for a moment in motion, looking directly at the camera with a knowing yet open gaze and half a smile. The work is entitled *Inhabited Canvas* and it sets out what have become the main concerns of Helena Almeida's working methodology: the almost exclusive use of photography; an image that always suggests an action (isolated or in a group of works); and her own role as protagonist in front of the camera.

To fully understand Almeida's practice, it is worth considering what came before and after *Inhabited Canvas*.¹ The artist began her career as a painter, studying the medium at university. Although she went through a relatively conventional phase in her early career, Almeida's interest in painting quickly focused on the surface of the image, its 2-dimensionality, and sought out a way to rupture that plane of illusion it contains. Almeida wanted to challenge the object in itself. She made works that either exploded and expelled their elements outwards, occupying a new dimension (as in *The Bride* 1970), or deconstructed the constituent parts of painting: the frame that shifts away, or a canvas that falls, leaving the stretcher visible as in the 1968-69 series of *Untitled* works.

Helena Almeida set about probing the limits of painting, as a way of deconstructing the thin membrane that separates the inside from the outside, in a permanent exchange that Merleau-Ponty identified as *chiasma*. The artist is never located solely on either

¹ In 1969, Helena Almeida made *Pink Canvas to Wear*, in which she dresses herself in a canvas with arms. What differs from the 1976 work, and what makes the later more important, is that it lacks the simulation of an action.

side but simultaneously and fully on both: she is at the same time work/object and author/ embodied subject. In her work, and in her life, the two are inseparable.

In a way, her work represents a restless pursuit to fully inhabit painting. To achieve this, it was necessary to deconstruct the object, the canvas itself, not to unravel a new object but to reveal her research processes. She does this by literally abandoning painting and starting to use photography. Her subject remains the same, to rethink the limits of painting and drawing, but it is explored through another medium. Almeida photographs herself painting and drawing, or interacting with them. She questions traditional painting's language and conventions and through her work has altered the course of painting and photography in Portugal.

Working at a time when art practice was dominated by an iconoclastic wave that declared painting dead and words, process and ideas its successors, the artist reflected on how to continue painting without doing it literally. "And now who am I?" asked Alice in Lewis Carroll's "Through the Looking Glass". One can imagine the artist posing the same question while confronting herself for the first time with the work of Lucio Fontana that so impressed her. In the famous *Spatial Concept* series, the Italian artist uncovered an interiority and depth to painting, or, from an opposing point of view, demonstrated exactly the contrary: the inexistence of something beyond the surface of the canvas. Almeida transfers this influence to an attitude that resists the traditional logic of painting's *modus operandi*, allowing her to consider a new condition for that medium: liberating it from the syndrome of the frame and allowing painting to escape its ontological contingency – that of a painted surface -, proposing new ways of thinking about the medium.

It is not the techniques or themes of painting or of drawing that trouble the artist. Almeida is interested in creating an intimate relationship with both painting and drawing. In order to do this, she interacts directly with its main elements: the paint mark and the line. This quest demanded the physical presence of the artist in the image, and it is precisely through her body made object/actor that photography, painting and drawing intertwine. In Almeida's work, however, photography will always be a means and not an end. In fact, Almeida displays a certain disregard for the sleek and perfect look of much contemporary photography, preferring to accommodate irregularities in the grain and texture of the final photographic image.

The fact that the final work takes the form of a photograph leads the viewer immediately to question what he/she is seeing: is it documentation of a performance or the object itself? Is it the final work or a part of the process? This deliberate ambiguity invites and involves the viewer in (re)staging narratives suggested by the images. Helena Almeida's works are strongly influenced by cinema (the artist herself claims that had she not been a painter, she'd been a film-maker) as they enact small plots. Her images look like stills from films that never were. Each image is vividly temporal, depicting a suspended action that comes to life in the spectator's imagination. In this sense, Almeida has much in common with the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. Her images are as full of narrative possibility as stills from Godard's film-poems are self-contained.

In *Inhabited Canvas* Helena Almeida uncovers the work's author. This question has been thoroughly discussed elsewhere (should this be footnoted?), and does not relate to self-portraiture as much as the issue of authorship. Almeida is able to simultaneously be herself, an other and neither. "I am not myself, I am not the other, I am something in between" wrote the poet Mário de Sá-Carneiro. Almeida uses herself as an object, an empty, malleable vessel (in the same way she uses the horsehair, the blue ink, the black pigment or the stool from her studio in later images), which is manipulated in ways that enable the artist to pursue her formal and conceptual interrogation of the image.

Helena Almeida refuses the concept of self-portrait as a transparent reproduction of an individual personality. There isn't an autobiographical aspect in her work; she is not herself. The spectator who attempts to unravel the subject author in her portrait is left wanting. Her images usurp a tautological desire for meaning that the immediate and pseudo-transparent nature of photography seems to allow. She takes on a mask – without ever recurring to disguises or makeup – in order to be photographable. As the main character in her works, Almeida introduces in them a paradoxical element: while she makes the author visible (and never stops being the author), the artist continuously postpones the possibility of knowing her identity. Looking at forty years of work, in which it is possible to see, for example, the artist aging, does not afford any more intimacy, or insight into the artist's personality, than in the first image her

she appears in. Furthermore, there are works in which the presence of replication is particularly intense. In works such as *Study for an Inner Improvement* (1977) simulation of the I as well as of the action reiterate the supposed performativity inferred in the works. The photograph pretends to document an action: be that the traversing of a canvas, promenading through a garden, or eating pigment. Yet, Helena Almeida refutes an association between her work and performance, preferring the concept of theatricality. Staged actions. The stroll she takes wearing her canvas-suit in *Inhabited Canvas*, is not more than an enactment for the camera. As with all other works, it is meticulously prepared through numerous drawings, which constitute a sort of cartography of the work, and that attest to the artificiality of each gesture. Thus we may speak of a pseudo-performance instead of a 'real' performance. The action never happens, there is no before or after; these moments are only imagined by the observer. Almeida formulates and makes visible several parts of a gesture without it ever occurring in reality. There is, in these works, little space for improvisation or randomness. All is calculated and controlled. The artist does not address a particular audience but the camera itself and a sole spectator: the photographer (coincidentally her husband) with whom she establishes a relationship of profound intimacy and trust.

On a larger scale, intimacy is exactly the main focus of her entire project. The choice of the exhibition's title "Inside me", homonym of an exhibited work, makes deliberate reference to this. It comes from inside and it is about the inside. It demonstrates a relationship of familiarity with the medium she chose to explore; the artist swallows the paint, weeps it, draws teasingly with the line, and is crossed by it. She literally and poetically inhabits it. Her body is transformed into light, spot and mass (the three nuclei of the exhibition). Almeida plays with the line, explores it. She becomes the line in the series *Inhabited Drawings*. Often when she investigates painting directly, she choreographs a physical confrontation with the blue paint that is applied over the photographic surface, over her body. And when she moves away from the more sculptural interventions on the photographs (when she abandons the horsehair and the blue paint) it is her own body that becomes a mass moulded by the artist.

If a playful tone is present in this private game between the artist and her work, a profound tragic dimension of death exists as well. Photography has frequently been

coupled with death, as Barthes and Benjamin have argued. It portrays a time passed, a moment gone. The black that dwells in most of her work is that of mourning. An acute black, a profound black, a black exit. All refer to an entry to and an exit from painting, and the process of loss and recreation these movements imply.

Without ever making an intentionally autobiographical gesture, Almeida's work is the manifestation of a very personal quest for new ways of facing the canvas and the blank sheet of paper. Inside herself, Helena Almeida searches for an outside and from the outside, through the actions of her body, she probes the inside of herself. A study for an inner enrichment, for an inner vastness and for a unique way of making art.

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Helena ALMEIDA: Inside Me, Kettle's Yard, 2009