Ana Vidigal's House of Secrets

> Sometimes, the best way to hide something is in full sight.
>
> Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*

> The city which cannot be expunged from the mind is like an armature, a honeycomb in whose cells each of us can place the things he wants to remember.
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> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Instead of following its meandering paths, to plunge straight in to the heart of the matter with a question: when is a labyrinth also a home? Or perhaps, the question could and should be reversed: when is it not? This is one of the sets of ideas with which Ana Vidigal's *House of Secrets* tantalisingly engages, and engages us. At once architectural and sculptural, monumental readymade and installation, content and container, this work was conceived for the huge atrium of the Central Pavilion of the Instituto Superior Técnico (IST) in Lisbon. I say 'was,' but this is a fiction set in place by the timings of catalogue production: as I write this, the piece itself is in the making, existing as a series of incrementally refined investigations, proposals, photographs and maquettes. It tickles me to wonder to what extent this text can keep pace with the work it addresses, and that in turn addresses it.

So imagine, with me, the following: we are standing on one of the four sides of the gigantic first floor gallery of the magisterial Central Pavilion at IST, with its centralised, panoptical design, a type of spatial organisation favoured by authoritarian regimes. Our bodies are miniaturised and intimidated by the scale of the building, and simultaneously dematerialised by the theatrical chiaroscuro of daylight filtering through the magnificent *art deco* skylight. What we see as we look over the banister into the central hall are the stark shapes of a maze whose outer walls form a strict rectangle. The rectangle echoes the greater architectural frame of the atrium, one nesting within the other. Drawn in simple pattern of lines in right-angled

arrangements, the maze itself is at once plan and volume, solid and evanescent, for the surface upon which we look down (the roof of the maze) is lined with mirrors. We look down, then, upon the light bathed ceiling, duplicating the ceiling above our heads in luminous geometric fragments, and granting the labyrinth a trompe l'oeil opulence while dissolving the certainties of its contours.

Taking the stairs down to the ground floor, we are presented, of course, with a view that is entirely different. In fact, the word 'view' does not properly describe it, for instead of the totalising perspective from above – a prospect of something we can control with our gaze, a view that presents the space below as picture or map – here we are invited to participate: our all-seeing eye is replaced by bodily and perceptual immersion. By definition, we cannot take in the whole of the work at a single glance; in fact we cannot take it in by looking at all. Rather, our access to the work is activated by the phenomenological effect of walking through space.[1] Here, our habitual pathways – multiple traversals of the vast space, wrapped by an outer border of pillars positioned at regular intervals – are immediately aborted by the walls of the maze, presenting a kind of bulwark both to our gaze and to our body. These bastions are broken only at two entrance points, symmetrically located on each of the short sides of the rectangle. These entrances simultaneously invite and direct us: we are at once presented with the possibility, and confronted with the necessity (if we are to cross the atrium without having to walk around its periphery) of corporeally occupying the maze, physically invading it and following its course to an asymmetrically stationed heart, or home. Here, upon entering it, we see that the maze is constituted of rows of old double-decker metal lockers, the kinds of small, lockable compartments habitually used in institutions and public places for the safeguarding of personal belongings.

The brief that accompanied the invitation to produce an exhibition/ installation to coincide with the commemorations of the centenary of the IST, came with no restrictions of form or content, but with the requirement that some aspect of the

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[1] Much has been written about the different political dimensions offered by the view from above and that from below. See in particular Michel de Certeau's essay 'Walking in the City,' in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Transl. Steven Rendall, Berkley: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 91-110.

institute be employed, consulted, addressed or referenced. Founded in 1911 by the reformer of scientific education and engineer Alfredo Bensaude, the IST was later given a home, under the aegis of another famous engineer, a one-time student at the institute itself, Duarte Pacheco. In 1932, he was appointed Minister of Public Works in Salazar's government, and later (1938) he became famous, among other things, for an ambitious project launched to develop monuments, bridges and schools as part of a drive to promote national pride (if not imperial consciousness). Duarte Pacheco oversaw the construction of the buildings housing the IST on a prime piece of real estate in Lisbon, with a utopian vision of authoritarian inspiration for the first ever Portuguese campus. The architect of the new installations of this university specialising in science and technology, built between 1929 and 1942, was Porfírio Pardal Monteiro, whose task was overwhelmingly complex, and constrained by financing.[2]

There was much here that Vidigal might have explored in ideological and institutional terms, given that, in the interlacing of public and private memory that is so central a concern in her work, she has touched more than once upon the history of Salazarism and its effects upon lives, both in the metropolis and in the colonies. In particular, the installations *Penelope* (2000) and *Void* (2007) and the ongoing online project *Memento Mori* (http://anavidigal.blogspot.com/2011/08/projecto-memento-mori.html) all address issues pertaining to the effects in the private domain of the Portuguese Colonial War, so to speak 'bringing the war home.'[3] However, at the IST, she has opted for nothing as simplistic as an examination of the ideological foundations upon which the architectural project was structured, instead taking on board the ways in which an institution is more than its physical shell; is defined by its trajectory and history, the shifts in its ideological positioning over time, and, of special significance, the processes and practices it promotes, and therefore the uses to which it is put.

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[2] For an excellent discussion and overview of the project in the context of Duarte Pacheco's career, see the catalogue *Duarte Pacheco – Do Técnico ao Terreiro do Paço* published as part of the centennial celebrations, Lisbon: Instituto Superior Técnico, 2011.

[3] *Bringing the War Home* was the title given by American artist Martha Rosler, much admired by Vidigal, to a series of photographic works made at the time of the Vietnam War and reprised during the Iraq War in 2004 and 2008.

In short, institutional critique – the desideratum of certain practices of installation, entailing the deconstruction of the ideologies underpinning the institution in which a work itself is exhibited or housed – is not central to Vidigal's practice. It would be, for her, too po-faced, too linear, too programmatically driven by ideas alone. Not that her work disdains ideas: it is brimming with them. But Vidigal's ideas are nothing if they are not given body, shape and colour; produced, anchored or unravelled by verbal twists and turns and spiced with a knowing humour. Hers, then, is not a concept-driven art, if by 'concept' we mean a skeletal formulation from which the flesh of visual appearances has been scrubbed. Rather, her work is impelled by vision, by flares of insight that combine layers of meaning with nuanced examination of the mobile *vehicles* of meaning: images, motifs, words. Put another way: her vision is not deconstructive so much as *re*constructive, seeking not to dissect disembodied notions so much as to mobilise the ways in which the phenomenal world is itself ideated: a perceptual world packed with ideas and generative of thoughts. Ideas, in short, are not disincarnate, but are, rather, quite literally substantiated. With her keen sense of the extent to which the substrates of ideologies are firmly lodged in material culture, Ana Vidigal has always enjoyed mining the cultured world for the gradations of meaning offered by its signs and symbols, and where need be, *under*mining their presumptions by astute, fleet-footed puns, both verbal and visual.

Aware that the piece she would produce would have to be site specific and, by virtue of the site, monumental in scale, Vidigal began her research, spending time with her camera, visiting various departments and centres at the IST: nuclear physics, biological and chemical engineering, molecular physical chemistry, marine technology and engineering, mechanical and electrical engineering, structural chemistry and so on. She approached these places armed with an innate sense of her own range of possibilities – a broad palette of skills and methodologies – while maintaining intact the boundary between these areas of research and her own, never tempted by the hubristic pretentiousness of adopting a pseudo-scientific language. Her quest was to find something she could employ here, something she could appropriate in such a way as to be consistent with her own interests and working procedures, honest to the limitations of a possible conversation between her art and the sciences, and yet something that would also speak of and to the institution in which she was intervening.

An initial plan entailed employing the enormous skips used for building works on the campus and the detritus produced by those works, as if to ask: what has to be eliminated, thrown away, in order for something to be constructed, construed, created. The question is as important for the arts as it is for the sciences: what it is that constitutes refuse. Other possibilities were engendered by visits to particular departments. Worthy of special mention here is the Department of Mining Engineering, whose archives chimed with Vidigal's fascination with both notions and forms of the archival: in other words the archive as both a method and an aesthetic. But working with archival material would have entailed tiptoeing through a minefield of security issues, bureaucracy and permissions. The notion did, however, trigger a chain of associations. As is always the case with her working procedure, the project was redirected by the serendipitous and the co-incidental, leading her to the students' lockers.

The lockers! With a flash, she understood that even with no intervention, these presented delicious meanings and possibilities. Their used and battered external appearance situated them if not in history, then at least in duration, in time. In being miniature private spaces for the use of individual students – for the potential use of each and every individual student – they bound together the collective institution and the prodigious colony of particular worker bees that constitute it. The lockers, then, represented for Vidigal the borderline between the educational and research institution and its smallest agents, who collectively constitute the pool that will produce the scientists of future generations. In its articulation of this threshold, Vidigal's work partakes of an incrementally growing international body of works that infiltrate public and media spaces and that are informed by a broad range of disciplines, seeping into the interstices of culture and engaging with spectatorship in dynamic ways. Such works diversify the site itself, with the hope, too, of making us (viewers, spectators, public) look upon the location differently even after the work has been removed, un-installed. 'The distinguishing characteristic of today's site oriented art,' writes Miwon Kwon, 'is the way in which the art works' relationship to the actuality of a location (as site) and the social conditions of the institutional frame (as site) are both subordinate to a *discursively* determined site that is delineated as a field

of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate.'[4] In other words the 'site' that such a work occupies is broader than simply its physical location, also occupying a space in discourse.

But there was more to attract Vidigal to the lockers. Cumulatively, these lockers, with their appearance of serried ranks of vertical metal containers, not only nudging one another in a potentially infinite horizontal queue but also stacked up vertically, had affinities with the appearance of an old fashioned archive. They therefore suggested coincidences with the archive's promise of organisation and comprehensive totality. (There have been many artists, over the past century, who have worked with the idea of such archival aspiration and with the concomitant and necessary 'devastation of that promise'[5] of infinite possibility.) The lockers also presented fabulous formal and iconographic possibilities, for they are at once practical and charged with metaphoric weight. While hinting at personal histories and the paring down of objects and belongings to the category of 'strictly necessary,' they also speak of the ambiguous hinge between that which is stored for memory and that which is relegated to forgetfulness. Vidigal has perceptively observed: 'Those spaces where we keep things that we don't want to forget are the very places where we put away things that we do want to forget. This seems obvious, something we do every day: carefully preserving the things that we don't necessarily want to keep, but at times, the gesture is so automatic that we don't even notice, or we don't want to notice.'[6]

In the second half of the twentieth century, the art of public memorials and its study reminded us of the ambivalent terrain occupied by – and the complex dynamic between – remembering and forgetting. Especially noteworthy in this arena is the

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[4] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge MA. and London: The MIT Press, p. 26.

[5] Lynne Cooke, Introduction to *Gerhard Richter: Atlas,* Dia Foundation, New York, 27 April 1995 - 25 February 1996, text available online: http://www.diaart.org/exhibitions/introduction/54 . In addition to Richter, other artists working with such abundant quasi-archival material include Hanne Darboven, Mark Dion, Craigie Horsfield, Roni Horn and Christian Boltanski. See Ruth Rosengarten, *Between Memory and Document: The Archival Turn in Contemporary Art,* Lisbon: Museu Coleção Berardo, 2012.

[6] Ana Vidigal in her blog, http://anavidigal.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2012-01-23T12:24:00Z&max-results=3&reverse-paginate=true

work of Jochen Gertz, whose monument against fascism was a column that was made gradually to disappear from view completely.[7] Similarly, Polish-born architect Daniel Libeskind's projects have prioritised the void not only as a space between forms, but as a significant and signifying gap, symbolically restaging the holes in German historical memory. At its best, then, the discourse of the memorial in the latter part of the twentieth century explored the dialectic between amnesia and anamnesis, recognising that by their static and immutable nature, the most fixed and monumental forms tended to prompt the obliteration of memory, while that which is most ephemeral and fleeting or intangible captures the collective imagination like a haunting, and can trigger the most poignant forms of remembering.

But there was more. The formal properties of the locker were ideal for Vidigal's purposes: both divisible into individual compartments – cells that may also be enlisted to serve almost as display boxes – and as multiples, amassable like a beehive into a monumental bank of repeated volumes, the lockers presented the artist with the possibility of combining minimalist form with maximalist content. Minimalist form plays a more important role than in many other projects that Vidigal has undertaken, not only because of the scale of the space and the work, but also because here, it is precisely the pared down simplicity of form that stands in for a kind of ethics of austerity, a moral seriousness. 'In the arts,' writes British historian Tony Judt, 'moral seriousness speaks to an economy of form and aesthetic restraint.'[8] In turn, such seriousness stands in the ethical stead of the institutional critique with which some contemporary artists seek to 'subvert' (the word itself has become banal) the ideological substructures of institutions and their material (architectural) homes. Such formal austerity – not necessarily a term one would associate with Vidigal's work – grants this installation its gravitas. In being linked to the memory of the exploration of

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[7] Gertz believes in employing absence and disappearance as powerful mnemonic strategies. Here, I am referring to his and Esther Shalev-Gertz's famous *Harburg Monument against Fascism, War and Violence* (1983) in a suburb of Hamburg, but also to other projects, including his (anti) monument against racism, *Square of the Invisible Monument* (1993) in Saarbrücken, Germany.

[8] Tony Judt, *The Memory Chalet*, UK: William Heinemann, 2010, e-books www.randomhouse.co.uk, chapter III.

space and volume in minimalist art, inviting us to observe plenitude in paucity and difference in similarity, it invites us to pay attention to spatial interval and interruption as well as volume and form.

However, if Minimalism was, historically, allied to an evacuation of content in art, in granting her installation the form (albeit simplified) of a labyrinth, Ana Vidigal positions her work for dialogue with a long historical and mythical lineage; fills her work with implicit content. From ancient Egypt through Cretan, native American and Australian cultures, as well as those of Scandinavia, Russia and Latin America, labyrinths occupy a special and beloved place in mythologies and have exercised the imagination of artists and architects as well as writers: think of labyrinths found at Pylos, or the Roman mosaic in Conímbriga in Portugal; of the mosaic floors of Gothic cathedrals such as Chartres or Amiens; of various mazes of turf, stone or hedge made at different periods and in different locations (Rutland, Cornwall, Hampton Court) in the UK; think of the labyrinths written by Virgil, Ovid and Pliny the Elder, Dante and Borges, Jung, Octavio Paz, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, but also implicitly and structurally in Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco, W.B. Yeats and James Joyce.

Typically and formally, what characterises a labyrinth is its invitation not merely to contemplation but to movement, to *walking through*. Combining mythic associations with the fact that they can only be known by the passage through them of a body, labyrinths appeared in the work of land artists in the 1970s: examples include work by Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim, Charles Simonds, Richard Long and Richard Fleischner. Writing of her celebrated *Maze* (1972), Alice Aycock says of this twelve-sided wooden structure of five concentric rings erected on a farm in Pennsylvania: 'originally, I had hoped to create a moment of absolute panic – when the only thing that mattered was to get out.'[9] On the contrary, built not as a circle but as a rectangle, Vidigal's maze has a clear teleology, inducing in us, for this reason, not so much panic as unease as it plunges us into the physical structure of bureaucratic reason. Certainly, in its conception and scale, it is immersive, but in its clear points of entrance and egress, it is less a warren than the heart of a library, or indeed of a house.

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[9] Alice Aycock, 'Maze', in Alan Sondheim, ed., *Post-Movement Art in America*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975, p. 105.

Think of occupying the stacks of any old library, in particular of a well-stocked academic one: the metaphor of the library grounds Vidigal's maze in the research and teaching institution in which it is constructed. However, the metaphors of house and home are rooted not in the specificity of the site, but in Vidigal's whole oeuvre. This association is made explicit in the title of the work: *House of Secrets*. A visitor will, I think, be struck by Vidigal's maze not as the problem that Theseus had to solve, but rather as following a pattern not unfamiliar to historical houses both small and grand (say palazzos of the 15thto 18th centuries), operating on the principle of connectivity, with adjoining rooms leading onto one another, allowing occupants to walk from one to the next and, of course, disabling what we today would think of as privacy. (One is struck by the brilliant invention of the corridor at the service of privacy, and with it, the greater elaboration of rooms for a specific and unique purpose, something we take for granted in our homes today.)

As is frequently her wont, Vidigal appropriates the title of this work from mass culture, in this instance a tacky reality TV series popular in Portugal on the TVI channel, and employing the now well-worn formula of a group of residents in an enclosed space, a space of feigned privacy whose fictional fourth wall is removed for mass television viewing. Vidigal's use of popular and mass culture in her work is diverse and multi-layered. Frequently ironic, it cannot be underestimated as a fertile source of both humour and formal invention.

Here, the title taps into two features of the installation: on the one hand, the regular, walled, house-like formation of the whole; and on the other hand, the uses to which its constituent parts are put. For each closed locker door occludes from our view not only the summary portrait of an individual, but also a collection of objects at once banal and precious, but certainly significant, if only for the immediate and temporary use to which they are put (I am thinking, for instance, of notes taken during a particular class: meaningful in the here and now, though often dispensable in the future). We keep in our lockers our private property, things we don't want lost or stolen, even if we don't especially want to remember them. Lockers hyperbolise in miniature the function of a house, performing on a diminutive stage the dialectic of sharing and privacy that plays itself out in our domestic lives.

Everyone knows that between privacy and secrecy there exists a continuum. The

evolution of norms of privacy is generally linked to a civilising process, the renunciation of instinct and lessons learnt in a necessary repression, sublimation and delayed gratification (Freud), accompanied by the lowering of the threshold of disgust in relation to the body and its processes and functions (Norbert Elias).[10] The continuum between privacy and secrecy has been underlined in the history of private life accompanying the birth of the modern individual. Indeed, historians of private life have demonstrated how 'privatization and hiding affect all aspects of existence: architecture, sleeping and eating arrangements, relations to servants, the raising of children – indeed the "invention" of childhood as a separate stage of development needing isolation from adulthood, and especially from adult sexuality.'[11] The link between secrecy and sexuality has, furthermore, been widely explored, initially by Freud, and more latterly in Michel Foucault's critical 'counter-science' that both applauded and opposed Freud. Foucault's analysis focuses of the discourse that produces the links between sexuality, secrets and curiosity.

But it is not only sexuality and desire that have entered the domain of privacy and secrecy: it is also pain. 'Suffering, like desire, turns privacy into secrecy,' writes Adam Phillips. 'From a psychoanalytic point of view, a symptom is a (secret) way of asking for something (hidden).' But like desire, suffering is (to follow Phillips) 'the secret we may not be able to keep. Because it has the potential to rupture our fantasies of self-sufficiency, suffering can be longed for, and feared, as a medium for legitimate contact and exchange between people.'[12] Put another way, 'I want to be alone' could be another way of saying 'I want you to trace your way through the maze and find me.' The home – that crucible of the modern self, that container for the familial relations

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[10] See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, (1930), Vol 21 in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. James Strachey (1974), London: Vintage, 2001, and Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*: *Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigation* (1939), trans. Edmund Jephcott, revised edition, Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1994.

[11] Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Cambridge, MA. and London: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 15.

[12] Adam Phillips, *Terrors and Experts*, London: Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 33. I have previously addressed the relationship between secrets and symptoms in Vidigal's work in 'Secrets and Symptoms: The Parallel Production of Ana Vidigal', in Ruth Rosengarten and Luisa Soares de Oliveira, *Ana Vidigal*, Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim 2003.

that instigate and rehearse other social relationships, also the site of inter-generational secrets and shame – is the subject's first experimental theatre. Here, the distances and intersections between showing things and hiding them – between communion and separation – are first essayed. Closing one's door, perhaps even affixing a PRIVATE sign to it, is the child's first exploration of wanting both to lose herself, and to be found. The house as home, then, is the container and frame of what matters most to the modern, private subject: 'the reach of childhood, the necessities of frustration, the significance of sexuality, the terrors and temptations of solitude and self-sufficiency, the lure of violence in human relations, the secrets kept from oneself and from others.'[13]

The house and the home, I have argued, are powerful vehicles of nested sets of images and relationships, both real and symbolic, of which the labyrinthine is one, and that which is secret or hidden another. I have argued, too, that there exists a closer relationship between remembering and forgetting than is frequently acknowledged. This relationship vexes the very notion of secrecy: is a secret something we are longing to share with a select individual in moments that define intimacy, or something we truly need to keep to ourselves? Does secrecy secretly desire indiscretion? Is it more or less of a secret if we have forgotten it? The locker, I have furthermore argued, performs in miniature some of the functions of the domestic, to which adjectives such as 'safe' or 'secure' might attach. Here, then, in a locker, Ana Vidigal places some of her most precious personal belongings, her preferred books and the appointment diaries and notebooks, thick with collage, that she has been keeping for thirty years.

But there is one more way in which a house may be a 'house of secrets,' and that is by serving as a mnemonic tool. In this sense, the house both contains and releases the meanings that are lodged within it, projected onto it. For a house that we know well – our home, for instance – might serve as the prototypical spatial mnemonic. From ancient times, a method called 'the memory palace' (but also known as *loci* or 'mental walk') has been employed as a tool for enhancing memory. In simple terms, the subject memorises the layout of a specific place, say a row of shops on a familiar street, or the arrangement of rooms in a building. Traditionally, this building is a 'palace,'

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[13] Adam Phillips and Leo Bersani, *Intimacies*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. i.

though for many, something less grand serves: for Tony Judt, it is a chalet where he spent time as a child on skiing holidays with his family.[14] The subject attaches particular words and concepts that she wishes to avail to later recollection to individual spaces, gradually building up a more elaborate, textured and detailed memory picture from this spatial framework. In describing the dream-like city of Zora to Kublai Khan, Italo Calvino's fictionalised Marco Polo describes such an itinerary as is described in mnemonic manuals: 'The city which cannot be expunged from the mind is like an armature, a honeycomb in whose cells each of us can place the things he wants to remember: names of famous men, virtues, numbers, vegetable and mineral classifications, dates of battles, constellations, parts of speech. Between each idea and each point of the itinerary an affinity or a contrast can be established, serving as an immediate aid to memory.'[15]

The system is, as Judt recognises, imperfect: overlaps, gaps and mistaken identifications between a space and a memory hinder a completely accurate reconstruction: forgetfulness and remembrance elide and collude in this armature, this 'honeycomb in whose cells each of us can place the thing he wants to remember.' Between wanting to remember and remembering lies a space as vast as that between remembering and forgetting, a whole tract of mental possibility. What could better describe that mental walk, that archive of personal effects, that is Ana Vidigal's mnemonic maze?

Ruth Rosengarten

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[14] Tony Judt, 1948-2010. Towards the end of his life, Judt was paralysed from the head down by a progressively incapacitating neuromotor disease, so that the walk through his mental chalet became all the more poignant, for at this point he could scarcely talk, let alone move. The thought chalet became, for Judt, the 'storage cupboard' for the 'recyclable and multi-purpose pieces of serviceable recollection' available to his mind. See *The Memory Chalet*, op. cit., chapter 1.

[15] Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, (1972), trans. William Weaver, San Diego and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974, pp. 15-16.