

SPARRING PARTNERS

Commodities

12 NOV 2010 – 08 JAN 2011

I. The history:

The Sparring Partners are a collective of artists formed by Alice Geirinhas, João Fonte Santa and Pedro Amaral. Friends and colleagues with an illustration background, with common aesthetic ideas, had decided to create a collective project - parallel to their individual artistic careers - in 1995, following on from a collaboration between Pedro Amaral and João Fonte Santa for a stand in the Book Fair in Lisbon. The desire to work together was not an alien concept for the three artists however was a response to the individualism of the previous decade.

In 1995 they had presented their first individual show at “Low” – Zé Gallery dos Bois, having opened the space that the association occupied in the Rua de São Paulo, Lisbon. For the exhibition the trio had created works using stencils and industrial paints, including ink and spray-paint generally associated with graffiti, conceptually using images taken from media, with the original reference withdrawn by juxtaposing them randomly. They said in an interview at the time that “the idea was to make parts on which hysteria would be measured, by using the garbage elements of the images to its advantage”. Works such as “I’ll love you until June, I’ll fuck you until November” or “Happiness of Mice” are some examples.

They continued to participate in joint exhibitions at the invitation of their peers (or by vocation), as Pablo Mendes who in 1996 curated “Zapping Ecstasy” in CAPC (Coimbra). The statement of this exhibition fitted perfectly in with the process of Sparring Partners. It was said that “The multidisciplinary, the joint creation, the confrontation of means is the way forward. Art must be unclean/ dirty”.

In the following year they participated in an exhibition “Contemporary Anatomies”, today consensually identified as a crucial milestone in the history of contemporary Portuguese art. This exhibition curated by Paulo Cunha e Silva and Paulo Mendes, gathered artists from various generations, including established names such as Paula Rego, Helena Almeida, Alberto Carneiro, Julião Sarmento and Pedro Cabrita Reis. Within this show ‘the concept of body’ was questioned – a central thematic of the 90s – a highly structured and systematic framework formed the central axis: body without organs (in the Artaud manner) and body with organs. The Sparring Partner had integrated the nucleus “Strength/ Power” with the enormous screen “Low” in that it represents a hyper-muscular torso in varying scales of grays.

In 2001 they were confronted with another trio - the Tone Scientists (Rui Toscano, Rui Valério and Carlos Roque) - in the CAPC. Collaborating in a less formal way and more through “instructions”, they produced two sets of works: Leading Silver Alternative #1, #2, #3 which should be three screens with the same format painted only with the color gray silver, exploring optical effect, this occurs in two of them; however the girl of the group decided to be risky and added a standard orange. For the others, each of the three artists should produce an individual work to address the collective. Alice Geirinhas represented “João Fonte Santa waiting for the professor of drawing”, in

the College of Fine Arts positioned to one side of a dustbin where the unwanted works went; Pedro Amaral made two screens: one representing the artist Eva Hesse and another one representing the revolutionary Andreas Baader; João Fonte Santa decided to clarify the things with a wavy mirrored plate reflecting and deforming the text of the definition of the expression "Sparring Partners" when read.

In the same year they had participated in the exhibition "Circle F", also in the CAPC, curated by for Vítor Diniz, alongside established international artists such as Mariko Mori and Sam Taylor-Wood, they were presented as the curators of "The Sparring Partners Academy Art Collection", in the Zé dos Bois. This satire of the National Art Collection which was narrated under the curatorship (that is the expression used by them) of Pedro Cabral Santo and meeting a "heterogeneous group of plastic activists", with names of the 1980s (some Homeostéticos) early in their artistic careers as Isabel Oak, Eduardo Matos or João Onofre. It was intended in this exhibition to question "the mutant aesthetic characterized by a post-contemporary artistic discourse", asking: "Who are we? From where do we see? Where are we going?".

By own initiative 2002 is/was the time of anthology. In a vacant house off the coast Mercado do Chão do Loureiro, The Sparring Partners met with a body of work under the title, we would say emblematic "Thieves Like US".

In the following year they had been invited by António Olaio to participate in group exhibition "Coimbra C", in the CAPC. Turning the city itself into the exhibition, they considered to work on the Square of the Republic, a place of meeting and fraternity of the Coimbrian students. In the spirit of the goodtimes, for much of the time watered by the alcohol, associated with the academic style of life, the Sparring Partners had painted coloured screens, almost psychedelic, details reminiscent of the Silver-plated Surfista comic. In 2004 the trio wanted to say that the group had died. In the ZDB, they incorporated into the exhibition "My running/ Walk through my tears, the police say" and presented "Sparring Partners Are Dead", An installation which recalls a funeral chamber, with three screens picturing the three artists with their silhouette profiles and a snack "space-cakes" to animate their friends who came to see the deathwatch. Since the group dispersed their collective works were included in "Toxic - THE discourse of the excess", in Hangar K7 from the Oeiras Foundation (2005), apparitions of the Sparring continued with new attempts to die: "Sparring Partners Are Dead" a performance version in the Purex bar, Lisbon, which included an unforgettable Alice Geirinhas clothed as a bride (2006) and, four years later, a new installation presented at the invitation of Miguel Amado for the exhibition "Everything that is solid dissolves into air...", at the Berardo Museum, however in place of the "snack" it was substituted by a jar of flowers, in keeping with the institutional seriousness.

The Sparring Partners remain undead. The room that Miguel Amado dedicated to them in the mentioned exhibition could seem a posthumous homage, a ceremony of repatriation to the body of the pantheon, But the curator "passed them the leg/ passed them the torch" resurrecting them-, commissioned immediately afterwards "The philosophy of the Money", where new works by the trio were made for exhibition at City Museum, Lisbon. Now, at Gallery 3+1 follows the example and proposes a new life to the group welcoming their first exposure of Sparring Partners in the commercial arena.

II. The name of the Collective

II.1. Definition:

Sparring partners is an expression used in ring and other combat sports assigned to the training of partners, a species of friendly adversaries. The term can also be used to identify a person with who regularly has friendly quarrels. When questioned by Célia Quico concerning the choice of the name for the collective, in an interview for JL, Alice Geirinhas, João Fonte Santo and Pedro Amaral had explained: sparring partners “are individuals as Mike Tyson who have to train. Their role is to take a punch.” The journalist replied: “And you the sparring partners of art in Portugal? The punching bags?” to which they replied: “Yes, but we have leather for this”.

II.2. A possible reading:

Professional losers? When lowering the expectations, assuming themselves as losing before entering into combat, allowing the collective the creative and experimental freedom. As many fighters initiate their careers sparring, the three artists find here a field of experimentation and quarrel that enriches the individuals right of passage. Having nothing to lose, everything is to be gained and they gain from one another.

III. The heading of the exposition

III.1. Definition (according to Wikipédia):

“Commodities” is a term in the English language which means merchandise, being used in the commercial transactions of products of primary origin in the exchanges of commodities. Used as reference for the products of base in a crude state (raw materials) or with small degree of industrialization, **quality almost uniform**, produced in great amounts and for **different producers. These products can be kept for a determined period without significant loss of quality**. Therefore what become the very important basis products is in fact the economy of them, even so they are primary merchandises, **they possess global “negotiability”**. Also it can be used to mention **products without differentiation**.

III.2. Suggested reading:

By using the boldface in the definitions above and attempts to justify the work of the Sparring Partners – in some cases accurately in others are questionably.

Taking into account that this is the first exposure of the collective in a commercial gallery environment. Finally, reflecting on this excerpt from an interview to the artists at their first presentation:

Could you speak about the Pop attitude, not to mention Warhol and company? "It is all presenting Pop. By coincidence, we have a similar trajectory of the 60s American Pop artists, We are starting by illustration and by commercial art." One of them is more precise, and says identifying with the position of the popular and commercial artist: "I hope that in future to make art a commercial commodity. Because I hope to make a fortune".

Rita Sobreiro, Lisbon, November 2010