

**THE ARTIST'S
WITHDRAWAL FROM
THE ARTWORK:
THE CASE OF THE
GOODBYE MAN
(*SENHOR DO ADEUS*)**

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ABSTRACT

João Manuel Serra (1931-2010) owes his media impact and his pseudonym — the *senhor do adeus* (the “goodbye man”) — to the fact that he spent the last evenings of his life waving to drivers as they passed through the Picoas and Saldanha areas of Lisbon. Many people sought to pay him a posthumous homage by waving to drivers from those places where previously he was most frequently to be found. This paper reflects on the ways in which the goodbye man might be inscribed in the field of the arts and of performance in particular. Such an inscription is in no way self-evident due to the fact that the two fundamental aspects — authorship and work — on which any inscription of this nature should be based are extremely difficult to pin down in this case. The problem can be expressed as follows: the goodbye man is the author of a gesture that is artistic in nature, for otherwise the waving is an artwork without any owner; the wave and its repetition testify to what is an artistic limit gesture, since it is nothing more than an act of politeness, and therefore a political act.

KEYWORDS GOODBYE MAN (SENHOR DO ADEUS), LIMIT-ARTIST

RESUMO

João Manuel Serra (1931-2010) deve o seu mediatismo e pseudónimo — o senhor do adeus — ao facto de ter passado os últimos serões da sua vida a acenar aos condutores que passavam pelas zonas de Picoas e Saldanha em Lisboa. Muitos foram aqueles que o quiseram homenagear postumamente saudando os automobilistas dos lugares onde era frequente encontrá-lo. Este artigo pretende refletir sobre as modalidades de inscrição do senhor do adeus no campo das artes e da performance em particular. Uma inscrição que não se afigura evidente pelo facto dos dois vértices fundamentais — a autoria e a obra — sobre os quais assenta qualquer inscrição dessa natureza serem aqui extremamente vacilantes. A problemática traduz-se nestes termos; o senhor do adeus é autor dum gesto de cariz artístico, caso contrário o aceno é obra sem dono; o aceno e a sua repetição atestam dum gesto artístico limite porque não mais do que polido, logo político.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE SENHOR DO ADEUS, ARTISTA-LIMITE



I N D E X



E D I T O R I A L



D O S S I E R



P R I N T

As far as I know, there is no record of the goodbye man ever claiming for himself the authorship of the wave as the fruit of his creative labours. Nor did he show any intention of hiding or disappearing behind his work, because, at first sight, there does not seem to have been any work.

However, there are countless examples of artworks without an author, or artworks behind which their authors either hide or disappear. To begin with, we have the supposed author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, whose identity was never proved, with it not being known whether Homer, the supposed father of western literature, really existed or whether he himself was a myth created by authors who preferred to remain forever in his shadow. A large part of pre-Socratic thought, which is the very foundation of our way of thinking about the world, is not based on original works, but on quotations: what remains, for example, from the thought of Thales, Heraclitus, Pythagoras or even Diogenes is what we find quoted in works by later authors, namely Plato, who also took it upon himself to bring Socrates to light. The absence of any written traces bearing witness to the authenticity of that pre-Socratic legacy does not in any way detract from the fact that we now consider it today to be unimpeachable. Pseudonyms and heteronyms are other forms of circumventing authorship, camouflaging the true identity of the author with a name that is used as a front. In the case of the heteronym, this front is linked to a false identity. Both embody another *persona*, which, in the case of Fernando Pessoa, amounts to several *personas*. Pessoa is, in fact, a very interesting case, not so much because his various *personas* succeed in filling a void, but rather because they are several “Pessoas” derived from just one “Fernando”. Both the front and the false identity are ways of undermining the tacit principle of attributing just one name to a work without calling into question the principle according to which the author is the authority on the work. The ready-made is yet another attempt to undermine the question of authorship, limiting the author’s intrusion into the work as much as possible. It is an attempt to dispense with the artist, without, however, abdicating from his or her judgement, thus ensuring that the work is, at least, as

Duchamp said, a mental thing (Cabane and Duchamp 1967). And it is based upon this idea that we can think of silence as a ready-made. The hypothesis raised by John Cage is that, in order for there to be silence, there must be a capacity to listen to it amid the sounds that irrevocably populate our intracorporal and extracorporal life. Silence thus arises from our capacity to listen to it. It means withdrawing our ears from what is given to us to hear, which is, basically, a polite refusal to listen to all of the sounds we hear, allowing silence to penetrate into that gap. Cage refers to this process as “active listening”: “active” in the sense in which the possible listening to silence implies activating our capacity of preferring “not to hear” the sounds that are given to us to hear. This capacity for withdrawing our hearing also applies to our sight. Withdrawing our eyes from what we are given to see creates a space for the neutrality of images. Neutrality in the sense that, when we look at them, our eyes see images that neither speak nor are silent, genuinely neutral images that have as much to say as they do to keep quiet about. When we withdraw our eyes in this way, all images say everything and keep quiet about it too; no image speaks in anticipation nor remains silent out of conviction (Mondzain 2007). The eye’s task is therefore limited to welcoming the image in the way that someone welcomes the ripe fruit that falls from the tree by itself. This neutrality of the ear and of the eye, manifested by those who are prepared “not to hear” and “not to see”, can also be found in the creative act. How does this neutrality of the creative act manifest itself? What is the zero degree of the creative act, the highest point of the artist’s withdrawal, the point from which what we are given to see or to hear is manifestly the limit in artistic terms?

The walks that Jean-Jacques Rousseau took when he had already retired from worldly life were not the same as the ones that he took when young, and which resulted in the famous *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. The difference is that the walks taken by the old Rousseau no longer had the responsibility of being a fertile terrain for thought: they were now being taken “in vain”, “for no purpose”, and were therefore the expression of a pure freedom. Walking “for no purpose” means being able to content oneself with immobility — the zero degree of

walking — but also with the contemplation of what is given to us “not to hear” and “not to see” while walking. As far as the creative process is concerned, contemplation and immobility are factors that derive from a particular posture in relation to artistic creation, being part of a polite withdrawal from the work itself, preferring to receive it in a disinterested and charitable way, without anticipating the fruit thereof and without seeking to return the gift should it appear unexpectedly. This means that by displaying the greatest possible contemplative readiness in relation to the work, the creator remains in the purest ignorance in relation to what might come afterwards and is totally ready to welcome and accept this; for artists, the height of ignorance is being the last to know that they are indeed artists, since such knowledge matters little or not at all within the framework of the creative process, where there is no place for either expectation or predictability, and where the only possible wish is to experience life through art, reducing the act of creation to what is most essential in life: the shared presence. As far as the goodbye man is concerned, since there is no doubt that he ever saw himself as an artist or performer, the way in which his presence has been inscribed in the public space and the way in which it has marked it bears witness to the posture of a limit-artist, through which one can discern these very three factors; immobility, contemplation and ignorance.

A motionless presence and an immediate emergence from nothing, a tangential manifestation of a presence until its sudden disappearance, the inscription of the goodbye man in the public space resembles that of a demonstrator whose act of protest involves sitting down peacefully in the middle of the street, although such a place is quintessentially a space where one should be standing and moving between geographical points as determined by a complex network of productive everyday activity. It is also like burning yourself to death in an eminently public sacrifice; the paradox of such an act is that your presence is only noted and made famous through your simultaneous disappearance. The common feature of all these three cases — the sitting demonstrator, those who burn themselves to death and the goodbye man — is the underlying

political premise, based on three different reasons: the public nature of their exhibition, its unproductiveness, and, above all, and most notably in the case of the goodbye man, their politeness. While, at first sight, it may seem like one of the most basic signs of a shared belonging within a linear space-time, and without any sudden shocks, the wave, its repetition and its return gesture subliminally indicate a new time, a new beginning; by awakening and liberating the wave from its inertia, and returning it to the street, the goodbye man unexpectedly and unpredictably points out to us a path to freedom without the shackles of habits, actions and reactions, knowledge and deeds. The wave and its repetition, as well as the fact of its being returned by the car drivers, are the inaugural signs of a new way of looking at the street, with its productive and mortal flows, but also, and above all, a new way of looking at life and its unproductive and immortal flows.

The second factor testifying to the link between the goodbye man and the long line of limit-artists is contemplation. His is a gesture that is as simple and polite as it is magical and spiritualistic, a gesture that is ascetic from the point of view of a polite withdrawal in the face of eloquence and triumphalism as the common hallmarks of the artistic thing, a gesture that does not leave any trace in the sense in which the history of art lives from traces. The wave is the tangential link that connects the goodbye man to the drivers in their shared contemplation of such a basic presence in the world, in this way promoting a type of attention without any particular quality, not concerned with any significant search. Such an absolute neutrality of the gaze as it is possible to have towards what appears. “Full” or “devoid” of interest, the contemplated image tells us nothing: it does not provoke, wound or shock us. Neither absent nor inquiring, the contemplative gaze rests upon the image without looking for it or finding it, not having been invited to do so by the artist. For this reason, the contemplative gaze is one that has neither intention nor hope, so that all that remains for it to do is to *catch* the image like someone picking up something that has fallen to the ground. The contemplative gaze also means being neutral in terms of one’s gaze without actually seeking such a condition; it means being silent in one’s

gaze without seeking to speak, apart from the impulse that speech promotes, or apart from the fact that silence is a latent condition which speech is anticipated. Contemplating is being in the silence that precedes the outbreak of speech; a silence that, as it extends over time, dispenses with speech; if silence is a sign of speech that is about to come, then the silence that extends beyond the advent of speech is the one that renders speech unviable within the context of an altered relationship between the retention (of speech by silence) and the discharge (of the tension associated with the silence prior to speech, anticipating it).

The third and final factor is ignorance. By not acknowledging himself as an artist, by leaving that question in abeyance and limiting his inscription in the public space to a wave, the goodbye man makes a clean slate of any doing and any knowing how to do, preferring instead a “not doing” and a “not knowing how to do”. Such manifest ignorance is the basis for a posture that, while recognising itself as creative, politely refuses to know and to do anything in relation to what the work might be in the future. A limit-artist always counters doing and knowing how to do with “not knowing” and “not knowing how to do”.

The combination of the three factors that we have just looked at — immobility, contemplation and ignorance — results in the definition of the limit-artist, from which we can highlight three fundamental aspects. The first of these is idiocy. The idiot is someone whose presence in the public space is underlined by their unique and unreasonable character (Rosset 2004, Jouannais 2003) without this being synonymous with their exclusion. In fact, the presence of the other people amongst whom the idiot moves is fundamental, since it provides a collective rhythm, from which an *idiorrhythmy* (Barthes 2002) is released. In the case of the goodbye man, this latter condition is produced not so much by the wave, but by its assiduousness, affording it an ironic and politely insubmissive nature. In a similar fashion to Edouard Manet, who in the past made use of painting in order to criticise it “from within”, painting asparagus and prostitutes, the goodbye man turned the wave and its assiduous repetition in the public

space into a way of subverting “from within” both the social context on which politeness is founded and the history of art and performance on which traces are founded. The second aspect is nomadism: what interests us here are the notions of flight and the lines of flight, and above all Gilles Deleuze’s lines of aberrant movement (Lapoujade 2014). By seemingly not causing any shock with normality, the nomadic presence and the wave of the goodbye man appear like a delicate mirage, a slight delirium, a tenuous aberration, imposing a personal logic upon the passing motorists. The goodbye man thus emerges like a flash of lightning in the public space and in the life of those with whom he shared a presence. This flash of lightning is like a flight in the system, perhaps creating flights and lines of flight that spread outside the system, undermining it “from within”. The third and final aspect is dandyism. In the book *Sociologie et anthropologie*, and, more concretely, in the chapter on techniques of the body, Marcel Mauss anticipates Pierre Bourdieu by speaking about the notion of “habitus” as a social factor that determines the gestures of the body which are erroneously assumed to be personal and intransmissible. “I think I can also recognise a girl who has been raised in a convent. In general she will walk with her fists closed,” says Mauss (2003: 368). The conclusion he reaches is that the education of the body is indissociable from convenient gestures that are distinct for each social group. This convenience of the gesture is the key to the body’s taming of the mind. In the mid-nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie imposed itself as the dominant class, turning productivity into the capitalist design of humanity. The techniques of the body adapted to this new reality, with the driving force behind its reorganisation undoubtedly continuing to be the social *status quo*. The dandy appeared on the fringes of bourgeois law and morality, and consequently on the fringes of capitalist material production, claiming to be a producer: not of artefacts, but of behaviours and postures. The figure of the dandy is therefore indissociable from that of the artist who creates gestures, or better who creates the pure gesture, the purity of the gesture rediscovered in the light of a certain disillusion with the world. This disillusionment distinguishes itself not by its affirmative and demanding nature, but rather

by an undeniable passiveness and unproductiveness, without any driving force or will. A topographical presence that leaves no traces, a heraldic gesture that has no owner; the goodbye man was that dandy, whose presence marked out his territory, but yet was atopic, whimsical and vaporous.

By limiting itself to recording artefacts and signatures, the history of art, says Jouannais (2009), has satisfied itself with a chronology of produced objects and an index of names. Left outside this record are artistic phenomena that leave no trace and have no face, many of them invisible and essentially based on an idea, on a gesture, on energy. It is almost always hard to describe, define or even see and hear them. In such a context, the terms “author” or “artist” are insufficient, and not very adept at expressing the disarrangement of the criteria used in defining what is commonly considered or not considered to be an artwork. As Jouannais stresses, it also seems to be equally difficult to use the term “artwork” to name “non-effective entities, non-effective bodies, thus betraying the etymology of the term “artwork” [linked to the notion of the physical work and suffering associated with its execution]” (2009: 32). Having saved himself from the work, tensions and constraints inherent in the act of doing, the deed for which the goodbye man became famous should not, however, be described as an artwork, nor should he be labelled as an artist. A term should be invented that contains in its essence not the doing and the know-how that are peculiar to those artists whose names have been widely honoured by the (western) history of art, but the “not doing” and the “not knowing how to do”, without any formal proof being given or being required, of limit-artists similar to the goodbye man. Jouannais further proposes that, in substituting the idea of an “artwork”, the new term should reflect the nuance that has already been enshrined in the seafarers’ jargon in distinguishing between “quick work” (the part of the hull of a ship below the water) and “dead work” (all of the ship above the water).

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