

Without Imago Mundi, A Random Diversion Instead

Eduarda Neves

Without Imago Mundi, A Random Diversion Instead, takes as a critical reference the work of Lucretius¹ *On the Nature of Things* [*De rerum natura*], a philosophical poem divided into six books and considered one of the founding texts of Western culture. An ill-fated author, inspired by the atomism of Democritus and the moral philosophy of Epicurus of Samos, Lucretius declares man is present in a universe without gods and distances himself from an anthropocentric vision. He proclaims liberation from the fear of death by asserting that the gods are no more than the illusions of fearful men. As Gilles Deleuze emphasized, the importance of this text is so great that after it appeared, it no longer made sense to ask what purpose philosophy serves. Moreover, he says: "with Epicurus and Lucretius the real noble acts of philosophical pluralism begin".²

Introducing the idea that atoms have no fixed direction, that chaos, imponderability and chance are part of the universe, that everything can be created from everything and everything can be created from nothing, Lucretius confronts us with the idea that the universe has no end or goals. No hidden force influences existence because everything ends with death. After death, nothing else exists. All that surrounds us results from the continuous movement of infinitely small particles, which we call atoms, and therefore creation is not a divine work. It is a source of happiness for man to know himself free and aware of the potential of imagination and passion.

To think of the diverse, or the heterogeneous as such, is the task in which the philosophies that preceded him failed, argues this Roman philosopher. Reflecting upon astronomy, matter, energy and emptiness, the natural history of the Earth, relativism of perception versus the real, the notion of simulacrum, bodily functions, or passionate and overwhelming love, Lucretius leads us to one of his main assertions: everything that constitutes the universe is formed by the same matter, be it the oceans, stones or men, and each one integrates this cosmos in continuous movement. He contested the knowledge grounded on the authority of the ancients, and various modern authors such as Erasmus, Machiavelli, Spinoza, Montaigne, Marx, Nietzsche, Calvino, Serres and Deleuze became generous readers of his work.

On the Nature of Things is also a classic in the sense that Italo Calvino attributed to this notion: "A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say (...) A classic is a work which constantly generates a pulviscular cloud of critical discourse around it, but which always

shakes the particles off.”³ We wish to reflect on the present day but starting from and with Lucretius. As Nietzsche warned, to think actively is to act in a non-actual manner, against time and therefore in time, in favour of a time that is to come.

Within the scope of the curatorial programme, one of the books out of the six that structure Lucretius’ work as mentioned above was proposed specifically to each artist. These texts are the basis of reflection for the exhibition project, but they only constitute the starting point. This project does not objectify itself in any representation of the world, an *imago mundi*, but rather in a random diversion, without any form of redemption. In the *Centro de Ciência Viva* of the Porto Planetarium, particles of dust, vortexes and invisible matter all swirl around on a battlefield. They allow the atoms “unpredictable deviations from the straight line, thereby ensuring freedom both to atoms and to human beings.”⁴ They venture into lightness and into the void, they exalt the *clinamen*, they celebrate the nature of things.

Referring to Book 1 of this philosophical poem, which announces the constitution of the universe, Ana Guimarães and Tiago Veloso call upon Lucretius’ lesson that nothing comes from nothing and that nothing transforms itself into nothing. In the words of the poet, if everything “came from nothing, anything could be born from anything, with no seed required. (...) In fact, were there no procreant bodies for each thing, how could there be a specific mother for anything?”⁵ A cocoon, energy, rocks and earth, seeds and trees, living beings that journey through a moving world, all give form to the outcome of the installation that combines a vacuum with solid bodies. The installation entitled *Pelo que se pode ter a certeza de que cada coisa vai crescendo e ganhando corpo a partir da sua matéria específica* [So that you can be sure that each thing goes on growing and getting larger

starting from its specific matter] indicates a space void of power, unlimited and light, dissolving in invisible atoms, eternal and immutable. Multiple images of nature and the city or an impressive spider’s web projected through a window mobilise our gaze and invite us to draw back when the moon appears. Between the infinity of matter and space, we are called to a contemplative life, to the slow passing of time, like the work of a spider or the coming and going of the sea. Let the sky, like Paul Éluard’s earth, be “blue as an orange”. This is what the glorious muses announce.

Celeste Cerqueira appropriates images captured and transmitted by satellite through which she establishes a deep interaction between gravity, movement and human action. We are confronted with technological images, disseminated by the media, that not only mediate our instrumental relationship with nature but also foresee marks of destruction. Configuring the movement and form of the atoms, the gravity Lucretius evokes in Book II finds a correspondence in *Sapiens, Sapiens*, seven drawings which materialise the view from above, movements from the sky to the Earth, from the gods to men. The classic representation of power. However, faced with the indifference of divine actions, between unstable speeds and continuous movements, what gains momentum are the infinite number of worlds, the storms of nature and of men. *Turbantibus aequora uentis*. Meteorites, stars, fires, wars and typhoons are projected towards what is most distant and as low as possible; they circulate in the energy of the infinite layers of graphite atoms: “So do you not see that, although outside forces drive many men and often make them move forward against their will and be carried off, yet there is in our heart something that is able to struggle against that motion and resist it.”⁶ *Clinamen*. The meeting of atoms. Every hero flies, with no limit and no defined measure.

In Book III, Lucretius, expounding the arguments of the old materialists, shows us that the soul, being made of incorruptible matter, perishes with the body, thus obeying the universal law of the transformation of matter. By constructing a sculptural form, an observatory, Daniel Moreira and Rita Castro Neves return to these philosophical premises via this large-scale structure. The visual and sound landscape of the installation *Alguns argumentos, 24 para sermos mais precisos* [A few arguments, 24 to be precise] presents us with a continuous succession of photographic images of 24 hand gestures, with 24 understood as the measure of all things, for the 24 letters of the alphabet and the 24 frames per second that make up a video in animation format. As it is in the combinatorics of the alphabet that Lucretius finds the immaterial atomic structure of matter and as he believes it is on Earth that the destiny of man is fulfilled, the artists likewise invite the spectator to be part of the work. By placing themselves inside, looking up from bottom to top, from the Earth to the sky, and contemplating all the “past space of immeasurable time”, the observer will believe that “these same particles (...) often already existed before. (...) Since dying prevents this and ends existence for the man who could be swamped by troubles, we can know that there is nothing to fear in death.”⁷ In this anthropomorphic poem what we continue to find is that higher good with which everything ends. Death.

The poet speaks to us of sensorial nature, atoms that want to join others and become bigger. In Book IV, however, Lucretius evokes overwhelming love. As if dealing with an ode to Venus, Nuno Ramalho retrieves a love letter received in times gone by. What must have happened to the intense emotions and rhythms that swept through it at that time? What force can they still have today in the subject who loves and the object who is loved? In *Vénus* [Venus] what remains of the *delectabile sensibile*?

Or, if we use words like Lacan’s, might we say that love is nothing but that of which we cannot speak⁸ and that it is not of sex that we speak when we talk of love?⁹ Presented in the exhibition in the form of Morse code, love assumes a discreet visibility in this representation system. Light and memory become the trail for a new language, for another text: “in fact, in the very moment of possession, lovers’ passion fluctuates, it wavers, undecided, not knowing where pleasure should be taken first, if with the eyes or with the hands.”¹⁰ Venus, the object of philosophical worship in Lucretius’ work, corresponds to the fertile power of nature that spreads and preserves life. In this love letter whose writing permeates the space, the word is both deviation and return. The listening to myself in the other that I am. Perhaps love is not old-fashioned. Perhaps it is necessary to take the risk.

Giving form to the legacy of Epicurus, in Book V the poet describes the movement of the stars, the celestial bodies, the appearance of living beings and the cycle of nature. Using video projections inside the Planetarium’s dome, Sérgio Leitão establishes an analogy between these phenomena and the account of the origin and development of Western human civilisation. The installation entitled *INGIRUM III – the beginnings, the diversions, the fallout and the promise* confronts us in a critical way with binary dualities in light of which we reflect upon the world, underlining the potentially totalizing nature of the great narratives: “it is thus that the Babylonian doctrines of the Chaldeans seek to refute the claims of the astronomers, as if it were not possible to have both of the two rival hypotheses, or if there were some reason why we might desire to embrace one theory rather than the other.” Foucault asked his students at the University of California, Berkeley, why a light bulb or a house are art objects while our life is not. Thus, appropriating objects from the context such as chairs and desks, a telescope, copies of Book V and sound,

Leitão invokes the natural history of the Earth as narrated by Lucretius. Men learnt that with one thing another thing can be explained, one *declines* the other, says the poet. The Sun and the Moon illuminate everything. Matter is born and dies. Thus is the nature of the world.

Meteorological phenomena and the world in all its heterogeneity are described by Lucretius in Book VI. Searching for the *clinamen* in thunder, its speculative diversion, João Tabarra displaces it to the territory of the self-portrait. In *Self Portrait-with-Thunders* we identify the same turbulence which the meeting between atoms engenders: “in this way too, all things struck by heavy thunder often appear to tremble, and the mighty walls of the spacious world in an instant seem to burst and split apart.”¹² In the unexpectedness of the winds and the swirling eddies that bind the film together, identity becomes an errant event, a noisy forest, the sign of the force that propels the atoms. Shaken by the passing of time, the self-portrait establishes, as Gilles Deleuze says apropos the eternal return, “an eternally excentric circle, the decentred centre of difference”.¹³ The multiplicity that constitutes nature, in which Lucretius says he finds things which differ from each other and various senses in the beings that inhabit it, is the same as that which we find in the body born with the face of man. So, if the force of the storm impels us to choose one single direction, then it will be the thunder that shakes all the effects of this. Given the immensity of the world, the shining light of the powerful ray, gyrating everywhere, will draw the trajectory – that of the freedom of all paths.

Mapas temporais de uma costa não definida [Temporal maps of a non-defined shore] by Thiago Rocha Pitta is a work that also developed out of Book VI and appears to instil a type of tranquillity or Epicurean impassivity. It deals with the lightness that in both Lucretius and the words of Italo Calvino¹⁴ is a way of looking at the world based on philosophy and science. However, if the poet also sees the objects of physics in weight, fluids and heat, the artist gives more importance in the video he presents to the solidity of the earth and the fluidity of water, understood as primordial materials that structure the dynamics of the universe. But where these maps ultimately lead us is to the mud, that mixture of earth and water that supports and preserves structures: “Besides, I have taught that clouds also take away a great quantity of water, absorbed from the vast surface of the ocean, and that they scatter it all over the Earth’s orb, when it rains on earth and winds bring clouds.”¹⁵ A communicating vessel on an inclined plane, it

**All that surrounds
us results from
the continuous
movement
of infinitely small
particles,
which we call atoms,
and therefore
creation is not
a divine work.**

is the mud that becomes the image of this eternally open cosmogony, always ready to receive, to recommence. Between the stillness of men and the pleasure of the gods, an organised semantics of the universe floats through a triptych of screens in a suave, restrained, albeit differentiated, movement. Being adrift, do atoms not ultimately veer towards what is stable?

With the participation of two comets

Alexandra Costa and Nuno Vieira, reindicating Lucretius' vitalist naturalism, present their respective installations in the outside space of the Centro de Ciência Viva of the Porto Planetarium.

In Alexandra Costa's intervention entitled *Estudos sobre a entropia. Para uma hipótese de arte como sintropia III* [Studies on entropy. For a hypothesis of art as syntropy III], the artist has created a garden marked by the diversity of natural species. The intentional human scale appeals to the idea of the garden as a space of harmony, encounters and exchange with the mutual relationship between rest and work also contemplated within it. A block of ice containing frozen flowers, placed on the earth the day the exhibition opened, slowly melted with the flowers remaining as the place of passing and the transformation of the state of matter – art as syntropy (negentropy) that restores the balance and development of the system of living beings, a place for producing energy. Contrary to entropy, it thus asserts, like Lucretius, that everything can be created from everything and from nothing. Colourful, fruitful, fragrant plants; regenerating beginnings that ensure the heterogeneity of the senses since "in truth, earth's soil is on fire underneath and burns in many places while violent Etna rages on with flames from down below. But earth also contains elements which enable her to raise pastures and trees laden with shiny fruit for mankind".¹⁶ A garden for a planet.

Nuno Vieira in *Aquilo que em si mesmo se não pode tocar também não pode tocar coisa nenhuma* [That which in itself may not be touched can also not touch anything at all] transforms a ladder into a solar clock in the space where the installation is set up. This clock dialogues formally and conceptually with a photographic image in trompe l'oeil. Only the branches of a tree are recorded on the image but, thanks to the effect of the sunlight, the shadows of real leaves of trees in the garden are projected onto it. Between the mirror and the image, "many simulacra are produced in a short period of time, and we can say, and rightly so, that their origin is swift and that, just as the sun must send out numerous rays in one instant, (...) the same must also happen with things." Domination of time over the referent – the dualism that separates us from the other side of the world. The same image is called upon to be present and to be absent, to be there, to be in the world, since it is of death that life speaks to us. During the exhibition, the work will go through a gradual process of deterioration: thus, accompanying the action of time, the image will be transformed into an accepted state of oblivion.

1 Titus Lucretius Carus, Roman poet and philosopher who lived in the 1st century BC [94 BC – 50 or 51 BC]. For a full recent English translation of his work, see johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/lucretius/lucretiustofc.html

2 Gilles Deleuze – *Lógica do Sentido*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1998, p. 274.

3 Italo Calvino – *Porquê ler os clássicos*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1993, pp. 11–12. [Why read the classics?]

4 Italo Calvino – *Seis propostas para o próximo milénio*. Lisboa: Editorial Teorema, 1990, p. 23. [Six proposals for the next millennium]

5 Lucrecio – *Da natureza das coisas*. Lisboa: Relógio d'Água, 2015, p. 27. [Lucretius – On the Nature of Things]

6 Ibid., p. 93.

7 Ibid., p. 183.

8 Jacques Lacan – *Le Séminaire*. Paris: Seuil, 1975, p. 27.

9 Ibid., p. 17.

10 Lucrecio, op. cit., p. 253.

11 Ibid., p. 303.

12 Ibid., p. 349.

13 Gilles Deleuze, op. cit., p. 270.

14 Italo Calvino, op. cit., cf. nota 4, p. 24.

15 Lucrecio, op. cit., p. 373.

16 Ibid., p. 107.