

Places of painting

Of all the discourses that may emerge,
None of them will be the one which consumes me.
Pedro Calapez¹

In the course of the last decade, the presence of Pedro Calapez on an international level confirmed him as one of the main exponents of contemporary painting dissertation. More than thirty individual exhibitions –in Portugal, France, Germany and Spain– and almost fifty instances of collective projects –some of which were held in various places throughout our geography– have turned him into a singular representative of a way of understanding this medium, both bringing together, possibly with a greater diversity than anybody else, the powerfulness that has characterized great painting during the last part of the previous century –specially European painting, which brings to mind such names as Gerhardt Richter, Sigmar Polke, Gunter Förg, Helmuth Dorner or Per Kirkeby, the Spanish Joan Hernández Pijuan or Juan Uslé and, also, the Americans Clyfford Still, Brice Marden, etc.–, with the developments related to image production and manipulation. To his subversion and questioning he adds a telling respect for the traditional practice of the pictorial. Perhaps this is due to the conscience that he expresses in the quotation featured above, out of a consumptive and, at the same time, consubstantial discourse; which, as it devours him, consummates and provides a due fulfilment of painting.

It seems as if he were persistently exploring the limit or limits of his practise. *Limite* is the actual title of one his series, dated 1999, from which João Miguel Fernández Jorge deduces that “painting may submerge itself (plunging) into painting, mirroring itself in painting, becoming separate from painting and being an apex of painting which, enlarged, remains there, always continuing to be painting, with its weight of authority and autonomy”. And, with similar accuracy, he also comments that wandering about Calapez’s paintings is “like walking along colour, within its plasticity, through the exercise that such verbs as to dissociate, decompose, undo, dissolve, break or separate introduce within the current realm of painting”.²

My professional and personal relationship with Pedro Calapez began at the end of last century, when, together with painter Ignacio Tovar, the three of us started the process that would lead to the exhibition *Madre Agua*, in which the two painters performed so fruitful a dialogue through some two hundred pieces purposely created for the exhibition, which was presented in 2002. At that time Calapez created the fifteen polyptychs of the *RAM* series (comprised by more than one hundred and fifty individual paintings) and a vast number of drawings, of which only *Submerso*, 2001, whose departure point was Titian’s print *The Wreck of the Pharaoh’s army on the Red Sea* was shown. Later on, in a collective exhibition at *Museo de Serralves*, Oporto, held on occasion of his winning the *EDP* painting prize, some of the *RAM* pieces which hadn’t been featured in *Madre Agua* “conversed” with the factory of the museum.

I point out this data to illustrate the fact that my knowledge of his work isn’t exclusively derived from a critical analysis unrelated to the artist, but instead in many cases it stems from what he directly told me. In relation to *Lugares de Pintura*, it should be pointed out that the exhibition was conceived, reasoned and designed, both in its installation and catalogue contents, together with his irreplaceable company, and adapted, from the very beginning, to the spaces and characteristics of *Centro de Arte Caja de Burgos (CAB)*.

Being still recent both the comprehensive retrospective, 1992-2004, that the Gulbenkian Foundation dedicated to him and his first individual exhibition in a Spanish public institution, *Piso Zero* -which closed last March at the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea and also displayed various expressly built works-, in *Lugares de Pintura* we chose to deal with an apparently peripheral aspect of his work, which, nevertheless, I think comprehends and analyses one of the central elements that made it possible: the transit and exchange between the creation of its own, singular realms by means of painting, and the appropriation of or dialogue with spaces of an essentially architectural nature, as painterly motifs.

In the voluminous critical corpus generated by his work and in the writings by the artist himself -which theoretical interest has been stressed beyond the merely anecdotal and biographical account-, the multiplicity of media, supports and techniques used and put into practice by Calapez stand out. Thus, his paintings and drawings -oil painting, acrylic, watercolour, pastel, charcoal, ink, etc.- can be made on adobe or brick, tree trunks, different woods, canvas, aluminium, papers of various texture, etc. Equally important are the measures of the supports and dimensions of the pieces, their relationship and scale, generally subjected to precise and not always explicit rules. The gesture or the actual immediate pictorial occurrence may equally be the result of freehand or digital drawing, photography, the use of palette knife, piercing, etc. He combines and simultaneously uses the figurative -from which various representational methodologies, as well as a catalogue of figures which functions as a minimum vocabulary, bearing its own syntax-, with a logical inclination towards abstraction, considered as painting's last modern tongue. Finally, much in the same way, the extraordinary plurality of his sources and motifs, whether paintings of other artists, proto-Renaissance, eighteenth and nineteenth century, the Monet of Giverny, or even contemporary, -be them comic books, gardens, architectural designs, ornaments, detailed interiors, natural landscapes articulated through avant-garde or other perspectives-, should also be noted.

So comprehensive a range is somehow manifest and complete in the ensemble of works exhibited, -in which there is a certain sequence and serialisation, breaking its possibilities into small pieces-, even if the concrete and specific choice was dictated, as I anticipated, either because they create a distinctive space in which the painting occurs, because a place presents singular features, whether in relation to its meaning and history, -such as the Convent of San Francisco, in Beja, the Salpêtrière Chapel in Paris or the Jerónimos' Monastery in Lisbon-, or because of their direct connection to the work of art's meaning production, - galleries and museums, such as Serralves or the CGAC-, where the dialogue with the space established by the architect may also become crucial, as indeed is the case in the mentioned centres, in relation to Álvaro Siza.

I dare say that this compromise with the space, with the place, this submission to the void -furthermore, in an artist whose settings are usually saturated and sumptuous- stems from the early stages of his art. Something already present in his first steps, during the seventies, as he would later tell Delfim Sardo: "If there is any constant in my photographic work, it is a kind of concern with the idea of an enveloping space".³

A similar statement would apply to his early sceneries. Just as he told his interlocutor in that very conversation, to him, the most appealing feature of Abstract Expressionism was the colour-field painting "since viewers were completely enveloped in the chromatic field"⁴. (Julio César Abad Vidal, in his text "The invisible paintings of Pedro Calapez", instead of "enveloped" translates "sheltered", which is a beautiful way of understanding it)⁵.

For him the attraction of the vedute by Piranesi and other eighteenth century artists, as well as of the Romantic and English gardens, stems from that enveloping intention. The Renaissance studiolo, –such as those of Francesco I in Florence’s Palazzo Vecchio or those of Federico de Montefeltro in Urbino and Gubbio [Studiolo is in fact the title of one of his exhibitions from 1998]–, the capricci and even the cabinet d’amateur similarly fascinate him.

As Delfim Sardo concludes, in his painting “there isn’t a narrative of characters but, instead, a narrative of space”.⁶

As early as 1987, Portuguese critic João Pinharanda entitled his text on Pedro Calapez for the catalogue of Sao Paulo Biennale’s Portuguese legation, *O lugar da pintura* [The place of painting], in which he wrote: “The painting of Pedro Calapez asserts itself as a questioning practice and constructive effort. [...] The dimension of his search unfolds around a cross-examination of the most abstract values of western painting: the multiple space representation media (line, colour, –and enhanced possibilities by means of various associations and textural play–, shape and volume) and their symbolic sense”.⁷

Some years earlier, in 1983-1984, the same critic appreciated the fact that Calapez had found a line of work, which in my opinion he continued until 2000. Pinharanda gathered pastel and oil paintings under the umbrella Deconstructive tasks, which he considered that took proto- and pre-Renaissance painting as a reference, vacated its characters, and focused the attention in the constructive structures (including landscape).

In 1990 Calapez had an exhibition together with Rui Sanchez at the Convent of San Francisco, in Beja. His eleven pieces, ten of which were on the floor of one of the halls while the remaining one was on its own, in a contiguous space, were created by drawing on the adobe bricks (known as tijolos in Portuguese) with white chalk. All the motifs of the drawings were figurative: mountain, stairs, table, box, sofa, lake, fountain, etc.

Two years later, in 1993, they did the same at the Chapelle Saint-Louis of the Salpêtière, Paris, although with a different project, which is the one reproduced in the featured illustrations.

His drawings were inspired by those of Piranesi. Calapez told Isabel Vila Nova [that] “by means of these forms, I find those places that I can’t or don’t know how to recall”, and she, in turn, accurately noted “Calapez also re-encounters architecture in his installations by way of metaphor’s detour. [His works] create a space, much as architecture would”.⁸

Wall against wall

Oddly enough, *Muro contra muro* [Wall against wall] –which could actually be considered, together with the Beja and Chapel pieces, as an early installation–, is one of works by Calapez that has generated a larger amount of critical literature and which various authors have considered to foretell and orientate many of the intuitions and tasks of the artist.

The corridor created by the eighteen paintings, which reveals the supporting structure behind them –like some drop-scene which allowed the audience to see the theatre’s backstage or as if the artist confessed that for the paintings to move from the walls to the centre of the hall in which they are situated, they need to be equipped with machines and devices–, was installed for the first time on November 1994 at the Galeria Luis Serpa in Lisbon.

The origin of the images is an old comic strip by Windsor McCay, Little Nemo in Slumberland, published between 1905 and 1911. The dreams of little Nemo, Calapez told me in one of our conversations, connected with a fantastic world which was capable, as painting itself, of transforming its continuous imaginary reality into a substitute for the elusively real.⁹

The paintings, displayed in a counterpoint mimicking a chiaroscuro, were created by having the Nemo vignettes displayed before the eyes, and painting each of them with the corresponding hand; the ones on the right with the right hand and those on the left with the left hand. There was also an attempt that each of them imitated or responded to the previous one in their stroke. A concern with reflection and copy is insistently repeated by this –ambidextrous– artist.¹⁰ “For each of the drawn spaces or objects, another one exists, which is not exactly symmetrical, but in some way reflects it. How is a space opened? Is the notion of place related to those of repetition and symmetry?”¹¹, wondered Calapez in his explanation, included in the catalogue.

Delfim Sardo sees in Muro contra muro “a preoccupation with the non canonical mechanisms of space construction, a keynote of perceptive alteration of space”.¹²

Helena de Freitas, whom I just quoted in the footnotes, stresses the prescription of movement that Muro contra muro forces upon visitors. She mentions that “this halfway house between architecture and painting furnishes viewers with a complete physical envelope. In this narrow, short span corridor, we fix the frame of reference for a game, which is also theatrical, and where the illusory effect of alternating colours (light and dark) and relief is surpassed by the mechanics of its construction”.¹³

Most of Calapez’s works issue an invitation to wander. Obviously, his paintings can be seen frontally, but in that way we would only get to see one of their modes of existence. Whether collected in the narrow corridor that opens Muro contra muro, running parallel to the wall from which such works as Trabalhos do olhar 02 (2000), and other pieces from the BD and Lugares series (2002-2003) and from Passagem 05, (2004) hang, in the collection Caja de Burgos or, in a perpendicular direction, causing looks to stretch to the limit of visibility, as in Composição 01 (2004), exhibited at the CGAC, which is almost 10 meters high.

Stars’ shadow

I have already indicated that one of the main sources that constitutes what Calapez calls “Data base” are the paintings of certain other artists. We have previously mentioned some of them, and we could add others. For instance, in 1996 he painted the Memoria Involuntaria series, which was shown in a namesake exhibition held at the Museo do Chiado, and which comprised works based on the landscapes by Jose Julio de Sousa Pinto (1856-1939), a Portuguese painter who lived between centuries. The next immediate series, Campo de Sombras (1996-1997), defines the exciting and keen relationship that Calapez has with the creative act and the implications and consequences that derive from undertaking it.

The artist himself has referred its origin and development: “During a visit to the Fundació Pilar I Joan Miró, in 1995 [...] which comprised both workshops [...] there was something particularly striking: in the visit to Son Boter, there was a little chamber that Miró dedicated to meditation and reading and annexed to it

there was a little room where the artist sometimes took refuge and looked at the shadows that were projected through an opening onto one of the walls.”

“At the workshop [...] I also found what could be considered a resource of ideas for his creative work [...] I felt, there and then, the very presence of Miró; moving about his works, painting and contemplating from time to time those trivial newspaper clippings, wrappings, postcards, and small objects that he had carefully fixed on the walls of his workshop with thumbtacks. And then I imagined what he drew”.

“What could he draw if he took those references as starting points? What images were or would be inevitably associated to things? [...] To me they emerged like ‘shadows’, not that they appeared from the ‘dark side of things’, but because they came from ‘the other side’. [...] Thus a series of thick red line drawings made with oil bars came about, directly evoking the outlines of some of the clippings and images on the walls [...] I also included some of these references in a series of paintings [...] in which pigment is used in a dense and thick way, upon which I performed my drawings”.

“In that series”, he concludes, “it is possible to find my strokes, made out of the ‘memories of Miró’ and not from his drawings and images”.

Alexandre Melo enumerates the ensembles or series that comprise what he calls Calapez’s alphabet: objects –boxes, tables, chairs, balloons, or mirrors–, architectures –bridges, sepulchres, castles, walls and stairs–, natural landscapes –lakes, mountains, rocks, or rivers–, vegetal thicket (the forest) –leaf’s veins, bark of tree-trunks, meshes of branches–. He comments: “we could say that the first lesson assimilated by Calapez in his reference to Miró was the learning of freedom, which enabled him to renounce to any specific formal or thematic criteria in the choice of starting points for this series of works”.¹⁴

Through the exhibition of these pieces at the Miró Foundation, Calapez held a dialogue –much as, a decade later, he would do with that of Álvaro Siza at the CGAC– with the architecture of Rafael Moneo. “A kind of architecture wholly oriented [...]” according to Melo “to play with the light of Majorca”.

The distress of looking

“O meu olhar”, “my looking”, is the phrase most frequently repeated in the autograph texts of Calapez and the act of looking/seeing is what unleashes the pictorial gesture and action.

“Are you fascinated by optical machines?”, asks Delfim Sardo. “Yes”, answers Calapez “and also by the ocular mechanisms involved in the construction of landscapes and frames, dioramas and panoramas, which in fact mark a transition phase between landscape painting and cinema”.¹⁵ Once again, he reiterates that chain whose links of painting, vignette and frame we can glimpse.

In relation to his “versions” of Sousa Pinto’s works, Calapez comments: “What seduced me was to look at a way of looking. There is another project that I would like to undertake; after drawing the landscapes, to draw places that I don’t know, as if the landscape became part of a whole which I have never known”.

And he mentions his interest in the reflections of Benjamin in relation to “the looking that looks at us and how the objects’ aura is related to that looking that looks at us. We usually don’t expect a drawing to look through us. [...] I find fascinating the thought that I will come across an object, a drawing that looks

through me. In fact there are many situations in which you look at paintings and you somehow become wrapped in them, and that act of wrapping has to do with you, with that which you are willing to give back".¹⁶

The two pieces of *Trabalhos do Olhar* (2000), as well as the five large pieces of paper of the *Desenhos Contínuos*, dating from the previous year, are like a black and white film, in which fragments of architecture and natural sights are fused without being confused. They prolong or become part of a graphic sequence whose origin could be *Muro contra muro* and which is continued in the *Domestic Dinner* series –whose works made up the show *Studiolo* (1998)– and in *Garden* (1999). To them we can add the already quoted *Submerso* (2001) and the computer works culminating the *Hidden ornament* project (2002), which responded to an invitation, issued on occasion of the 500 anniversary of the beginning of the construction of the *Monastery dos Jerónimos*, for Pedro Calapez to create a piece, now permanently installed where the *Christ or The way to Calvary*, a piece by António Campelo from approximately 1570, used to be.¹⁷

The abyss' shine

What happens to painting if apart from lodging it in a hall, as it is custom, we also confine it to a cubicle? An enclosed area of generous, if medium-sized dimensions, with a single opening in one of its sides, the top one, and the remaining ones or, at least, most of them painted only on their inner face. Painting as a disturbing element within a neutral object. A goad on the back of the absolute and finished minimalist cubes, as if Donald Judd exhibited his feelings or advertised his political ideas.

Because "in his works, the themes –as Helena de Freitas discovers– also move towards original solutions. In one of the cubes lunar landscapes and images of the destruction of the city of Baghdad are superimposed, and extend themselves over the successive faces of the cube". Industrial cities, oil refineries... mirror images on the faces of the dice...

"Sections of the world confined in some sort of containers, which he called *Unidade Habitacional*, *Terra Firme*, *Contentor de Paisagem* [and *Dentro*] (2004), and which are presented in the shape of metallic cubes inside which we have to look if we want to see the painted surface. The mere bending over these boxes may unleash vertigo, reinforced in their interior by means of the alternating association of images and by the intense expressiveness of the backgrounds, which seem to open up in sudden shines. The abyss intention seems evident".¹⁸

Unidade Habitacional makes use by way of title of Le Corbusier's proposal for *Marseilles*, the *Unité d'habitation*, developed shortly after the end of World War II. In the *habitation unity*, Le Corbusier applied his five principles of modern architecture: 36 shafts or concrete pillars, the diaphanous story, continuous horizontal window –whose horizontality is evoked in the works by Calapez *Janelas* (1998) and *Passagem* (2004)–, the garden-terrace and the plain façade. In the cubes of the Portuguese artist there even is some sort of indirect quote to the chromatic ornament chosen by the architect for the visual play of the façade.

In *Inferno* (2002) there is a reference which, if not mirroring the idea of the abyss, it is in a way opposed to the natural sense. The title comes from the evocation of a painting by Carl Gustav Carus (1789-1896), painter, doctor and botanist, friend and disciple of Carl David Friedrich, –Goethe's biographer–, who in the likeness of his master also felt attracted by glaciers, seas and frozen

mountains; by the white hell of ice. And also, antipodal of it, by the last verses of Dante's Inferno.

By that hid way my guide and I withal,
Back to the lit world from the darkened dens
Toiled upward, caring for no rest at all,

He first, I following; till my straining sense
Glimpsed the bright burden of the heavenly cars
Through a round hole; by this we climbed, and thence

Came forth, to look once more upon the stars.¹⁹

From Avernus to the zenith. From Tartarus to the skies. From the pit of damnation to the kingdom of salvation: to look once more upon the stars.

Places of concurrence

The Lugares series, at least seen from the perspective taken by the present exhibition, could be described as the most Calapezian of them all or the one which responds to the most reasserted image of the painter.

The polyptics fulfil or break the symmetry of their layout, alternating some serial measurements with other series of measurements that alter their neighbourhood. In the words of the artist they are: "paintings comprised of individualized elements in which it is not possible to linger over any of the images as we look at them; one has to ceaselessly wander among the various rectangles –much as we do when we walk in a city and our eyes jump from a cornice to a tower, from a balcony to a plastering, from a roof-tile to a lock, from a door to a window".²⁰

Conversadeira (2003), assembles the ingredients described, their corner arrangement, as if the aluminium parallelepipeds presented the square of their intersections as a limit from which to establish a six voice conversation, two of them higher in pitch and the other four quieter, in various registers.

Flush

The most recent pieces of the exhibition were all of them part of the Piso Zero exhibition.

Composição 03, as the remaining pieces from 2004, is in my opinion one of the most beautiful, astonishing and crushing paintings ever signed by Calapez. The synthesized chromatism of the two-coloured red and blue, the simplicity of the figures which defines the painting, parallel lines, occasional stains, a certain Newmanian influence... Besides, the piece, as in the case of other pieces, –a Composição 04 being included, and not others–, has become more subtle, light and graceful, as if the lightness put them to flight. Furthermore, almost taking us back to what we said at the beginning of Muro contra muro, the various lengths of the bars or faces of the support, which deepens some of the pieces in the walls and causes others to protrude far beyond the aluminium bars, multiply the impression of a moving volume as the colours are reflected and twisted on the metallic plaques. The reflected paint or the mirroring of painting behaves as symmetry of transparency.

The work on the floor, or on some kind of platform, of Piso Zero [Zero floor], adopting an alien layout to pictorial tradition, but deeply rooted in all cultures – mosaics, carpets, etc.– has antecedents in Calapez's own work, such as Paisaje

(1993), which we commented in the introduction, and also responds to the dialogue with the architect. As the painter declares in a still unpublished text, which shall be printed in the catalogue-book which compiles his interventions at CGAC and which I could access and use thanks to the generosity of Maria do Céu Baptista and Miguel Fernández Cid: "Siza's technical designs were manipulated by means of the superimposition in transparent form of the various floors of the building, a process which yielded Piso Zero as a result". Paradoxically, the flatness of painting –questioned by its display over piles- produces a crushing effect, the reproduction of an inexistent flatness to the building. "From the end towards the beginning, from the outer look towards the intimate and personal shape of things. Forgetting functionality. Just seeing the surfaces as if cut out over a background. Separating, superimposing the lines which constitute the walls, mixing the dimensions, deforming the point of view, twisting the visible. Redesigning space, copying it and pursuing the inevitable distortions".

Calapez infers that: "It is in the 'deformation' of the look upon this already built universe where my images appear". And concludes: "From the ground the walls grow". So it should be when we see it thus.

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NOTES

- 1 Pedro Calapez, "Passagens", cat. Pedro Calapez-Rui Sanches, Convento de S. Francisco, Beja, 1990.
- 2 João Miguel Fernandez Jorge, "Obras escolhidas", cat. Pedro Calapez Obras Escolhidas. Selected Works 1992/2004, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, 2004. A list that reminds of the transitive verbs declined by Richard Serra in relation to what could be "done" in sculpture, 'roll/bend/fold/pile...
- 3 "Delfim Sardo in conversation with Pedro Calapez. Intervals, distances and affinities", cat. Pedro Calapez. Memoria Involuntaria, Museo do Chiado, Lisbon, 1997.
- 4 "Delfim Sardo, op. cit.
- 5 Julio César Abad Vidal, "Las Pinturas Invisibles de Pedro Calapez", cat. Pedro Calapez. Lugar del que los ojos acuden, Galería Max Estrella, Madrid, 2003.
- 6 "Delfim Sardo, op. cit.
- 7 Joao Pinharanda, "O lugar da pintura", en Representação portuguesa a 19ª Bienal de Sao Paulo, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa, 1987.
- 8 Isabel Vila Nova, "Sur L'oeuvre in situ", cat. Pedro Calapez/ Rui Sanches. Chapelle Saint Louis de la Salpêtière, Paris, 1991.
- 9 Years later, although they don't appear in this exhibition, he would paint the series BD (Bande Desinée), (2001).
- 10 "Calapez uses copying as a strategy for personal revelation". Helena de Freitas, "Pedro Calapez. O Mundo a duas mãos", cat. Pedro Calapez. Obras Escolhidas. Selected Works 1992/2004, op. cit.
- 11 Pedro Calapez, "Campo de Sombras" cat. Pedro Calapez .Campo de Sombras, Fundació Pilar y Joan Miró a Mallorca, Palma de Mallorca, 1997.
- 12 "Delfim Sardo converses with Pedro Calapez. Intervals, distances and affinities", op. cit.
- 13 Helena de Freitas, op. Cit.
- 14 Alexandre Melo, "El sol de Mallorca", cat. Pedro Calapez, Campo de Sombras, op. Cit.
- 15 Delfim Sardo op. Cit.
- 16 Delfim Sardo op. Cit.
- 17 I will take the liberty of making a long quotation from the description that Julio César Abad Vidal makes in the above mentioned work: "A total of twenty four

aluminium plaques are displayed with their usual regular interstices until they cover an area of 505 x 545 cm (inscribed in a perfect rectangle) on a whitewashed wall of one of the halls, not used for cult, of the Monastery dos Jerónimos (Belém). Over a uniform saffron coloured background, both scenes are superimposed with red acrylic. Firstly, with a subtler contour, the lines of a view of the Monastery's actual cloister, a view that is similarly duplicated before an invisible axis which doesn't hide the fact that the images don't quite fit. Secondly, by means of bent, doubled strokes of a richer pigment, as if sight couldn't adapt itself to the huge amount of light, a landscape in which it is difficult to situate ourselves. The intervention of Calapez should be appreciated as a magnificent achievement. Contemplating his mural, after being in the Monastery's church for a few minutes, where light plays a fleeing game and avoids helping the eyes recognise the details and shine of the sumptuous building, constitutes an experience that fills with joy, which fulfils."

18 Helena de Freitas, op. Cit.

19 Lo duca e io per quel camino ascoso/ intrammo a ritornar nel chiaro mondo;/ a sanza cura aver d'alcun riposo/ salimo sú, el primo e io secondo, tanto ch'í vidi de le cose belle/ che porta 'l ciel, per un pertugio tondo;/ e quindi uscimmo a riveder le estelle. Dante Alighieri, Divine Comedy, Hell, Chant XXXIV, 288-289, Penguin Classics, U.K, 1968.

20 "Do outro lado- no outro lado", cat. Pedro Calapez. Del otro lado, en el otro lado. Cáceres, Bores & Mallo, 1998.