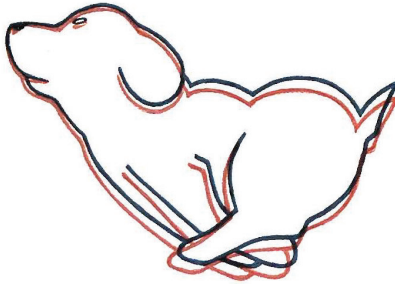


Ana Jotta *Never the Less*

September 7–November 11, 2023

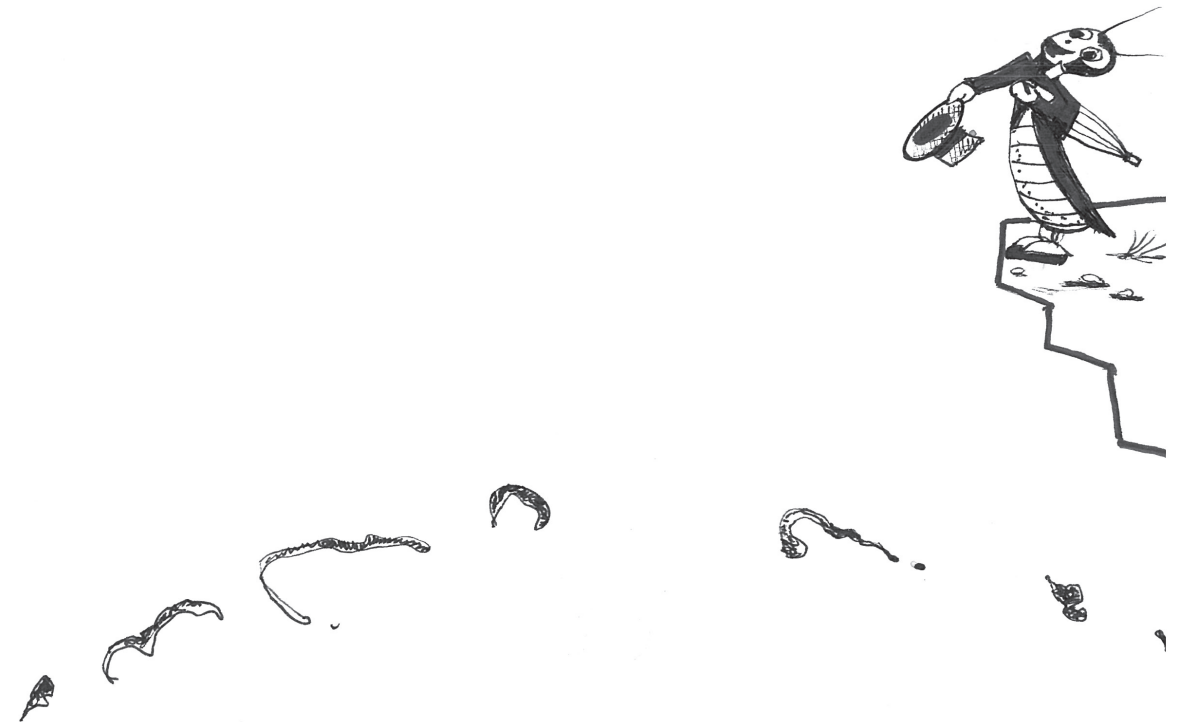


(Anthony) Do you remember a conversation, maybe seven or eight years ago, when you, Ana, and I talked about the cynics? Ana had brought up the school of cynic philosophers, in Ancient Greece, and talked about how the cynic is one who rejects all conventional social values such as property, fame, or power, and, instead, chooses to be self-sufficient, living only according to their own bare necessities. I recognize why Ana would be drawn to this, since so much of her work has been about rejecting convention and aligning itself only with the necessary. But I only recently learned that the term “cynic” is derived from the Greek word κύων, meaning “dog,” so I wonder if this is why she was happy with the idea of including her drawings of dogs in the exhibition.

(Miguel) For her first solo exhibition in 1987, Ana produced a series of more than thirty oil paintings where a dog, invariably a mongrel, appears as a character, and she titled that series *Eu seja cão*, which is an idiomatic expression that means “I’ll be damned,” but its literal translation is “I’ll be dog.”

(A) I like “I’ll be dog” much better than “I’ll be damned.”

(M) I love them together...the sense they make together. Animals reoccur again and again in Ana’s work. It’s the same old story: an artist using the animal figure to reflect on our “human condition.” But with regards to Ana, as the title *Eu seja cão* hints at, the animal figure is also linked to a strong impulse towards self-portraiture—it is often an alter ego or a projection of Ana herself.



And since you brought up Ancient Greece, another work comes to mind, from 2016, whose title *Cassandra* references a famous figure from Greek mythology who was considered crazy and whose prophecies were disregarded by everyone as being delusional. Cassandra can be a metaphor for the artist and her role in our society, but more importantly, Ana is using this mythological figure to portray herself as an artist. While it’s far removed from the protocols of self-portraiture, and never discussed in those terms, I think the work is in fact a self-portrait in disguise.

In any case, the impulse towards self-portraiture in Ana's work rarely takes on the appearance of a self-portrait. There is a remarkable self-portrait in the exhibition, *Esperança (Hope)*, made from a found sign that spells out the word "Esperança," a garland of shimmering lights, a painter's brush, and a bottle. The punchline appears with great sense of humor on the bottle's label: "En plus je bois" ("On top of everything else, I drink"), repeated multiple times.

(A) She constantly jokes about the fact that her own last name, Jotta, sounds exactly the same as the Portuguese word for the letter J, *jota*. As a result, when she tells people her name, Ana Jotta, it sounds like she's saying "Ana J," giving people the confusing impression that she's choosing not to reveal her full last name. In fact, Ana has a pretty extraordinary collection of found objects that are shaped like the letter J in her house—branches, old umbrellas, pipes, brooms—all of which, following your point, are forms of self-portraiture as well, even if they don't look anything like a self-portrait.

(M) Indeed, the concise signature can be seen as a metonymic abstract self-portrait.

(A) But to get back to the question of whether Ana is a "cynic"—do you agree? Do you see her work as being cynical in the sense of rejecting conventions and keeping to the bare minimum?

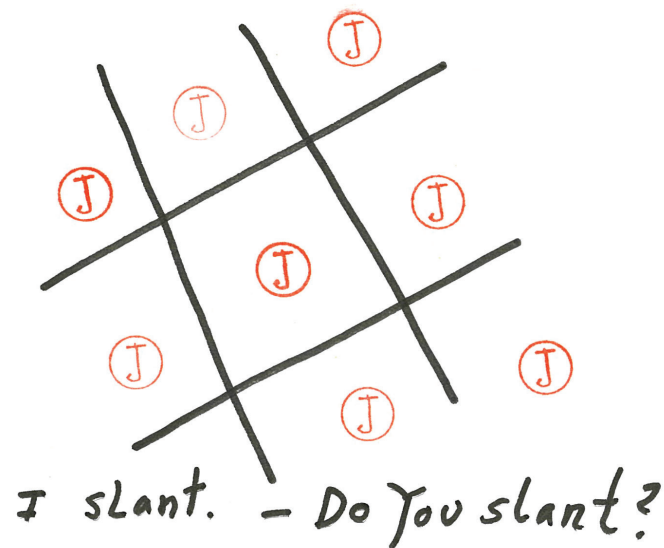
(M) Twenty-five years ago, in a lecture she gave at a university in Japan, she essentially said as much herself. She was expressing her disagreement with the art critics who fall into what she called the "bad habit" of describing her work in terms of irony and derision, and said: "I definitely prefer to be cynic, like the ancient Greek school, which cherished the metaphor

of the dog that growls, almost smiles, in order not to bite." It's true, Ana sees herself as someone who doesn't conform to shared social norms and values. But to operate at the margins of social conventions doesn't necessarily mean to revolt against society—in her own words, the artist is the one who growls but doesn't bite.

(A) But to me, Ana's work is not minimal, mute, empty, or cynical. On the contrary, it contains the proof of a life lived. It is full of detail, pathos, and eccentricity. It reminds me of Emily Dickinson's famous line—*tell all the truth but tell it slant*—in that her work tells a jagged kind of truth. One that misbehaves, perhaps a bit like a dog, but that never lies.

(M) I love how you say that Ana's work is impregnated with traces of her life and how this imbues it with a quality of truthfulness. I see some of her works as allegorical representations of life, but for her, it should be noted, there is no ultimate meaning or purpose in life, other than daily life, life being lived. One of the works in the exhibition has a very charged title, with existential overtones: *Un jour sans pain* est un jour sans soleil (a day without bread is a day without sun)*, which is a common French expression that she found stamped on the wrapping paper at a bakery in Paris a long time ago. However, the title comes with a footnote that specifies that "pain" is meant to be read not in French but in English, which turns the title into: *a day without pain is a day without sun*. She says this with humor, along with a bit of melancholy, but never with a heavy-handed sense of drama. In any case, Ana only feels truly fulfilled in her life when she is working. She even titled one of her exhibitions *Haverá vida depois do trabalho? (Is there life after work?)*.

(A) Yes, others have written about how Ana's work rejects the common dichotomy between work and play. Traditionally, there are those who work and those who play—and society tends to reward the former rather than the latter. The traditional fable with the ant and the grasshopper describes the ant as the one who works, who prepares for the winter, and the grasshopper as the one who rests, plays, and “enjoys” life while it can—only to then find itself unprepared when the winter cold arrives. But for Ana, *everything* fits into daily life, without hierarchy. I remember how she summarized this idea by saying that she is interested in *les petits morceaux*, the small pieces that are cut out of the vastness of daily life, making no distinction between whether those pieces relate to “work,” “play,” “art,” “decoration,” or anything else in between. And throughout her work, there is this constant emphasis on the small and the marginal. On taking something that is neglected by a broader social sphere but that is vibrant and alive in the context of an individual life.



(M) Ana has used the ant as a character in a few works, one of which, an embroidery, is featured in the exhibition. The figure of the ant is clearly a symbol of labor and work ethics, and it can also be read as an alter ego for the artist. But she recently made a few paintings depicting a group of ants that are immersed in the pleasures of eating a large pudding, and, in this way, she challenges the idea that ants can only symbolize an ethics of hardwork.

(A) That's a great example of how Ana's work operates. It's constantly disagreeing with itself. Contradicting itself. She makes something, and then crosses it out and makes something else—not because she's changed her mind but because she wants to live in a world where *both* can be true.

Of course, this is part of what's difficult about making an exhibition of Ana's work! How can an exhibition contain her irreverent use of contradiction and inconsistency, and yet also feel coherent? How can an exhibition tell her slanted truths?

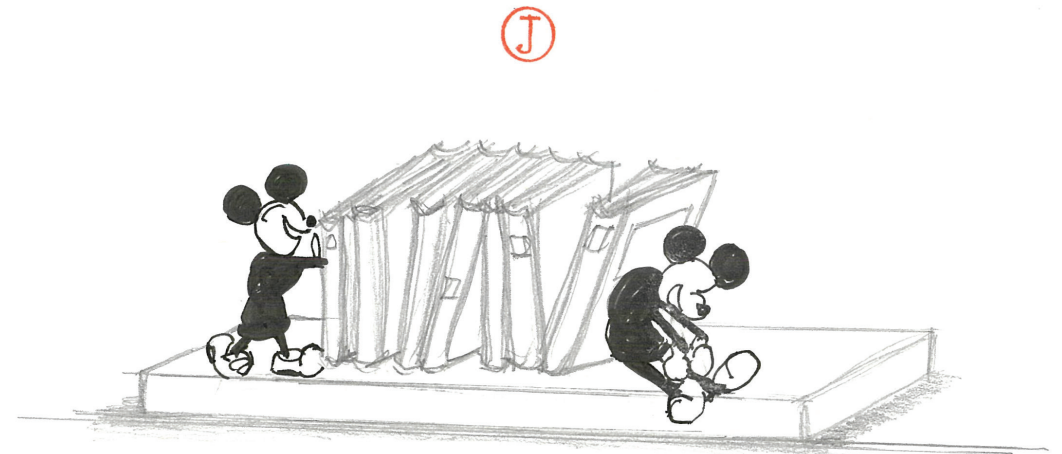
This is what led me to the act of “drawing,” in all of its many senses, since it is central to how Ana tells those irreverent and unclassifiable truths. It seemed like it could function as a unifying thread (pun intended) for the exhibition, while also allowing for a wide range of different directions. For example, there is drawing in the sense of *drawing on*—the lines, sketches, or fragile outlines inscribed onto a surface; drawing in the sense of *drawing with*, since the instrument that draws could be a pen, a needle-and-thread, a nail, or something else entirely; drawing in the sense of *drawing out*—demonstrating, discovering, or fleshing out the potential connections that lie dormant between disparate images and references; drawing in the sense of *drawing from*—to take, to appropriate, and to extract from the world; and drawing in the sense of *writing*—drawing the lines that form letters of a word.

(M) When you proposed a framework for this exhibition, centered around the notion of drawing defined more as a verb than as a medium, I immediately thought it provided a productive framework for an exhibition that would do justice to the incredible heterogeneity of Ana's work in terms of medium, technique, and materials. But what I found particularly interesting about your proposal is the notion of drawing opening up other meanings that go well beyond the act of making a drawing, or an adjacent process like stitching. I was particularly compelled by one specific meaning you brought to the discussion: "drawing from—to take, to appropriate, and to extract from the world." As I see it, appropriation is at the core of Ana's practice. And it is fundamental to understanding the porous back-and-forth between art and life that runs through her work.

The exhibition is filled with examples: the couple dancing, on the wallpaper, is taken from an illustration in a French book from the First World War; the peasant crossing the river on his barge, painted on the screen, is a detail from a mid-nineteenth century woodcut by Utagawa Hiroshige; the figure of the mouse walking around absentmindedly, on one of the embroideries, or the one struggling against the river current, in the leporello, is one of the main characters from the comic strip "Krazy Kat" by George Herriman; the images of a dog running, falling, and turning around were printed on toilet paper made by the well-known brand Scottex.

(A) To me, the term "appropriation" feels slightly off. I think it's because it implies a conceptual or "meta" approach to making art—an "appropriated image" is an image that's about an image, or an art of appropriation is an art that is invested in the semiotic mechanisms involved in how meaning gets produced via images. Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine, and so on. Whereas I see Ana as someone who is far more

invested in intuition, in accidents, in locating the eccentricities that lie around everywhere, hiding in plain sight. Isn't there a difference between an "appropriated image" and a "found image"? Between taking something and finding something? I feel like Ana doesn't take, but she finds. Rather than having a predetermined theory or rational system in place, she simply sees, chooses, and gets to work. Her artwork, in that sense, is less about an act of appropriation and more about weaving together a string of small life encounters. It's as if art *happens* to her. Not in the sense that she is lazily sitting around doing nothing, but that she is fiercely attentive, always alert to her surroundings, and that when a specific word, a piece of fabric, or an image crosses her path, she recognizes it as containing the traces of a daily life—proof that life has *happened* to it and that it can be brought into the space of art.



(M) I think you have just described, in a wonderful way, how appropriation works in Ana's practice!

I use appropriation as a neutral term that encompasses a wide range of *modus operandi*, including what you say about the "found image" in Ana's practice. The inner workings of her practice involve constant acts of appropriation, even if often discreet, but she couldn't be less invested in theory or discourse. It's never *about* the image she chooses or what she makes with it—not even when she turns a marine painting by Edward Hopper into a very large drawing on paper, or a painting by Philip Guston into a Styrofoam wall object. In order to look at the world, she chooses images from the most disparate sources, erudite and vernacular. Ana has a very intuitive and selective glance, you are right. But after choosing a certain image (or object or piece of text), she has to decide what to do with it! She has to process it through the making of the work, she has to make it a thing of her own, an expression of her own "voice."

(A) Ana, I think, puts it best when she says that she sees her work as being *très cultivé et très sauvage*—sophisticated and wild at the same time.

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CCA Wattis Institute
September 7–November 11, 2023

Program: A poetry reading with
Norma Cole & Adrian Lürssen
co-organized with The Poetry Center
October 12, 2023
6:00pm, Free

Ana Jotta (b. 1946, Lisbon) lives and works in Lisbon, Portugal.

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