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Writing and Seeing in Portuguese Art in the Second Half of the 20th Century:

**Abílio, Alberto Carneiro, Albuquerque Mendes, Ana
Hatherly, António Areal, António Sena, Eurico Gonçalves,
João Vieira, Joaquim Rodrigo and Silvestre Pestana
Avelino Sá**

I

“All writing is paradoxically an act of voluntary affirmation which, with its own discontinuity, undoes and remakes itself. It is made up of pulsations, of entirely formulated meanings and of significances that are incomplete or that do not exactly finish, of differentiations of register that range from the perceptible to the unreadable and on to the completely undecipherable. All experiences, all sorts of memories are contained in writing.”¹

II

“Oh vast world: a grain of sand in space.
The knowledge of men: words. The peoples,
the animals, the flowers of the seven climates: shadows.
The profound result of your meditation: nothing.”²

This exhibition seeks to advance towards a space of continuity. The authors presented are emblematic, are historical, and they contemplate some of the dimensions of plasticity inscribed into the perspective of *Looks and Writings*. They do not, however, represent an exhaustive survey of all the important names that stand out in the historiography of Portuguese art, which is why there is a pressing need for future events to complement this first showing.

The history of Portuguese art in the 20th century may also be constructed by focusing upon the inter-relationship between the image and writing, a persistent and relevant trend that has involved authors of unquestionable talent, and has accompanied the general development of poetry and literature and the performing arts.

At the beginning of that century, the most representative and high-profile case in Portugal (though achieving recognition only belatedly) was Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso, who made use of fragments of writing in his compositions, giving them a privileged place in keeping with the languages of synthetic cubism, futurism and Dadaism, which were at that time emerging (definitively). As was the case with other unquenchable artists, the very act of integrating external elements into his painting led to an expansion into new combinations, revealing an overlapping relatedness peopled by words from his private hoard, chosen for their creative and provocative seductiveness. This recourse to words stimulated proclamatory discourse, shaped by the various Manifestos that by then had appeared. In those texts, that were sometimes dogmatic and excessively assertive, concepts were recycled by *praxis* and linguistic codes, and

¹ Fernando Azevedo, “Prémios de Arte em Portugal 1982 – António Sena: a escrita e o objecto” [“Art Prizes in Portugal 1982 – António Sena: writing and the object”], in *Colóquio/Artes*, nº 56 (March 1983), p.27

² Omar Kadhayam, *Rubaiyat*, 23

deliberated, pragmatic assertions were introduced. The circle closed between the apparent liberation of the word, taken out of context or casuistically used, and its commitment to a public that it sought to captivate and convince of its causes. That is to say, the word and writing found themselves implicated in an exercise that almost resulted in their own annihilation.

At that same time, some experimental poetry was trying to draw closer to visuality, following a tradition explored in Europe by the Baroque and Gongorism, for example. The *calligrammes* of Guillaume Apollinaire, his constant connection to pictorial languages that were then in ascendancy, advanced towards an aesthetic that would later come to be explored by different European poets and writers, by way of hermetism in some cases, through the genuineness of the unconscious, or even through ideological non-conformism or the urgency of iconoclasm.

The eagerness of modernity and the avant-garde, abundantly represented in Portugal and throughout Europe, would eventually lead to the paradoxical proclamation for the new century, of a long tradition involving not only artistic *praxis* but also philosophical reflection and literary creation.

Case 1:

“Now that philosophical commentary about contemporary painting appears very frequently, it should not be allowed to attract us more than the painting itself.”
(António Areal, *Textos de Crítica e Combate na Vanguarda das Artes Visuais*
[*Texts of Criticism and Combat in the Vanguard of the Visual Arts*] 1970)

Some three decades later, during the belated advent of Portuguese surrealism, word and image developed a relationship that was private, stimulating and irreverent, shaping an irreversible *modus vivendis*. Mário Cesariny, Cruzeiro Seixas and António Maria Lisboa, amongst others, expounded both (words and images) in a vast oeuvre that has remained relevant even now, at the start of the 21st century. This trend was continued by the generations that were active in the ‘50s and ‘60s, such as **António Areal** (who combined surrealism and neo-Dadaism) and later, Álvaro Lapa – see, for example, the case of the 1972 series *Prophecies of Abdul Varetti* – through endless experimentation that was both ironic and contingent.

In a work published in 1970, to which was consigned the revealing title of *Textos de Crítica e Combate na Vanguarda das Artes Visuais* (*Texts of Criticism and Combat in the Vanguard of the Visual Arts*), António Areal, from Oporto, collected texts from the late ‘50s, the ‘60s and 1970. In a strange and masterful written style, that was both reflective and critical, he examined the arguments for a socially engaged, ideological aesthetics, reworking the paradigm of the surrealist and neo-Dadaist avant-garde. Demystifying the condition of Art and the theorising associated with it (as product and intention), Areal contributed in both his plastic art and his written work to the consolidation of the relationship between the image and the word in different areas, highlighting the importance of communicative situations and the institutionalised tools for the transmission of information:

“An exhibition involves the surrender of all that is problematic, impure, intransmissible and vital into the public domain, which negates the authors, and congratulates itself on the way it assimilates their work. And from this emerges the exchange of aggressions in which public and authors reveal more specific antipathy and the absolute need for a replica of suspicion and inefficacy, than any complementarity of purpose – and much less any solidarity as regards the options to which they devote themselves. With these small drawings and manuscripts, the spectacle ends at the moment that it is made public. The authors withdraw; strangers come, and those direct forms of expression – the letters, the drawings – are integrated by fictitious agreement into the rituals of a suffocating culture.”³

An innovation that was noteworthy within the panorama of the emerging Portuguese culture, was the deliberate design of the 1970 exhibition at the *Árvore* Cooperative, when the only objects exhibited were texts of artistic commentary.

³ António Areal, 06.01.1969

“The love of commentary, that affliction of thinkers, is, I believe, considerably greater than the love of painting – which appears like one of those ironic revenges that history (often monotony installed as the rule) establishes, according to which the principle of an activity is not itself but rather itself as symptom.”⁴

The visual works presented by this painter, some of which may be seen at this exhibition, attempted to explore a different type of creative complicity in their collaboration with the writings of Agustina Bessa-Luís, first in Lisbon and the Palácio Foz and later in Oporto in January and February 1969. The manuscripts used correspond mostly to texts published by this author in the *Diário Popular* and were the fruit of her regular contributions to that newspaper. Cohabiting in the same physical space, the texts and drawings were oriented towards the experience of autonomy and identity of each and both authors, subverting the conventional relationship between the text and illustration: *Os associais – espiritual de uma paisagem defunta, Uma mulher de sua casa* - 1967-68.

Case 2:

“In horizontal and parallel bands, I inscribe the elemental gestures of an embryonic writing, one which spontaneously finds structure, meaning and organic rhythm, assimilable to the manuscript pages that I myself contemplate as if they were oracles.” (Eurico Gonçalves, “Aquém e além Deserto”, 2001)

Having emerged during the “surrealist ascendancy” of the ‘50s, **Eurico Gonçalves** set out on an exploratory journey by way of *Zen* pictography, developing an appropriate informal/gestural language that revealed an expressionistic or abstract posture. In that context, writing was endowed with a calligraphic acceptability that the painter never abandoned.

What is most notable in his attitude of personal concentration is the simultaneous fluidity and consistency of his brushwork, clearly resulting from his internalisation of the Chinese and Japanese tradition. The painter does not try to expound meanings or transport interpretations through his signs; instead he empties them of conceptual recognition. He orients them towards pure visibility, ignores their external commitments, and focuses on their affective dexterity, urging acceptance and detachment.

His calligraphy, (apparently) despoiled of meaning, wanders off into the void, organised by the intuition of the moment, and guided by the rightness of the path. Once the abyss between body and soul is bridged, the spirit rises to an ineffable height, that of transcendence.⁵

“Since writing has become stereotyped, since the sign invented by free movement of the hand has stabilized and become repetitive and ornamental, since the gesture has become mechanical, since the manuscript has given way to the typescript, since the slow methods of the artisan have been replaced by industrial production, since the machine has replaced man, another relationship has been established between being and doing. In the process of adapting to the new tools of communication and mechanical expression, a relationship has emerged which not infrequently represents a rupture or divorce between man and his own nature.”⁶

Case 3:

⁴ António Areal, *Textos de Crítica e Combate na Vanguarda das Artes Visuais, [Texts of Criticism and Combat in the Vanguard of the Visual Arts]* 1970, pp.160-161

⁵ “Zen points to a specific state of awareness in which the mystery and beauty of life in this very moment is perceived wholly and directly and with pure objectivity.” (Anne Bancroft, *Zen, Direct, Pointing to Reality*)

⁶ Eurico Gonçalves, “Escrita Escrita Ideogramas e Anagramas” [“Writing Writing Ideograms and Anagrams”], in Ana Hatherly /E.M. de Melo e Castro, *PO-EX textos teóricos e documentos da poesia experimental portuguesa [PO-EX Theoretical Texts and Documents of Portuguese Experimental Poetry]*, Lisbon, Moraes Ed., 1982, p.193

“My reflections on the poetic act in the light of the principle of experimentation helped me to understand the old visual poems, since some of the basic rules of 20th century Experimentalism applied surprisingly well to the “experimentalism” of the past.”⁷

In the 1960s, within a particular intellectual context in which the protagonists showed evidence of being a cultural privilege in themselves, a movement came into being that was called experimental poetry – *po-ex*. The authors, who included E.M. de Melo e Castro, Alberto Pimenta, José Alberto Marques and **Ana Hatherly**, came from a background that was both poetic/literary and artistic/plastic.

In the generative personality of Ana Hatherly, writing - even outside her experimental phase - takes on almost all the eventualities of creation and knowledge. The productive flow emanating from her aesthetic source converges into a unity that is dynamic and boundless:

“My work begins with writing – I am a writer who creates visual art by experimenting with words. Concrete Poetry was a necessary stage, but more important was the study of writing and printing, and also manuscripts, especially ancient ones from China and Europe.

My work also begins with painting – I am a painter who creates literature by a process of becoming conscious of the ties that unite all the arts, particularly in our society. This consciousness became more important when I also began to use photography and cinema as a means of investigating the processes of experience and communication.”⁸

As regards the historical contextualisation, Ana Hatherly first presented two emblematic works, *Operation I* and *Operation II*, first in Lisbon and then in Oporto in the Alvarez Gallery in 1968.⁹ The session, we recall, consisted of a lecture in which she spoke about the theme, purpose and theory underlying the works exhibited, which was then followed by a prolonged debate. Based on Saussurean concepts, the explanation given was not easily comprehensible, nor recognisable to everyone in the crowd that filled the gallery, and this gave rise to reactions that focused upon the content of the author’s structuralist presuppositions.¹⁰ The colloquium concluded with a session of experimental music, consisting of three compositions by Jorge Peixinho played simultaneously.

The author’s inexhaustible capacity for creation almost precludes any kind of writing about her work. Writing about her writings creates labyrinths – those that are so seductive – confirming the fantasies and esoteric ramblings that impregnate them. The labyrinth - as a path through time, unknown and primordial, but also as a way of overcoming fear and the unpredictable - has become even more appealing; it is forbidden, ravishing lines and making mocking re-entrances that are exalted and baroque. The labyrinth as a metaphor of language itself, in that aspect that is multiple, ambiguous and revealing.

Case 4:

“there are	cemetery museums
there are	failed artists that are

⁷ “Once their theoretical bases were known – particularly in the *labyrinths*, *anagrams* and texts in which the process of combination played a determining role – it became evident the value these gave to the realisation of a programme, considered valuable in itself. The recourse to the technique of combination and substitution was something that brought these texts close to present-day Experimentalism.” Ana Hatherly, *A Casa das Musas [The House of the Muses]*, Lisbon, Editorial Estampa, 1995, p.11

⁸ Ana Hatherly, Oporto, Alvarez Gallery, October-November 1979

⁹ In *Operation I*, the poet presented her “structural alphabets”: in these, the design resulted from the application of a set of finite rules capable of generating an infinite set of visual products. In the journal, *Operation II*, her *Tratado das Estruturas Poéticas [Treaty of Poetic Structure]* is published.

¹⁰ “However, the works exhibited there are related with that research on linguistic structures. Thus, Ana Hatherly shows us, in her work, how an alphabet can be constructed without a key, and she gives an example of how this can be applied. It is an alphabet without meaning, but which has an internal logic, despite that; it is organised coherently, although lacking in signification”.

there are failed critics that are
 artists?
 There are the slighted...
 There are critics and artists that
 knew how to live...”
 (Abílio, “considerações justas desconsiderações inevitáveis” [“just
 considerations inevitable disconsiderations”] 1974)

In Oporto, **Abílio** collaborated hard on publications and initiatives promoted by the *Portuguese experimental poetry* group, and participated in the *Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, published in 1972, by Ernesto Melo e Castro and José Alberto Marques. His work is configured in a singular fashion, one could say, within the ambit of Portuguese art and poetry.

“what I draw I write
 I engrave cut and stick
 It may be worth nothing tomorrow
 But the packaging
 won't be either”¹¹

This autodidact always assumed, with exhaustive directness, the exemplary stance of a genuine product of the *underground*. Over the years, with the production of deliberately ephemeral material like manifestos, journals, pamphlets, collages and photocopied visual poems, he has demonstrated his convictions, denouncing the art market, the meanderings of the artistic institutions and the vested interests of art critics, to the general public. His proclamations, with their endlessly particularised systematizations, provide evidence of all the components that define the practice and pseudo-criticism of art, from his intentional focus.

Brief scandals and colourful demonstrations characterise the dynamics of the “Red Group”, organised around him. This, which also included Carlos Ferreira and Dias Santos, allowed his irreverent, magnetic and unquenchable personality to expand all the more. His outlook on society, at unique moments when mentalities were changing, permitted him to detect the bankruptcy of the involvements and utopias glimpsed through progress and through the Portuguese modernization project for Europe.

“...the artist was self-taught and member nº 330 of the national society of fine art. he observed men, nature and things, discovering, recreating, transfiguring, inventing...like anyone, he needed love, freedom, time, money to fulfil himself. he lived for work. he worked with pleasure to the point of pain, for human, physiological and social motives. he engraved metal or linoleum as if he were scratching his own flesh, he wrote and painted with pigments based on his own blood.”¹²

Caso 5:

“My eyes saw, tried, verified (or not) the theory.
 My mind elaborated, theorized, verified itself (or not) in practice.
 The complementarity of these two situations is indispensable.
 They complete each other, that is, they realise each other in a single unity’.
 (Joaquim Rodrigo, *O Complementarismo em Pintura – contribuição para a Ciência da Arte, [Complementarity in Painting: Contribution for the Science of Art]*, 1982)

Having initiated his artistic career in Lisbon in the ‘50s, **Joaquim Rodrigo**, agronomic engineer by profession, developed a coherent and genuinely unusual oeuvre that combined the use of a denominative and simplified calligraphy with almost pure iconic elements. His approach to composition and its semantics resulted from a profound meditation upon the language of the aboriginal artists of Australia, “in their narrative and representative codes and in the basic

¹¹ Abílio José dos Santos, *O defunto que se parece comigo [The deadman that looks like me]*, published by the author, 1991, s/p.

¹² Abílio Santos, “edict”, text for the Exhibition at the Alvarez Gallery, May 1968, Oporto, s/p

simplification of the palette into the four earth-based colours. He would execute signs and symbols directly without premeditation, though never at random, creating extensive narratives that were sometimes dramatic, sometimes lyrical, other times humorous, emotively reworking details from daily life into diary sequences of images and ideas.”¹³

In his compositions, remarkable historical, social or private episodes (such as journeys) would be described, charged with social criticism, relating to a particular ideology that was oppressed by censorship.

He was also concerned with the pedagogic dimension, considering it a privileged way of constituting his artistic interests, and later published two volumes of detailed and conclusive reflections in *O Complementarismo em Pintura – contribuição para a Ciência da Arte* (*Complementarity in Painting – A Contribution to the Science of Art*) (1982) and *Pintar Certo* (*Painting Correctly*) (1994). His argumentation moved between a theorization about painting and a positive philosophical speculation about the pragmatic conceptuality of the real, always exercised with rigour and objectivity.

“Reality is appearance plus non-appearance. Or in other words, appearance is a part or a fraction of a whole that is called reality. Let us understand the cosmos as a natural organised unit on its own. (...) Consequently, the structural unit of appearance is indissociable from the structural unit of reality.”¹⁴

His philosophical approach contains a pre-Socratic core in which the Cosmos is conceived as an “organised natural unit”, which means the “structural unit”: “the set of factors, principles or laws that permit the ordering/harmonization of all heterogeneous, dissimilar things and non-things, which the model proposed to us”. These ideas were explicitly manifested in an interview carried out by João Pinharanda, when the artist was asked about such influences in his work:

“J.R.: (...) Pythagoras: the sacred quaternary, source of eternal nature”?

A&L: What are you referring to exactly?

J.R.: To the number four. I am a convinced tetradict. Pythagoras explained the Universe from the number four. If we want to arrive at a consensus about the correct definition of nature, we cannot avoid what Empedocles pointed out in 444 B.C. when he said it was constructed of the four elements – fire, earth, air and water. There is no life on earth without those four elements.”¹⁵

Caso 6:

“P4. Language is a machine?

R4. Language is the body of the human spirit

P.5. And the machine?

R.5. The machine produces the body of the language of the human spirit.

P.6. And the machine?

R.6. The graphic/acoustic/objectual/poetic representation is the production-of-the-body-of-the-language-of-the-human-spirit.

P.7. And the machine?

¹³ Fernando Azevedo, “Prémios de Arte em Portugal 1982 – Joaquim Rodrigo: a invenção, a pintura e a ciência da arte” [“Art Prizes in Portugal 1982 – Joaquim Rodrigo: invention, painting and the science of art”], in *Colóquio/Artes*, nº 56 (March 1983), p.35. “In his so oriented technical and narrative freedom, the methodology invented for painting is a principle of scientific verification and application, so rigorous in its universality that it excludes any other.”

¹⁴ Joaquim Rodrigo, *O Complementarismo em Pintura – contribuição para a Ciência da Arte* [*Complementarity in Painting: Contribution towards the Science of Art*], Lisbon, Livros Horizonte, 1982, p.79

¹⁵ Joaquim Rodrigo in an interview with João Pinharanda and José Sousa Machado: “O único quadro-tipo possível” [“The Only Possible Picture-Type”] in *Artes & Leilões*, nº 2 (December-January 1989/90), p.49

R.7. Visualisation in movement of the graphic/acoustic object is the poetics of the bodysoul represented in the language of man..."

(Silvestre Pestana, *As ilhas desertas [The Deserted Islands]* 1979)

Still in Oporto in the '70s and '80s, cases stand out like Emerenciano with his "pictorial calligraphies" and **Silvestre Pestana**¹⁶ with the collages that aim at the deconstruction of ideologies underlying texts. Both, with their different styles, thus materialised a similar aesthetic.

"This inevitable theoretical-perceptual alteration of our literary concepts and practice, forged within and for the world, and then dominated by the press, is supported by a techno-vision, unleashed by our contemporary "media", necessarily lead to the rupture with what we usually call the act of reading."¹⁷

Silvestre Pestana's activity extended the complicity between writing and image into the realms of performance, intervention, videography, and even as far as theoretical reflection about those domains. His activities in the group *Anima*, which he co-founded in 1977, developed out of experimentation with the visual text and with concrete poetry - that which Seme Lufti called "poetic graphic experimentalism". Bodily expression was the basis of his individual or group work, organised in accordance with pulsional deliberations, released in performances or in embodied writings:

"Our bodies following loose pathways on the white page. The next step, the connection of the proposed poems, disconnected in their individuality, but interconnected by a specific desire to tell a story that interests us all"¹⁸

1st Interval:

Jorge Pinheiro - one of the 4 Twenties - also unleashed an experimental process that was simultaneously hermeneutical and pictorial, using the series (numerical structures) of *Fibonacci* - see the album "Fifteen essays on a theme or Pythagoras playing chess with Marcel Duchamp"-, and the scores of contemporary Portuguese composers like Jorge Peixinho¹⁹. The painter, who later settled in Lisbon, sought in notation the raw material for possible formal exercises based upon the musical code.

Case 7:

"António Sena has a horror of any way of explaining meaning through gesture, especially, the semantic coincidences peculiar to illustration."²⁰

¹⁶ Cf. His literary creation in *Hydra 2*, 1969 and *The Desert Islands* - Catalogue of the exhibition at the Árvore Cooperative, Oporto, 1979.

¹⁷ Silvestre Pestana, "Visual e depois? Literatura Informacional" ("Visual, and afterwards? Informational Literature"), March 1980, in Ana Hatherly /E.M. de Melo e Castro, *PO-EX textos teóricos e documentos da poesia experimental portuguesa (PO-EX Theoretical Texts and Documents of Portuguese Experimental Poetry)*, Lisbon, Moraes Ed., 1982, pp.275-278

¹⁸ Seme Lufti & Rui Frati, "Ânima - Teatro - Acção de textos visuais" ("Anima - Theatre - Action of Visual Texts") in Ana Hatherly /E.M. de Melo e Castro, *PO-EX textos teóricos e documentos da poesia experimental portuguesa (PO-EX Theoretical Texts and Documents of Portuguese Experimental Poetry)* Lisbon, Moraes Ed., 1982, pp. 256-257

¹⁹ The composer (and pianist) had the leading role in the first *happenings* in Lisbon. Such was the event realised on the night of 7th January 1965, at the Gallery *Divulgação*, the "Concert and Pictorial Audition". In addition to Jorge Peixinho, the team included António Aragão, Salette Tavares, Manuel Baptista, Mário Falcão, Melo e Castro and Clotilde Rosa. Peixinho subsequently worked with José Ernesto de Sousa, in particular, in a number of unforgettable projects, a collaboration that lasted until the middle of the '80s, and which represented a notable attempt at forging links between the plastic and audiovisual arts.

²⁰ Maria Filomena Molder, "Da pintura recente de António Sena" ("On the recent painting of António Sena") in *Colóquio/Artes (Colloquy/Arts)*, n° 95 (December 1992), pp.5-6

The works of **António Sena**, spanning almost 4 decades, reveal loyalty and obedience to his personal notions of aesthetic rigour. His calligraphy, or rather, his way of writing, glosses different European languages, encouraging the decoding and comprehension of delimiting institutionalised nationalities: a “manuscript painting,”²¹ as João Fernandes has called it.

The letters, inscribed one after the other with unshakeable psycho-motor fluency - though carefree in their apparent graphic regularity, are associated to the sublime of overpainting and to the revisited concept of palimpsest, leaving in suspense an almost murmured music.

Writing the painting, engraving it, wounding the canvas itself with the contents of some of the phrases, reality approaches this world but moves away from it too, with games and illusions that it cannot escape, transferring, passing always in front, eluding. Such occasion or obsession is established in specific calligraphic and pictorial models, giving rise to an aesthetic discursiveness, founded (as we have seen) in the solvency of a decodification as exclusive orienting principle.

The escape from and possession of reality through the use of writing in painting, incessantly transposed from painting to painting and from paper to paper, attends to time by invading it, and uses space to retain it by recourse to simple geometric elements, those that serve to synthesise the universe and communicate:

“And, however, there are few artists that get as close as he does to the conception of art as an evocation, a re-editing of those primary movements of constriction, letting the hand guide the memory, gestures seeking their formula.”²²

+ 1 Interval:

In tune with the major changes that were taking place in established Europe, there appeared in Paris in the year 1958²³ the journal *KWY*, a novel project involving 6 Portuguese artists, a Bulgarian and a German: Lourdes Castro, René Bertholo, Costa Pinheiro, José Escada, João Vieira, Gonçalo Duarte, Christo and Jan Voss.

The journal was published for 9 years, and under its aegis, relevant activities and episodes were developed. Its policies as regards graphic presentation and content were resolved in practice: it tried out a sociological and aesthetic relationship *sui generis*, following an orientation derived from “letrism”;²⁴ it also sought to materialise a critical vision, closely affected by the Second World War, although without neglecting motivations of an explicitly plastic and performative nature, associated to the literary and ideological. In parallel, there were exhibitions, with works that demonstrated their underlying philosophy: see, for example, the semantic and symbolic dismantling that results from the conviviality of the (respectively, two and three dimensional) works of Lourdes Castro: *Letras e duas casas (Letters and two houses)* (1962) e *Máquina de escrever (Typewriter)* (1961).

Highlighting arguments implicit in Umberto Eco’s *Open Work*, the plasticity, iconography and semantics that characterised the work of the nominated artists would not entail that their individualities should be constrained by the common project.

²¹ CF. “A pintura e o desenho de António Sena: uma cartografia autográfica” [“The Painting and Drawing of António Sena: an Autographic Cartography”] in Catalogue *António Sena -1964-2003*, Oporto, Serralves Museum, 2003, pp.37-59

²² Maria Filomena Molder, “Uma Arte da Remuneração: António Sena” [“An Art of Remuneration: António Sena”] *Matérias Sensíveis [Sensitive Matters]*, Lisbon, Relógio d’Água, 1999, p.117

²³ It may be recalled, as illustration, that 1960 was the year that Pierre Restany proclaimed the new contours of the relationship between art and life in the Manifesto of the *Nouveaux Réalismes*. There were also the groups *El Paso* in Spain, Group 58 and the Group *Fluxus*.

²⁴ “The poets that collaborated in this helped to fix reality by means of concepts in their lexicon. And the journal, for its part, needed this lexicographic support.” Margarida Acciaiuoli, “KWY: a revista, as edições e o grupo” [“KWY: the journal, the editions and the group”], in Catalogue *KWY – Paris 1958/68*, Lisbon, Belém Cultural Centre, 2001, p.21

“It used words as signs to construct its images and intuitions. Therefore, the poems were embodied, that is, designed and printed afterwards as serigraphies, acquiring from the start and mainly at the start, a status equal to that of the image.”²⁵

In accordance with singular languages, different authors glossed the exercise of the letter, the word, writing, and submitted to its personal authenticity, allowing it to assume an almost exclusive graphic, almost decorative value; they included signic elements in an visual vocabulary embodied in multiple colours or attributed to it a dense mythic conceptualisation.

Case 8:

“For João Vieira, the discovery and use of the pictorial possibilities of signs and letters leads to a true reinvention of painting, following a particular and idiosyncratic code that never ceases being iconological in order to become textual.”

(João Fernandes, “A letra e o corpo na obra de João Vieira” [“The Letter and the Body in the Work of João Vieira”], 2001)

Upon his return to Portugal from Paris in 1963, **João Vieira**, in isolation, continued working on a project *sui generis*. He took letters, the word, as dogma and substantiated them through pretexts and with available or imaginable resources – two-dimensional, three-dimensional, performative – a project he has worked on from the end of the ‘50s until today:

“...between the reworked memories of childhood (spelling notebooks and his parents’ jobs as primary school teachers) and a never proclaimed but well-founded erudite culture that allowed him to reflect upon the historical functions of writing in painting, from the earliest medieval illuminated manuscripts and the long and ritual inscriptions in Chinese and Japanese painting, to the modernist ruptures of first cubism and then, Dadaism and surrealism.”²⁶

With this varied aesthetic background, the letters inscribed in paintings were appropriated from different traditions, and gained multiple manifestations, as stated in the Retrospective Exhibition at the Museum of Serralves. Initially associated with gesture, with a more effective informality, they came to be concentrated into clearer pictorial contours, tending to be delimited into three-dimensional forms. While in the first phase, the letters and background of the composition insinuate themselves in an indeterminate way, later, the certainty of his purpose contributed to his assumption of perceptual clarity of vowels and consonants. The connection of the letters to the private and communal world was never lost, for words and ideas are evoked, actions are demanded. The accepted semantic game, developed and powerful, served an aesthetic irony, infected with an amorous affection:

“As if he were hearing the painter: “Look at where you are. In these alphabets there is more than an enunciation, but also a community, enclosed and situated. The ultimate site of a letter is its primal situation: what marks and records the absence of a body, but sustains the (essential) moment of the figure. What I call “writing” is the transformation of the experience of the senses.”²⁷

These conceptual games became most media-friendly during the performances of the 1970s. These were memorable events in a Portuguese artistic panorama that sought (to redeem itself) to appropriate time in mutation: “The spirit of the letter”(Judite Cruz Gallery, 1970) is an example of this. The video recordings that remained revealed an unrivalled dynamic.

²⁵ Margarida Acciaiuoli, “KWY: a revista, as edições e o grupo” [KWY: the journal, the editions and the group] in Catalogue *KWY – Paris 1958/68*, Lisbon, Belém Cultural Centre, 2001, p.21

²⁶ Raquel Henriques da Silva, “João Vieira: das letras aos corpos” [“João Vieira: from letters to bodies”], in the Catalogue *João Vieira*, Oporto, Serralves Museum, 2002, pp.67-68

²⁷ João Miguel Fernandes Jorge, “Escrever, pintar, até desaparecer o mundo circundante”, [“Write, paint until the surrounding world disappears”] in *Sombras [Shadows]*, Lisbon, Relógio d’Água, 2001, p.286

Case 9:

“Words to speak about the unspeakable: metaphors to induce verbalised meanings about the work. Thus, what seems is not. In fact, there are no secure references at all.” (Alberto Carneiro, “Necessary Words”, January 1973)

Loyal to the principles of the *happening* and the *performance*, **Alberto Carneiro**, from the 60s onwards, designed complex projects and carried them out in accordance with his aesthetic and ideological options: photography, drawing, sculpture, materials and above all the *body* as protagonist in everything, and these activities isolate him in the contemporary Portuguese panorama. These projects live on in detailed records, where sketches are indistinguishable from detailed writing, valuing both aesthetic and literary contents.

The sculptor constituted a creative universe, founding it in the conviction of a relationship of belonging to the cosmos and in the recovery of pre-Socratic meaning in the definition of the concept - intrinsic and indissociable belonging, based on the four elements. The consciousness of the situation and the condition of manifest relatedness between man and the cosmos consolidated the substance of a case that is seminal in Portuguese sculpture. Inserting it into a dimension that was developed and characteristic of the international panorama – close to the aesthetic position of Joseph Beuys - the author institutes himself as a body/work of sculpture, respecting his semantic essence (and existence).

“Nature recreated in my image is similarity: I within it and within the polarity of my aesthetic sentiments. Art is created to transform the images of daily life. A cloud, a tree, a flower, a handful of earth, a stone, all are situated on the same aesthetic plane in which I myself move: they are an integral part of my world, they are a swamp of sensations accumulated from all times, across a memory which has the age of man.”²⁸

The complex projects realised in the ‘70s and ‘80s (such as, “The sea is prolonged in each and us”, 1968-69; “A desert between two oases”, 1969/71; “A line towards your aesthetic sentiments”, 1970/71; “Aesthetic operation in Caldas de S. João (Aregos)”, 1974-75; “7 aesthetic rituals over a bundle of bamboo in the landscape”, 1975; “Body Art/ Art Body”, 1976/78) correspond to the demand for a handwritten and calligraphic record that attains the proportions of obsessive intimacy.

The photographs that describe the artist’s activity, development and rituals are accompanied by exploratory graphic schemes and a pulsional writing. In other cases, he concentrates on short words and phrases, the key of the artistic design or the austerity of ontological reflection. In other cases, he engraved into his proclamations and manifestos the essence of his decisions, the reasons for his actions.

Case 10:

“3. Tiredness
Coimbra, 12th November 1978
Dear Sir

I have taken the liberty of writing to you, and now
I wish to desist from this company that
Proposed to make my soul.

I see you when you pass, near my house
And I at the window, behind the curtains
I watch you with my heart jumping
Transcendent.
What should I do?...to whom should I write?
Oh Sir. You don’t know me, you don’t even know

²⁸ Alberto Carneiro, “From Notes for a Diary” (December 1968-January 1971)

My name, I am deluding myself, for
Life for me no longer has meaning, only
When I see you does it transform
Into the reason for living.
I would like to talk to you...
Excuse me...

Maria da Conceição Moreira

P.S: I will be at the Snak 007, at six in the afternoon, next Thursday.”²⁹

Belonging to a transitional generation, between the pre-25th-April and the post-revolution, **Albuquerque Mendes**, who began working in the area of the performance in association with the *CAPC*³⁰, bases his writing in the transversality of his painting. In accordance with these presuppositions and giving rein to an entrepreneurial spirit, he was one of the elements responsible for the setting up in 1975 of the group *Puzzle*.³¹ Some years later, he went on to co-found with Gerardo Burmester, the *Lusitanian Space* (1983-85). In both cases, the range of possibilities available to the performance (like pictorial art) is filled with manifestations based upon the word, its polysemy and ironic potential, crisscrossed with seductive visual elements.

In painting, Albuquerque’s experience with the word is repeated; it is impregnated with a narrative iconographic seduction that is complacent and filled with poetic artifice, sought out with the dedication of a collector of rarities. This is the case whether he is dealing with fragments cut out of magazines (duly assuming the condition of collage, something random and spontaneous) or whether the written presence is embroidered with concentrated ideas and feelings.

The relationship is still extended to the restless, insatiable search for phrases and ideas that, with all propriety, cross the author’s dearest influences: Marcel Duchamp and Dadaism, Brazilian concrete poetry, cultural and symbolic anthropology – particularly centred in Brazil. All these references converge and portray themselves, frequently indistinguishable from the “self-portrait” – not only the portrait as a representation of oneself, but also as an analogy of the mythical and religious domains. We could define a typology of visual signs that could help: fragments of autobiographical reference, images of mechanical tools, images from religious iconography, and particularly, the endless fascination for writing, the exercise of this and its formalism (intentional or random).³²

Interval (still another x):

‘Aesthetic operators’ was what José Ernesto de Sousa called some of those artists. In a phase that was peculiar to the socio-cultural and historical life in Portugal, *Zero Alternative* became the emblem of the concept, of the will and the action. Although of different generations, these artists have shared a common project/action, as many have said, throughout the most recent history of art in Portugal: António Sena, Ana Hatherly, Alberto Carneiro, Albuquerque Mendes, João Vieira, António Areal, Joaquim Rodrigo, and the others: Abílio José Santos, “self-taught accursed artist”, exerting his iconoclastic look and writing over values instituted in the history and criticism of Portuguese art as manifestations of the social decline of the time: Silvestre Pestana, another type of marginality, of academic background,

²⁹ Albuquerque Mendes, “Tiredness”, in the Catalogue for the Exhibition *Armando Azevedo*, Oporto, Eng. António de Almeida Foundation, 1978, s/p.

³⁰ CAPC = Centre of Plastic Arts in Coimbra.

³¹ “The Puzzle Group considers itself a form of social and cultural animation open to all confrontations that are possible or proposed to it; these may be contradictory or not (debates, counter-exhibitions), geographic (multiplicity and diversity of exhibition sites and places for encounters with the public) and theoretical/practical (leaving the gallery or museum for the open space of the city; or simultaneous exhibition with other groups).” (Egídio Álvaro)

³² Bernardo Pinto de Almeida, in the Catalogue of the Exhibition *Almas [Souls]*, Lisbon, Nasoni Gallery, 1991, s/p.

involved in subversions of the plastic and performance arts; in the deliberately archaic margin of calligraphy; and, in the void of gesture, Eurico Gonçalves.

This journey through Portuguese art, through the relationship it has sustained between writing and image, does not end here. Important languages in the '90s, developed from the experiments of the immediately preceding years, have led to solid and genuine explorations on the part of different artists in modern conceptual fields, from different backgrounds, associated to a plurality of typologies and IT applications and communication.

All these artists, and others, themselves justify another exhibition, one which we hope will come to pass, in the wake of the thematic shows presented here.

Case 11:

The installation *Hypnosonata (cataleptic series)* of Avelino Sá attempts to make visible in a space specially chosen for the occasion, the close connection that he has maintained since the beginning of his activity, between image and writing, and in this particular case, with the sound-art of Kurt Schwitters.

Following his interest in the world of that socially-instituted marginality known as “madness”, which exhibitions such as the *Praise of Madness* (Oporto 2001) sought to demystify, Avelino Sá has again returned to the sublime photographs of patients at the Paris hospital of La Salpêtrière, from the end of the 19th century. In the period when the famous Dr. Jean Martin Charcot was carrying out his research³³ into previously unknown psychic pathologies, the strange beauty of the faces and fixed bodies became more than a sociological and historical testimony, but also the record of disproportionate prejudice and cultural stereotyping. In addition, the fact that these were photographs and not drawings or any other type of visual/documental record directly manipulated by the human hand, it was as if the necessary distance was generated for a vaster public not to feel uncomfortable. The photographs, while still documents, reliable records and clearly objective, are mediated by mechanical and optical apparatus that seem to paradoxically filter out the fear of eschatological reality.

(Egon Schiele was inspired by some of Charcot's images for his own sublevations of the body itself).

Dr. Charcot stage-managed his public lessons in such a way as to best demonstrate his discoveries; in those sessions, he acted alongside patients who had been duly rehearsed, with Blanche Wittmann, his most famous model. She was portrayed in the painting of André Brouillet (1887), *A Clinical Lesson at La Salpêtrière*.

In this installation, the painter interferes with these photographs, incorporating into them the encoded force of fragments from the play of the German (non-aligned) Dadaist entitled *Die Sonate In Urlauten*. The ‘final’ version of this sound play dates from 1932, but has acquired different features and variations over the years, since the moment the author understood, in about 1921, the potential of this type of “composition”. Like the principle underlying the Dadaist relationship between the word and the non-decipheryng of its meaning (in the conventional context), Avelino Sá has used words in a way that associates them precisely with the phantasmagoric dimension of madness, interposing and subverting them, glossing appearance and unreality.

In a visual reading of these 50 photographs, it remains for us to summon that sublimity that razes the world and imposes the aesthetic condition.

Note

And it is the emergence of the ego that results from the shared condition of our visit to these 11 cases of seeing, images and writings.

One day, I will finish off the idea of this exhibition and this text, not today.

³³ The famous *Lessons on the illnesses of the nervous system held at la Salpêtrière* (Volume I) were published between 1872 and 1873. His writings on the effects of hypnosis (magnetism and electricity) in cases of hysteria, post-traumatic disorder and epilepsy were of great importance, particularly for Sigmund Freud.

Maria de Fátima Lambert
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