

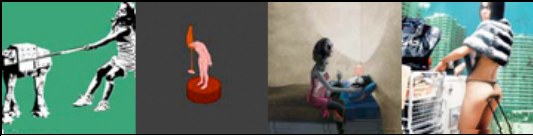
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CURRENT ISSUE



SPECIAL PROJECTS



Where Are You From? LISBON SEEN

Lesley Wright is the director of the Faulconer Gallery at Grinnell College, Iowa, and the co-curator of *Where are you from?* Contemporary Portuguese Art that was on view February 1–April 20.



José Carlos Teixeira, 38 Minutes of Anthropology (strangers to ourselves), 2005-06. Video installation (detail), Size variable. Courtesy of the artist.

"The traveler usually neglects to speak to and about the homes they leave."—Joe Wood

Where are you from? is an exhibition about curatorial and artistic exploration. It is an exhibition that acknowledges that the contemporary Portuguese artist wanders far from home, settling elsewhere in Europe, in the U.S., in Africa, or Asia for a time, absorbing ideas and influences and then bringing them back to feed the art milieu of Lisbon or Porto or Évora. This exhibition also acknowledges the journeying of the curators (Jane Gilmore and Lesley Wright), colleagues from central Iowa who travel, often, away from the Midwest to see art and artists in other cities, other countries, and on other continents. In this particular exhibition, the focus is on art they found in Portugal. The resulting exhibition takes that art on its own unexpected journey, from Portugal to Iowa. Within the sophisticated art galleries and museums in that most-westward of European nations, the idea of Portuguese art in Iowa is resoundingly peculiar, beyond the boundaries of the known art world, and without any recognizable reason for being.

In the course of all this exploration, changes take place in the artist, the curator and the experience of the art. Every change of context changes us, changes how we see the art before us, and changes how the art functions within an environment. The oddness of seeing contemporary Portuguese art in Grinnell or Cedar Rapids or Cedar Falls, Iowa raises anew the question we ask of any new thing: where are you from? In turn, as we unpack the answer, we have to ask ourselves: where are we from? The answer, in every case, is not so simple. It is a construction built out of our histories, our circumstances, and our connections. The 21 artists brought together in this exhibition would never be seen together as a group in Portugal, primarily because curators from Iowa see the Portuguese art world through different filters. Perhaps this rearrangement is for the good and can open doors, make new connections, and inject the unexpected into both languishing and flourishing careers. Portuguese art in Iowa, and Iowa

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curators in Portugal, form an unexpected contact zone.

The term “contact zone,” introduced by Mary Louise Pratt in her important book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* in 1992, is defined as “social [space] where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other.” As a curator moving into the contact zone, I meet the art world first in a social space, and am fascinated with the place and the culture that surrounds the art. The art world of today, with its traveling shows, biennials, artist residencies, and art capitals, is a globe-trotting contact zone. But seeing the art “at home” provides a different context. In an exhibition like *Where are you from?* we pause to interrogate a particular place, to see what we might be able to comprehend as a visitor, and to shape a vision of that place into an exhibition comprehensible to an audience far away. Then we pick up that created exhibition and take it to our home, and in the process alter both what we select and the place we choose to inhabit.

As I moved through the contact zone of Portuguese art in June 2006 and March 2007 and grappled with what I found, I looked at a lot of art, I met many artists and critics, and I experienced a wide range of art environments. Although much of what I saw was part of the greater globalized art world, there was still the barrier of a variety of cultural assumptions. As Pratt notes, the text—be it a book, a letter, or a work of art—is intended both “to be read, *and to be readable.*” In two short trips to Portugal, there was much that remained for me unreadable and opaque. As Portuguese artist Ana Pérez-Quiroga astutely noted, an environment affects the ability to communicate and when the curator is a traveler, much can be lost in translation.

As a result our selection of these 21 artists is idiosyncratic, connected to the baggage we brought with us from Iowa. We selected artists with whom we connected personally, intellectually, and who fit the (eventual) core question: *Where are you from?* They are not all blue chip artists in Portugal, seen widely in the best galleries and in biennials from São Paulo to Liverpool. But each presented a facet of the complicated answer to the question we posed and together create an exhibition that may be at least somewhat readable to an Iowa audience, and even the wider American audience.

What about that core question? What implications does it carry? Asking artists *where* they are *from* implies a past and a history, a time before the present. It also implies many places and many points of view. One might be “from” a location, or many locations, a theoretical point of view, a philosophical approach, an artistic movement, a point on the map, a series of journeys. But it asks for some specificity, some defining moment or place which could be construed as a demand for cultural identity. In today’s globalized art world, the notion of cultural identity is suspect, ideally irrelevant, transcended by a worldwide multimedia feast that ties everyone together. If this were indeed true, then art anywhere should be comprehensible to everyone. At least to me, this is not the case.

By basing this exhibition on the question *Where are you from?* we inject our personal assumptions about personal, place, and cultural identity as an irreducible part of the project that is art. Perhaps this is an old-fashioned restriction to place on an exhibition concept. Perhaps, for me, it comes from 15 years of living in an art world (the American Midwest) that is endlessly defined as *not* of the mainstream by those who assume they live in the hub of the mainstream (New York, Los Angeles). When the circle is not inclusive, one can only assume there is a difference between being in or out of the circle and that the global is not universal.

Nevertheless, the limitations imposed by culture present their own opportunities for exploration. We present here an exhibition of these 21 artists that produces our peculiar view of Portuguese art, our image of where this exhibition comes from. Within our answer to the question are elements of many histories relevant to Portugal: colonial history (in the work of Manuel Santos Maia, born in former Portuguese colony Mozambique, and Ana Pérez-Quiroga, a regular visitor to Morocco), economic history (the piece by Paula Reaes Pinto and António Pinto on the sardine industry), and art history (see Pedro Portugal and António Caramelo’s pieces on Dada, sculpting and identity). There are stories of family in the work of João Leonardo and Dina Campos Lopes (who also happen to be cousins), and of the strains produced by gender in Teresa Furtado’s work.

These are starting points, as are the direct references to the place that is Portugal in André Cepeda’s photographs, and in the tension between home and away in Rui Toscano’s videos. Pedro Valdez Cardoso’s sculpture and José Carlos Teixeira’s video installation carry us out of Portugal to how the world beyond may look back at that place, while Eduardo Matos, Carlos Bunga, Rodrigo Oliveira, and Nuno Pedrosa focus in on the structures—mundane or fantastic—of an omnipresent Portuguese built environment, and all that ‘structure’ implies culturally and artistically.

Culture, and perhaps even a critique of culture, flows through many of these works. It is more explicitly expressed in Filipe Rocha da Silva’s paintings, dependent on mark making and the perhaps futile urge to communicate with visual symbols, and in the video work of Rui Valério, a master of spinning the possibilities proposed by the culture created by the music industry. Miguel Palma steps beyond the arts into borderlands with science and technology, allowing the industrial aspects of these cultural expressions to obscure his role as an artist. Marta de Menezes walks directly into the science lab to find the tools for her art.

Lest we assume there is something essentialist about being an artist in Portugal, it is important to note that the 21 artists presented in this exhibition have wide ranging experiences of living, studying and exhibiting their art around the world. Within this group there are artists who have made their way to Berlin, New York, London, Spain, San Francisco, Australia, Holland, Morocco, or Los Angeles. Some were born to families from former Portuguese colonies such as Mozambique, Brazil, or Angola. Currently, they all have a presence in the Portuguese art scene, even if they are crossing in and out of Portugal regularly.

Where are you from? is, in other words, a peculiar hybrid, a construction made of a place that is itself made of many inputs and expressed in many voices. It is the product of a reciprocal relationship between artists and curators, and it will be seen by a wide variety of people who encounter it in Iowa in 2008. In addition, a portion of the exhibition will be experienced virtually via the Internet, and a portion will be experienced through the catalogue.

Whatever the context, the work by these 21 Portuguese artists is part of the great, eternal flow of art. As anthropologist James Clifford has written, "...objects currently in the great museums are travelers, crossers—some strongly 'diasporic' with powerful, still meaningful ties elsewhere." He notes that art is part of a great "unfinished historical process of travel" where art made one place, perhaps out of experiences and materials garnered in another place, becomes art treasured somewhere else.

For Portuguese artists, such travel for the self and one's art is highly desirable. The hybridity it engenders enriches artistic expression, artistic dialogue, and the greater understanding of art. It enriches the contact zone where art is encountered in Portugal. Taking that art to Iowa with this exhibition is an unexpected journey, transplanting the art of a nation of explorers to the center of a nation of pioneers. The core question, 'where are you from,' complicates the encounter, since the answer for both the artists and the curators, as well as the audience, is not simple. I am from California, before living in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts and then settling in Iowa. Jane is from Iowa but has traveled widely and often, to Greece, Mexico, Portugal, and India, and to artist residencies across the US to nourish her creativity as an artist. There is something about each of those places that has shaped us. But what makes us American, as opposed to Portuguese, is lodged in some other elusive place.

Wherever we are from, we must be able to locate ourselves in order to enter into a conversation with this art. We know the exhibition is from Portugal, from the title. How then is it different from other art we know, or is it? What new thing do we create by bringing Portuguese art to Iowa, and once it has been here, then where is it from? For these 21 peripatetic artists, a home in Portugal matters at some level in their lives. We hope we can also make it matter for the viewers of this exhibition.

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