

# Joana Vasconcelos: ways towards a *relational art*\*

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“In this logic, the artist is at once the archivist of collective life and the collector/witness of a shared capacity. In bringing together the art of the plastic artist with that of the *chiffonnier*, the inventory gives a prominent place to the potential of objects and images in terms of common history; it also shows the kinship between inventive acts of art and the multiplicity of inventions of the arts of doing and living that make up a shared world – bricolage, collections, language games, materials for demonstrations, etc. In the space reserved for art, the artist strives to render visible the arts of doing which exist scattered throughout society.”

Michel de Certeau <sup>1</sup>

## Preamble 1: approaching through the outside entrance

At the end of 2010, the most recent of Joana Vasconcelos' public artworks – *Portugal a Banhos*, a marine-blue fibreglass swimming pool, an enormous hollowed out box in the shape of Portugal – was installed in Praça do Comércio in Lisbon.

With the usual competence of Joana Vasconcelos' production team, the swimming pool was erected with the Tagus in the background and slightly slanted towards it, just outside the boundaries of the Praça, or square, on the pavement leading to the wharf known as Cais das Colunas. Despite the still ongoing renovations, the work on the square was essentially finished, undertaken in line with a new design that in recent years had been the subject of much discussion in Lisbon. The aim, on the part of historians, urban planners and architects, was to safeguard the formal and aesthetic values of the most important set of buildings from the time of the reconstruction of Lisbon after the earthquake of 1755. The essence of these values manifests itself in the audacious yet calm way the city opens out on to the Tagus, in an attitude that is at once passive (the river was the reason for its existence) and active: it was by means of the river that Lisbon became *caput mundi* in the 16<sup>th</sup> century after the discovery of the maritime trade route to India, which then led the Portuguese to Japan, China, to African colonisation and the invention of Brazil.

The size of the square and its classical regularity endowed Joana Vasconcelos' piece with a matching scale. The best view, a discreet but lively hint of a slightly slanting vertical line, was to be had when arriving from Rua Augusta and before passing through the Arch. As opposed to the equestrian statue of King José which stands at the centre of the square, it was not intended to leave a mark on this sacred *locus*, merely to hint at a slight movement of flight: from the unmodulated blue of the fake swimming pool to the intense yet unstable blue of the Tagus, which rapidly submerges into greens or concentrates in endless greys.

As she likes to do, Joana Vasconcelos gave the piece a purpose: “Portugal can't let itself be turned into a swimming pool: be careful we don't let ourselves sink.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps she was evoking the serious financial, economic and political crisis affecting the country, threatened, after Greece and Ireland, with the humiliating invasion of the IMF's 'bean counters'. Or, perhaps, referring to the Republic's centennial, which was commemorated in 2010 and for which this piece was produced and exhibited. A century after the emergence of the noble republican, developmental, educational and patriotic ideals, how will Portugal face the future, so wrapped up as it is with memories of lost grandeur and so marked by one of Western Europe's most enduring dictatorships of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

Playing with words and the meanings of common phrases, therefore, the metaphor *Portugal a banhos*, only apparently focuses on its first meaning: summer and holidays (though on the petit bourgeois and industrialised scale of a garden swimming pool), words which denote the structure of the pool. With its cheerful and pleasingly democratic appearance, the shape of the pool mirrored the borders of Portugal (the oldest and most stable in all of Europe, it is usually added) and its structure was hollowed out of a cheap consumer material. But if it was Portugal and not the Portuguese who were at the seaside, then the country had absented itself, a ghost on holiday able to set sail unmanned... leaving the Portuguese where exactly?

The piece was exhibited for several months. According to the artist's observations, some people did not notice it or did not realise that it depicted the geographical outline of Portugal. It seems that *Portugal a Banhos* failed to achieve the popularity of her other public artworks, such as *Vitrine*, a variation of *Contaminação*, which was displayed on the facade of a building under construction in the popular Rua do Alecrim, where many pedestrians stopped and, at risk of being run over by the traffic, discussed the conflicting multiform patchwork object. Or the lace structure of *Donzela*, produced for the Castle of Santa Maria da Feira and its variation on the same theme, *Varina*, hung from D. Luís bridge in Oporto. As for myself, while I find the (non-)sense of these works captivating, shifting traditionally female and domestic production techniques into the public realm, I prefer the drier conceptual thinking behind *Portugal a Banhos*, which interrupts and questions the trademark images with which Joana Vasconcelos is customarily associated.

\* I use here an expression by Jacques Rancière from his work *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Polity Press, 2009, which was my guide throughout this article.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Les Arts de faire*, Paris: UGE, 1980, p.55

<sup>2</sup> Nuno R. Chorão, 'Artist exhibits swimming pool in Terreiro do Paço to 'question' the country's direction', *Público* newspaper, 22 October 2010.

## Preamble 2: 'Bordaliana'

I first met Joana Vasconcelos a long time after getting to know and appreciate her work. It came about neither by chance, nor design. We met in 'open protest', as people used to say in the last century, in the years immediately following the revolution of 25 April 1974, when I was in my twenties and Joana had just been born, in Paris in fact, where the echoes of the Portuguese revolution could be felt. Some envied the din of life at that time, split as we were between bourgeois democracy, which we had little time for, and Communist radicalism (Soviet, Maoist, Cuban...), whose *instrumentalia* we manipulated: there was still something dangerous about movements that had been banned and persecuted since the time of our grandparents.

The 'protest' I refer to was the decision to save the Fábrica Bordalo Pinheiro in Caldas da Rainha,<sup>3</sup> the most interesting example of Portuguese arts and crafts. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the factory had reinvented the regional ceramics tradition, effectively combining the knowledge of handicrafts and the culture and inventiveness of Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro, who was also a journalist, illustrator and cartoonist. He designed hundreds of pieces for his factory, some comprising a surreal catalogue of outsized creatures, with which he won a Gold Medal for the Portuguese Pavilion at the Exposition Universelle de Paris in 1889.

The urgent need to save the factory also turned into a movement to resist the well-intentioned plan by the local council to turn it into a museum based on the important collection of moulds from the time when Bordalo Pinheiro had made his extraordinary pieces. However, during the long and eventful history of the factory, production had ceased due to the very high level of skill, and expense, required to make them.

What the 'protest' hoped (and managed) to achieve was to force the factory to reverse this decision and to dedicate itself to the production of unique ceramics, some of which had begun to be ordered again precisely by... Joana Vasconcelos. The artist had stumbled upon them with amazement and, with passionate zeal, had begun a new line of work: she began enveloping Bordalo Pinheiro creatures in softly suffocating crocheted lace, luxuriant in colour and obsessive in narrative, whose very often enlarged scale (the lobster, crab, lizard, snake, toad and wasp...) activated a surreal imagery of considerable erotic charge. However, for Joana Vasconcelos, saving the factory was not just about saving something connected to her art. It was one of the elements in a strive to protect heritage, but also from the perspective of economic development informed by cultural roots rather than museumification.

As a historian, and someone older in years, it was an unforgettable experience to be part of this group and its resounding victory, with the important involvement of figures from the business world, Lisbon City Hall and the government of the day. Today, the factory appears to have opted for the strategy proposed. It is run by a larger group that maintains it as a small-scale niche producer whose success stems from its heritage value (producing Bordalo Pinheiro ceramics using traditional techniques) and a promising alliance with new designers. Joana Vasconcelos is one of the important links in this transformation via her orders for new examples of 'Bordaliana'.<sup>4</sup> But the relationship is deeper, more political and more emotional. Joana knows the workers and the managers and encourages them to experiment, to be bold and creative. This is one of the traits of a leader, someone who is increasingly represented in the powerful structures of her own work.

## Towards an iconological reflection: playing hard on every slate

In his aforementioned book, Jacques Rancière analyses several contemporary art exhibitions which, in his opinion, manifest the "indeterminate" paths of "a politics of art" which, utopianistically, confronts the retreat of politics from the social sphere.<sup>5</sup> He submits this analysis to "four major figures": "the play, the inventory, the encounter and the mystery".<sup>6</sup> In his specific language, which is somewhat cryptic but very stimulating, these "figures" represent "multiple shifts" in which the "dialectical provocations" of the avant-garde art movements of the past move towards "new figures of the composition of heterogeneous elements".

In my opinion, these "figures" (a less restrictive term than 'concept' or 'category') are diversely amalgamated into the work of Joana Vasconcelos and this is an interesting point to examine.

One thinks, for example, of 'play' in terms of its anthropological function in traditional societies or the cultural element given it by Johan Huizinga in his celebrated book *Homo Ludens* first published in 1938.<sup>7</sup> What unifies the huge diversity of what can be termed 'play' is the confrontation with the time allocated to work. Play is the opposite of routine: of repetition, obligation, resignation, survival and prudence. In the positive sense, play is the proclamation of heterotopic place and time<sup>8</sup> of imagination, invention, uselessness, laughter and derision. It is childhood versus adulthood, adventure versus safety, uselessness versus usefulness. In ancient societies, however, the time for play was precisely defined and the possibility for transgression controlled, recalling, to a point, the rules and procedures developed by the Ancient Greeks for sport and theatre. Even so, to a greater

<sup>3</sup> Besides Joana Vasconcelos, other members of this protest movement included Catarina Portas, the owner of 'A Vida Portuguesa', Bárbara Coutinho, director of MUDE - Museu do Design e da Moda, and Elsa Rebelo, a militant employee of the factory and a key figure in the study and valorisation of its heritage.

<sup>4</sup> I use here the title of an individual exhibition held in 2009 at the Espaço Fundação PLMJ in Lisbon at which the artist presented Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro's creatures enveloped in crocheted covers. In the same year, Joana Vasconcelos installed *Jardim Bordalo Pinheiro* in the gardens of the Museu da Cidade in Lisbon, articulating Bordalo's creatures with the space in a small and formal garden.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Rancière, *op. cit.*, pp. 53 and after.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem, ibidem*, p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> "The great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play from the start. Take language, for instance, that first and supreme instrument which man shapes in order to communicate, to teach, to command. Language allows him to distinguish, to establish, to state things; in short, to name them and by naming them to raise them into the domain of the spirit. In the making of speech and language the spirit is continually sparking between matter and mind, as it were, playing with this wonderful nominative faculty. Behind every abstract expression there lie the boldest of metaphors, and every metaphor is a play on words. This in giving expression to life man creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature." Boston: Beacon Press, 1971, p.4.

<sup>8</sup> I use this term in the same way as Michel Foucault in *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, in Neil Leach (ed.) - *Rethinking architecture*. New York: Routledge, 1997. In essence, 'heterotopias' are places that interrupt the everyday flows of life, such as a hotel or a holiday home or even a prison or museum.

or lesser extent, since time immemorial, play has been the main source of artistic creation alongside religion, especially in the utilitarian arts.

Beyond its social functions – as seen in its anthropological and psychological essence – play is also an indeterminate productive device. Before being codified and scheduled, it manipulates materials and the way they mesh together with all the freedom that is characteristic of children, lunatics, social misfits and artists. As it does not pretend to be useful, it is open to invention, to the mixing of what should not be mixed and the creation of non-objects: *things* which are played with and dreamed about and which are used to provoke and imaginatively produce laughter, love and hatred in others.

And there is yet another side to play. Alongside its heterotopic function (interrupting the flow of life's everyday places: living in another place) and its inventive use of materials (using banned or abandoned materials, meshing them together without codified knowledge to produce anti-objects), play uses language with the same creative freedom, inventing words for its procedures and its *things, playing*, more specifically, with words and their meanings: with the breaks that exist, and are recognised and encouraged between them.

Every element of play can be seen in Joana Vasconcelos' work, to the extent that, more than a "class" (in Rancière's sense), it is the very heart of the artwork. The artist frequently refers to the debt she owes Marcel Duchamp, who invented the ready-made in the avant-garde art movement of 1910. This involves removing a completely untouched or 'assisted' object from its obscure daily functions and raising it up to the status of an artwork. Another important aspect that characterises the ready-made is the title, which confers the new status of the object and creates a productive disconnection between what we see and what we read (for instance, we see a urinal but we read 'Fontaine'). One would refer to Duchamp's distinctive and avowedly ill-humoured opinion of the dynamics and diversity of the art scene and of the private or social usefulness of the role of the artist. As we know, he often said he found it less interesting and exciting than playing chess, in which he followed rigid rules and procedures that he said he refused in his art.<sup>9</sup>

As regards Duchamp's 'playing' with art, what Joana Vasconcelos takes from him is the definitive primacy of idea over execution. This is Conceptual art seen as consisting essentially of theory rather than a set of individual or group practices. However, for both Duchamp and Joana Vasconcelos, the 'idea' of the artwork is contaminated with senses and nonsenses, short-circuiting the objective functions and the tradition of making art (including the modernisms) through provocation and imagination and proposing 'things' which are art despite all the evidence to the contrary.

Even Duchamp's detachment fails to hide what Joana Vasconcelos exuberantly manifests: playing with the playfulness of those who observe the work and laugh, like the artist laughed when he first thought of them. This then is a Conceptual art full of emotions which queries the sacral and self-sufficient element with which most art is presented in the social domain that is the exhibition. Joana Vasconcelos also resembles Duchamp in the inventiveness she applies to the titles of her pieces, playing not only with the words, and their common meanings, but also with their anthropological and cultural references in high and low urban, national and international culture. However, she surpasses the strictness of Duchamp's titles, introducing them into the distinctive traits with which she plays with the role of art.

Among these distinctive traits, first and foremost is the scenographic quality. Whether big or small, most of Joana Vasconcelos' artworks are either in themselves powerful stagings (the purest example is *Jardim do Éden*, 2009), or they come to occupy the space as such, in some cases due to their objectual integrity (*A Noiva, Marilyn, Néctar*, for example), in others because of the movement within them (*Burka, Wash and Go...*), or the movement they make us perform (*Ponto de Encontro, Mundo a Seus Pés, Una Dirección...*).

This scenographic quality, which we see in the works I refer to or others that have yet to be mentioned, are crucially supported by effective production processes. These as frequently involve an element of handicrafts (knitting and crochet, for instance), as the displacing of techniques of mass production (pots and pans in *Marilyn*, tampons in *A Noiva*, plastic earrings in *Carmen*), which, in some cases, require heavy, sophisticated and complex engineering.

Joana Vasconcelos' studio is a workshop, factory, office and library all rolled into one, bringing together dozens of people who make no pretence to be artists, but who, in truth, are co-producers of meticulously executed artworks, even when these are shortlived and, in many cases, use low quality and displaced materials. In this aspect, Joana Vasconcelos could not be more unlike Duchamp, who throughout his life worked completely alone and in private.

The social aspect of Joana Vasconcelos' working method is an extraordinary sharing of the play in which she is involved and which involves her team, various suppliers and ourselves. I would call this distinctive trait of her work 'volatile expertise'. Expertise because of the thorough, effective and imaginative articulation between materials of different shapes and forms; volatile because every work is different and so there is no single rigid system or intention that it should last forever. The act of turning idea into artistic reality involves a dynamic fusion

<sup>9</sup> For a stimulating historical account, see *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* by Pierre Cabanne. Da Capo Press, 1987.

of the various production processes; it cannibalises errors and failures (“assisted” accidents, to use the term coined by Duchamp for one type of his ready-mades) and obliges restarting from the beginning to find the exact angle that articulates expressivity. As she herself says:

“Scale, just like material, is only one part of the thought process. I am not the classical sculptor with a block of stone, a hammer in one hand and a chisel in the other trying to create form. That is not me. When I start, I have no particular material, technology or scale in mind, those three things that traditionally define sculpture. What I have are ideas.”<sup>10</sup>

The consequence of this scenographic element in Joana Vasconcelos’ work and her imaginative, complex and demanding production methods is the auratic nature of her paradigmatic pieces, or, in other words, her ability to create contemplation and amazement. From my own experience, that is what happens with *A Noiva*, *Marilyn*, *Jardim do Éden* and *Coração Independente*. The playing then becomes more subtle and paradoxical: how can you feel admiration and emotion towards ephemeral works made of implausible materials that do not conceal themselves but which are transfigured by some kind of blindness that turns them abstract?<sup>11</sup>

Suggesting a legacy from 1960s Pop art and Nouveau Réalisme, but based on production techniques that reveal elements of Conceptual art, Joana Vasconcelos’ objects are nonetheless clearly the products of another age: mass-produced, non-believing, nomadic and alarmingly able to absorb every scandal and spectacle, in line with Danto’s theory of the ‘end of art’.<sup>12</sup>

The miracle is that they function and irradiate an auratic element that can also be qualified as “the mystery” that Rancière advocates for political art. The reasons are complex and they all articulate play devices: we see tampons, pots and plastic flowers and cutlery and, at the same time, something else that invites the observer to dream because it is beautiful, unexpected and luxurious, recreating children’s games and tales that underlie the collective psyche. However, the reality of the materials that comprise these illusions of grandeur, reinforced by the narrative quality of the titles, which represent iconic signs of the star system, give the auratic function an unexpected critical dimension. *A Noiva*, made of tampons, or *Marilyn*, court shoes made of pots, or the simple picnic cutlery that the luxury jewellery in *Coração Independente* is made of, are another form of play of which every audience knows the rules a slate wiped clean so often by deceit and failed dreams that the stereotypes stick to it like their own skin.

### ***With benefit of inventory***<sup>13</sup>

The political character of Joana Vasconcelos’ work that we have just demonstrated is undoubtedly one of the reasons for her popularity with the general public. Uninterested in the “autonomy of artistic ‘making’ celebrated by modernism”,<sup>14</sup> she has dealt with several themes connected to major issues (in some cases, open wounds) of our time.

One of these we have already mentioned: the status of women. Despite massive change, the role of women continues to be wrapped up in social expectations that conjure myth and mistification. Besides the pieces that have already earned iconic status (*A Noiva*, *Marilyn*, *Coração Independente*), there are others which are hugely inventive: *Brise*, a sofa entirely upholstered in plastic roses; *Donzela*, a conceptual variation on the theme of *A Noiva*, a giant white crocheted tablecloth designed to hang from the balcony of a medieval castle; *Spin*, a public vanity mirror in which the hair dryers frame the mirror; and *Flores do Meu Desejo*, which simulates a sort of soft and cocooning niche but which on the outside actually consists of ordinary and coarse feather dusters.

*Burka* in particular stands out, an operatic installation of the dress/veil imposed by Islam and self-imposed by many women who use it as a statement of identity. When released from a suspended hook, which mimics an unusually high gallows, and before falling noisily to the floor, six other veils are revealed, suggesting, at least to Portuguese eyes, the traditional costume of women from Nazaré. In this subtle yet effective way, a circulating vagueness is created between very different cultural systems. What the artist appears to be suggesting is that the status of Muslim women today is no different, after all, from that of Western women in the past. Both are engaged in the social nullification of their bodies and, at the same time, its enhancement as the basis of expressive aesthetic styles they themselves invent and reinvent to the point of saturation.

Another important theme in Joana Vasconcelos’ work relates to domestic life and the daily patterns of consumption inherent to it both out of need and, above all, compulsion. In various situations, the traditional place of women returns, in line with the social and ideological portrayals of the household fairy. But this is expanded significantly in historical pieces like *Sofá Aspirina* and *Cama Valium*, highly clean and modern in design (very rare in the artist’s oeuvre), which through silent dialogue mirror the importance of and dependence on prescription drugs for daily survival.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Leonor Nunes and Luís Ricardo Duarte, ‘Joana Vasconcelos: A arte a seus pés’, *JL - Jornal de Letras, Artes e Ideias*, 10 March 2010, p.12

<sup>11</sup> In the words of the artist: “Handcraft gives you three things: time, repetition and then, when things are repeated over and over again, they become abstract.” “From Micro to Macro and Viceversa. A Conversation Between Agustín Pérez Rubio and Joana Vasconcelos” in *Joana Vasconcelos*. ADIAC Portugal, 2007, p. 164.

<sup>12</sup> I refer here to Arthur Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box. The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> I use here the title of Marguerite Yourcenar’s work, *Sous bénéfice d’inventaire. Essais*. Paris: Gallimard, 1962.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Rancière, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

Contrasting in style and consisting of legible narratives and detailed accumulations is another extraordinary piece: *Vista Interior*. This is a kind of perfect pantry or basic survival kit for a petit bourgeois home which, in highly concentrated form, manages to contain kitchen and bathroom cleaning materials, living room gewgaws, books, records and photos, kitchen linen and replacement utensils. The set of shelves, arranged according to the strict logic of domestic organisation, is enclosed within an upright rectangular case which is hermetically sealed with blinds, mimicking the Portuguese penchant for the awful enclosed balconies common to apartment buildings.

In the depiction of the home, there is a totalizing sub-theme that examines the use of handmade crochet which, in a diverse play of colours and patterns, Joana Vasconcelos uses to literally upholster a piano, table, TV stand and the more or less domestic creatures invented by Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro. This strategy – which according to Rancière generates “mystery” and unifies the “inventory” – unleashes new problems when the crochet envelops the gigantic wasps, crabs and lobsters that the Fábrica Bordalo Pinheiro makes almost exclusively for the artist and which she baptises with mythically resonant names. They thus appear before us as surreal figures in a kind of self-protective veil. For me, *Cleópatra*, the splendid wasp dressed in black lace, is reminiscent of the mysterious masked revellers on their way to balls on Venice’s silent nights.

Another very inventive theme is based on suggestions of domestic life which introduce mechanisms and techniques in their iconography that endow movement and, yet again, a surrealist aspect. This is the case with *Wash and Go*, two stands full of successive rows of brightly-coloured women’s tights that continuously revolve and through which people can walk, experiencing the frenetic movement. This suggestion of female excess has a male counterpart in *Airflow*, a display stand for ties, which are buffeted by the action of fans. In contrast, I admire the Arte Povera restraint of *Menu do Dia*, an installation consisting of fridge doors with empty shelves from which fur coats hang.

Moving outdoors and into the public realm, there are pieces like *Strangers in the Night*, an open trailer covered in car lights which frantically blink on and off to the sound of Sinatra’s famous song by the same name; or *Spot Me*, a sentry box which on entering contains walls lined with small round mirrors. These are highly effective performance situations that use the assisted readymade format to examine the interplay between multiple references.

These experiments with seemingly elementary plays of light, also characterise other installations, such as *Deslunado* and *Neoblanc*. Without taking away from their diffuse narratives, these are essentially visual exercises. Nevertheless, the play on words that their titles suggest continue to refer back to everyday life, commenting on the industrialisation of consumption and behaviour in an urban atmosphere characterised by the exuberance of massification. The attitude we sense in the artist is one of criticism, but one which is connivingly spelt out: this is the world we live in, full of things and artifice, in which art’s place is the onyric dimension of a frenzied *On the Road*.<sup>15</sup>

Outside the domestic sphere, but retaining a link to common social behaviour in places frequented by the public and administrative services, there are a set of pieces which, more specifically, are open artworks that can be handled and which one can enter and sit on. One such example is *Ponto de Encontro*, a rotating carousel of office chairs produced for the Fundação de Serralves. It reminds one of fairgrounds and children’s swings, memories that clash jarringly with the sober boardroom where the piece was first placed. An identical rotating mechanism also forms the structure of *Passerelle*: once the piece has been set in motion (which the observer is responsible for doing), the faience dogs hanging on hooks bang into each other and smash noisily on the ground, covering it in broken pieces in the process. There is a playful violence to the work that we all share, a circuitous interplay between the permitted enjoyment of destruction, the memory of real dogs treated as personal possessions and the slight alarm at the pointlessness of so much destruction.

In *O Mundo a Seus Pés*, which appropriates the Portuguese title of Orson Welles’ film *Citizen Kane*, the spectator is presented with a set of access steps, perhaps for a plane. We climb them and find ourselves suspended over a gigantic mesh reminiscent of a basketball net with intermittently shining globes.

The concepts and suggestions cut across each other sharply, activated by major ‘ideas’ which are constructed out of antagonistic materials whose surrealism any uninformed visitor can understand. An identical fruition is proposed by *Una Dirección*, a path marked by stainless steel barriers frequently used in public spaces. The visitor enters and has to proceed without turning back, but when he places his hands on the ropes, what he touches are plaits of synthetic hair. Some don’t initially realise this, but word is soon passed along by the more aware. The first- or second-degree shock of this turns the touch into one of revulsion rather than a caress, creating an indistinct realm of projections, memories and reflections. And among this spectrum of possibilities, for many both the real and symbolic issue of female slavery comes to mind.

But there is a sunny, albeit complex, side to the way in which Joana Vasconcelos addresses the traditional place of women. I refer here to the domestic leisure pastimes, of which crochet and knitting held pride of place. Produced for evidently economic purposes, this work was also recognised for its artistic merit. In 19<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>15</sup> Title of the famous novel by Jack Kerouac published in 1957, which was a precursor of the youth uprisings of the 1960s in the United States and Europe and related to the Pop art movement.

Europe, it was systematically exhibited and various women artists applauded in what was a tolerated field of so-called 'lesser arts'.<sup>16</sup> It also possesses a mythical element which, in the imagery of European culture, relates back to Penélope, the wife of Ulysses. During his many adventures, his wife would wait for decades, weaving by day and unweaving by night a magical tapestry whose completion would mark the time when they would be reunited.

These are some of the referents that underlay Joana Vasconcelos' vast body of work, comprised by formless and polymorphic figures made of knitted fabrics, in some cases stitched together in fantastic patchworks adorned with glittering fake jewellery and varied ornaments. The most extraordinary piece from this production line – which employs a group of women full time at the artist's studio – is *Contaminação*. Overwhelming in size, when on display, this piece appropriates all of the space available, climbing, descending and creeping between floor, walls, ceilings and balustrades.

In 2010, during the exhibition at the Museu Coleção Berardo, the shapeless form of *Contaminação*, with its different widths and many excrescences and subsections, was sat on, touched, examined for its patterns, used as a point for heated discussions and searched for its ever-changing and permanently metamorphosing beginning and end by thousands of visitors. Besides these examples, at the global level, it conjures the memory of Brazilian carnival figures or Chinese dragon festivities, exemplifying the surrealism of reality and the representation of the formless in folk art, through the patches that convey a quality of randomness, but also stories and memories.

The last class of objects I would like to look at in Joana Vasconcelos' work relates to the public domain and takes us back to the theme at the start of this essay. The first work that occurs to me is an itinerant piece of performance art: *www.fatimashop*. Consisting of a tricycle van that the artist filled with factory-made luminous statues of Our Lady of Fatima, Joana Vasconcelos drove along a stretch of the pilgrimage route, stopping intentionally at several iconic locations where she filmed the video *Fui às Compras*.

In terms of its immediate message, this is the most openly political of Joana Vasconcelos' works, appropriating one of Portugal's most defining national symbols: the cult of Our Lady of Fatima. In a remote and simple spot in deepest Estremadura, the Virgin Mary appeared five times to three poor shepherd children in 1917. After initial resistance, the Catholic Church granted legitimacy to the episode and allowed the building of a large Marian temple that is visited by pilgrims from all around the world. During the annual calendar that celebrates the series of apparitions, but especially on the date of the first, 13 May, hundreds of pilgrims from all around the country walk along the roads lined with myriad services and a kind of tailor-made trade. At Fatima there are also dozens of shops piled high with souvenirs, among which stand out the multiple figures of Our Lady in every size, shape and form and very often luminous, which are later placed in small household altars. It is this story, repeated every year, that Joana Vasconcelos examines, confronting the trade in religious objects and the mass production of its products of minimal artistic merit. But it is clear to any observer that she is also questioning the practices and even the basis of the Miracle of Fatima.

Identical in certain aspects of its production, the recent piece *War Games* consists of an old car (the first car that Joana Vasconcelos ever drove and which belonged to her grandfather) filled with cuddly toys and covered with plastic toy rifles arranged in parallel lines that immediately reminded me of the barrels of the firing squad in Goya's *The Third of May*. By flicking a switch, the toys begin to dance inside the car, at the same time as the rifles are lit up by flickering lights. The artist is evidently appropriating the war-like imagery in children's video games and proposing a more removed reflection on children's education and mass consumption.

Joana Vasconcelos' enjoyment of working in the public domain has frequently led to her producing monuments. Besides *Portugal a Banhos*, which we have already looked at, I would like to mention *A Jóia do Tejo*, an enormous necklace made up of nautical buoys, fenders and cables that the artist draped around the Torre de Belém, one of Portugal's most self-identifying monuments. Commissioned by King Manuel I, at the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was built to celebrate Portuguese maritime expansion beside the Tagus and at the edge of the Atlantic.

In this piece, Joana Vasconcelos used buoys in the same colour as the national flag (green, red and yellow), accentuating the tribute that this site-specific installation represented. It thus takes on a celebratory patriotic aspect and, as always, plays with the polysemy of the monument, the work itself and its title: *A Jóia do Tejo*. The artwork is not so much the ephemeral object that the artist has produced, but the Torre itself, a rare treasure that the artist activates as if it were an eternal readymade ephemerally assisted. You can also sense the more subtle interplay between the statement of the Torre's femininity, capable of being adorned with jewellery on its bare chest, and the evidence of its military functions, an important link in the Tagus' defences and therefore in Lisbon's protection.

<sup>16</sup> See here the excellent article by Elisabeth Lebovici, 'Inventories of the Polymorphous' in *Joana de Vasconcelos. Sem Rede*. Lisbon: Museu Coleção Berardo, 2010 (catalogue of the exhibition curated by Miguel Amado).

<sup>17</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, Paris: Presses du Réel, 2002, p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Rancière, *op. cit.*, p.22.

<sup>19</sup> One of the best studies of Joana Vasconcelos' work is 'Meeting Point or The Return of the Art of the Real' by Miguel Amado in *Joana Vasconcelos. Sem Rede...* *op. cit.*, pp. 15-51. The work stands out for being exhaustive and for its analysis of the artist's work from a current and stimulating historical and critical perspective.

<sup>20</sup> "In my pieces (...) I test out all materials at hand and work on the idea of seriality; a conceptual and pragmatic idea in this world of repetition we live in. (...) I choose a material, such as tampons, and I repeat it until it becomes an abstraction, somewhere between micro and macro." 'From Micro to Macro and Viceversa. A Conversation Between Agustín Pérez Rubio and Joana Vasconcelos' in *Joana Vasconcelos*. Lisbon: ADIAC Portugal, 2007, pp. 162-163.

<sup>21</sup> On this point, see Arthur Danto, *op. cit.*, and his supreme analysis of the links between Warhol's work and the values of consumer society, in particular through design.

<sup>22</sup> See also Jacinto Lageira's thoughts in "Être consommé", *Joana Vasconcelos*. Lisbon: ADIAC Portugal, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> See Raquel Henriques da Silva, "O Zé Povinho de Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro: uma iconologia de ambivalência" (Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro's 'Zé Povinho': An Iconology of Ambivalence) in *Revista de História da Arte*. Lisbon: Instituto de História da Arte, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, issue 3, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> "The project has a lot to do with the identity of alcohol use and the social problem it creates" 'From Micro to Macro and Viceversa...', *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> "Don't think about crochet as something that is ours, it's much more universal than you would imagine. Crochet is as Portuguese as it is German, or Chinese or Mexican. The identity of crochet is ours in terms of design and the use of colour." in *idem, ibidem*, p. 40.

## Epilogue: of the artist and of society

"Through little services rendered, the artists fill in the cracks in the social bond."

Nicolas Bourriaud<sup>17</sup>

Having concluded our inventory-journey through the work of Joana Vasconcelos, let me now address the remaining element in Rancière's reflections, the "encounter", though up till now the issue of the acceptance of her artworks has been a constant theme.

At first sight, there is no doubt that the work under review achieves the "encounter" as, according to the author, it falls into what he describes as "relational aesthetics". I quote:

"Relational aesthetics rejects art's claims to self-sufficiency as much as its dreams of transforming life, but even so it reaffirms an essential idea: that art consists in constructing spaces and relations to reconfigure materially and symbolically the territory of the common."<sup>18</sup>

In Joana Vasconcelos' case, the "territory of the common" which artists are called upon to "reconfigure" has a twofold origin. Firstly, it is the territory of the arts, as all artists confront reality by studying, evaluating and appropriating the work of others, from the same field or similar ones, before creating themselves. As I have mentioned at various points in the text, and in clear proximity with other authors,<sup>19</sup> Joana Vasconcelos claims, and reasonably so, to be a Conceptual artist. The rationale she uses is that of Duchamp, which means that she sees an artwork as essentially an 'idea' (the artist's favourite word) that is objectualised through the instrumental use of materials and productive processes. The procedure she considers essential is what she calls "seriality", with which she repeats the same object until it becomes an abstract motif.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the 'debt' she owes Conceptual art manifests itself in the objectualisation of the artwork and, above all else, in the claim that it once and for all rids itself of traditional museological instruments (the wall to hang the painting on, the plinth to support the sculpture) and invades the space, questioning the aesthetics and metaphysics of the modernist museum. However, Joana Vasconcelos is also a Neo-Pop artist in the way she handles imagery, icons and the leftovers of consumer society, creating a productive articulation between high and low culture whose founding aesthetic relates back to Andy Warhol.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, she also maintains some of the core values of Modernism, such as the search for an anti-classical aesthetic capable of confronting academism and which, besides African art and Tribal arts in general, led to the valorisation of the folk art of European farming and fishing cultures. In this, she is reminiscent, for example, of the Russian artist Sonia Delaunay and the Portuguese artists Amadeo de Sousa Cardoso and José de Almada Negreiros. Finally, Joana Vasconcelos clearly addresses the feminist revindication within the art scene, as suggested not only by the way she handles certain themes, where she examines the myths and the mystification that envelop them with reflective irony, but also in the use of materials, techniques and modes of production that reclaim and elevate the needle arts (crochet, knitting and needlework), a fundamental component of domestic art forms.

But the territory of 'encounter' of a 'relational aesthetics' is not limited to artistic inheritances.<sup>22</sup> For good reason, critics have examined the way Joana Vasconcelos re-works themes from Portuguese culture and identity. Examples of this are her projects with monuments and in monumental public spaces; the appropriation of Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro's ceramics, an artist who himself was committed to the examination of 'Portuguese' identity through his invention of *Zé Povinho*;<sup>23</sup> works such as *Néctar* which, in her own words, embody the issue of the excessive consumption of wine in Portugal;<sup>24</sup> and, above all, *Coração Independente*, which recreates both the traditional jewellery-making of Viana do Castelo (the filigree produced in pre-Roman villages in the northeast of Portugal) and the title of a fado sung by Amália Rodrigues to great effect.

Some writers have also related her use of crochet and knitting to the age-old customs of Portuguese women, both rural and urban, but the artist likes to add, and correctly, that these are habits practised by women in many parts of the world, including pre-industrial Europe and, further afield, the Americas and China.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, while these practices cannot be regarded as specifically Portuguese, the way in which she develops them, with teams of skilled women, shows her objective and intuitive knowledge of the huge cultural potential of a country which, as recently as the 1960s, maintained highly archaic productive and social structures. It is also noteworthy how Joana Vasconcelos makes willing and effective use of Portuguese companies to produce other types of pieces as well, thus promoting and encouraging a territory of encounter, sharing and reinforcement.

The militant love with which Joana Vasconcelos thinks about, appropriates and stirs up the still active values of the country's cultural identity is rare in Portuguese visual arts. Up until the 1980s, in fact, this was an area that was practically off-limits to artists, out of an understandable reaction to the abuses and mystification of Salazar's attempts during the Estado Novo (New State) to promote national symbols and values in a context of paternalism, persecution of civil and political liberties and profound anti-modernism. But even today, the

reinforcing of Portuguese identity values causes discomfort among the elites, particularly in the contemporary art scene.

Joana Vasconcelos' attitude shows courage and boldness, and provokes the aversion of influential groups within the intelligentsia and art criticism circles, who tend to relegate her work to the confusing realm of kitsch. While it is true that she works with themes and situations that we might consider kitsch – understood as the non-productive distance between an aesthetic and the social and symbolic contexts in which it was created – it would be abusive, if not downright wrong, to qualify the artist herself or her body of work as such. In terms of the “division of the sensible” (another of Rancière's luminous concepts), Joana Vasconcelos operates on conceptual and experiential ‘shifts’ that do not have precise outlines or a defining logic. Kitsch motifs exist – the excessive amount of lace in the homes of the petit bourgeoisie, the distressing aesthetic poverty of the Our Lady of Fatima figures, the use of low quality and re-used materials to simulate trash – like others which are social, cultural and symbolic performances that completely align with the mass culture of our globalised cities.

The issue of revindicating, studying and empowering the defining values of a culture with a long tradition of belittling itself in relation to the culture of others,<sup>26</sup> introduces what I believe to be the most salient characteristic of Joana Vasconcelos' art, which we discussed at the beginning of this essay: the radical mesh of artistic research in the field of Post-Modernism and civil - and therefore political - militancy in support of the values, histories and traditions of an ancestral culture. The artist believes, as do I, that this is an interesting way to resist the planetary massification and ‘sameification’ of everyday life and consumption. On this point, Jacinto Lageira comments: “By assuming the *fragility* of her pieces, Joana Vasconcelos behaves like a junk which bends under the weight of its load or the strength of the wind but which does not break.”<sup>27</sup>

Translated by Chris Foster.

<sup>26</sup> For a better understanding of this subject, see Eduardo Lourenço, *O Labirinto da Saudade. Psicanálise Mítica do Destino Português* (The Labyrinth of Saudade: Mythical Psychoanalysis of the Portuguese Fate) Lisbon: Gradiva, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Jacinto Lageira, *op. cit.*, p. 18.