

THE PRIMORDIAL SITE OF ART

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1. Prologue

Joana Vasconcelos interprets reality through an analysis of today's society's mentalities and iconographies. She deals with the dialectic between high and low culture, the private and public spheres, tradition and contemporaneity. Her practice consists of the deconstruction of the values, habits and customs of Western civilization in order to question personal and collective identity, whether this arises from gender, class or nationality. Vasconcelos takes her inspiration from the common imagination, both on the local and global levels. However, what prevails in her practice are references to narratives and artefacts that are familiar to her everyday life. This is shown in her regular adopting of images and objects that are characteristic to the place where she lives and works – Lisbon, Portugal – as the basis for her works. In making her works she uses popular materials normally associated to the condition of women, as well as crafts-related techniques that are generally connected to female labour.

Vasconcelos is affiliated with the *Nouveau Réalisme*, a French art movement that aimed at “new ways of perceiving the real”, as one can read in their manifesto, drawn up in 1960. The *Nouveau Réalisme* group spread the *assemblage*, a technique based on the juxtaposition of objects (at the time called “found” in order to underline the fact that they pre-existed as consumer goods). The recourse to objects in art goes back to the beginning of the first decade of the twentieth century, when Picasso and Braque placed newspaper cuttings and other types of paper in their Cubist paintings. Yet it is Duchamp's *ready-made* that brings about a new regime in artistic production. Indeed, with the *ready-made* being defined as an object raised to the category of art due to it being designated as such by an artist, the spectrum of possibilities of what art can be was expanded into infinity. *Porte-bouteilles* [Bottle Rack] (1914), which was simply a bottle rack, exemplifies the organising principle of the *ready-made*, but the work that perhaps best illustrates it is *Fountain* (1917), an upside down urinal with the inscription “R. Mutt” followed by “1917” (the conventional signature by the artist and the date of the completion of the work).

2. The Image and the Objects

The choice of a given image, its enlarging and its composition with several objects and/or techniques that are different to that which con-

stitutes that image is one of Vasconcelos's main conceptual strategies. This can be seen in works that are central to her career, particularly since the 2000s, where the appearance and ingenuousness of the process of making them is their added value as forms. In *The Bride* (2001-05), for example, the image is that of a chandelier, while the objects are female tampons, which take the place of the crystal or glass pendants. The nucleus “Independent Heart (Golden, Red and Black)” (2004-06) takes its inspiration from the Viana do Castelo Heart, a filigree jewel in gold or silver, here with the technique and materials recreated with plastic cutlery. In *Cinderella* (2007) and *Marilyn* (2009), the image is a high-heeled sandal (or a pair) and the objects are cooking pans with their respective lids.

Vasconcelos's practice, however, is not limited to the formal dimension. Indeed, the aesthetic experience of her works is also based on a given topic. In the case of *The Bride*, the work takes its inspiration from the decoration both of the sumptuous palatial salons and of modest middle-class family dining rooms, along with the configuration of the typical wedding dress (namely in Catholicism), in order to bring up the ethos of machismo. In the nucleus “Independent Heart (Golden, Red and Black)”, the Viana do Castelo Heart indicates luxury, which contrasts with the poorest of the utensils used in the restaurant business: plastic cutlery. The title of these works quotes the words of a poem sung by Amália Rodrigues, the diva of Fado, the Portuguese lyrical song: *Estranha Forma de Vida* [Strange Way of Life] (1965). In turn, this song, along with others, makes up the soundtrack of each of the declinations of the work, as well as its joint installation. The yellow, red and black suggest gold, blood and mourning, respectively: a trilogy that can be associated to the Fado genre of music.

In *Cinderella* and *Marilyn*, the objects used in the works suggest the kitchen, a place which is stereotypically associated with womanhood, particularly in communities with a patriarchal model of organization. The image to which the works refer to indicates the glamorous ideals of beauty presented by the media and the advertising sector. The titles of the works allude to characters who, from fairytales to the Hollywood film industry, depict the dominant representations of femininity, the poles of which are the angelical princess and the *femme fatale*. These works thus reflect the contradictory views that even today mark out the condition of women, set between the pressure of success and the supposedly intrinsic role of being a mother.

3. Doilies

Doilies, small cloth or paper items in lace which decorate or protect pieces of furniture, gave rise to another of Vasconcelos's main conceptual strategies: the covering of objects in crochet work. Works like *Euro-Vision* (2005) mimic the context that inspired them. This is a TV set (with a DVD player connected to it) that is broadcasting the 1982 Eurovision Song Contest. That year Portugal was represented by girl group Doce [Sweet], which sang *Bem Bom* [Really Nice], of which the erotic connotation caused controversy in a country with a conservative mindset. The song is to this day a part of the Portuguese collective subconscious, while the doily on top of the TV set (or over the back of the settee) translated the habits – some of which were rural in origin – of a middle class that was gaining stature in Portugal in the early 1980s.

Vasconcelos turned to the wrapping of objects in crochet work in other works that have a domestic basis. They are, for example, figures of animals in materials like ceramics in *Pack of Dog* (2005). They are also the garden statues which are on sale on the roadsides of the main national road in Portugal, as in the case of *The Island of Love* (2006), a metaphorical revisiting of the idyllic scenario described by the Portuguese poet Luís Vaz de Camões in his epic book *Os Lusíadas* [The Lusíads]. Yet she freed herself from this referent and used this conceptual strategy on different types of objects, ranging from an electric guitar to a piano and the corresponding bench, and also including a laptop computer. Some of these works allude to picturesque scenes, as is the case of *We Are the Best Team* (2006), which evokes a café table at which one hears the commentary of a football game while one drinks a “Sagres” brand Portuguese beer.

4. Repetition

4.1. Brief Bases for a Theory

Art is “a thing of the past” – as Hegel stated – and the becoming of artists is their confrontation with this statement. Indeed, some artists delve into the present or project themselves into the future; yet they all confront the past. Looking back, locating a reference point, quoting; among others of the same kind, these gestures thus constitute the base of the creative process – one might even say that their ontological condition resides in them. Becoming aware of this fact has to do with the clarification of what common sense obscures: in art nothing is original and everything is repetition – repetition of ideas, of methods and of forms.

Originality has become a modernist myth, as scholar Rosalind Krauss pointed out. She examined the dichotomy between originality and repetition in order to show that artistic creation consists of repeating. Rodin is one of the artists with whom she exemplifies her thesis: when alive he did not accompany the making of his sculptures by disciples and technicians, nor did he inspect them when they were finished; after his death his sculptures continued to be made based on the drawings, clay models and plaster casts that he left. In both of these contexts no one placed the authenticity of Rodin's works at issue because they always had the status of being “original”.

For Krauss, what mattered was Rodin's intention and not its materialization. Thus the problem of originality did not emerge in Rodin because his artistic production was technically reproducible by nature. In this sense the difference between the original and the copy lost its pertinence, given that the copy was a repeated original. In Krauss's view, the question that is posed is that of the usual lack of understanding of this circumstance as a characteristic of all artistic production. For

theorists like Peter Bürger, for example, this is due to the stating of a perspective of the art with a Kantian background in the modern period. Indeed, in accordance with this line of thought, a dysfunctionalised artistic production – without the practical, cognitive or moral values befitting pre-modernity – would be made autonomous from social life. It is when one understands the fallacy that this statement represents that post-modernism is proclaimed in art.

4.2. On the Series

Many of Vasconcelos's works are divided into series. The “Valkyries” series is perhaps the most well known among them. The works from the “Valkyries” series are normally multicoloured organic forms that hang from the ceiling of a given building. Like many artists, during the development of her practice, Vasconcelos departs from her art and to it returns. She proves this in a work like *Contamination* (2008-10), which kept the technique and the materials of the “Valkyries” works – polyester lined with hand-crocheted wool, industrial mesh, other cloths and props – but expanded its style. *Contamination* is a hyper-coloured tentacle-like structure that, like a virus, crawls, creeps and raises itself up on the surrounding architectural structures.

Vasconcelos is therefore an artist of repetition. Nevertheless, this does not exclusively come from her making her works by series – indeed, many artists operate in the same manner and do not use repetition as a conceptual strategy. The repetition can also be felt in the type of objects used in Vasconcelos's works, which are defined by a symbolic dimension – beyond their function, they are set out as symbols in the sense that they enunciate a “truth” about social life. Among these objects there are, besides many others, plastic food containers, medication blister packaging, dusters, plastic earth globes, linen drying racks, tampons, plastic cutlery, pans and lids, bottles of all sorts of drinks, plastic sand moulds, steam irons and hairdressing trolleys. The repetition can also be seen in the cumulative logic that is at the base of the use of these objects in Vasconcelos's works, which are multiplied as required in order to reproduce a given image.

5. Cultural Heritage

5.1. The Bestiary of Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro

Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro was a Portuguese artist who became famous during the second half of the nineteenth century for his diverse interests, which included working in the field of caricature and ceramics, by then under-appreciated within the art scene. His personality, which was that of a free spirit, was disturbing to the powers that be at the time. One of his most ground-breaking projects was the establishing of a factory for making earthenware pottery. This factory is in Caldas da Rainha and has been working since 1884, creating a large number of works that are both decorative and functional which revitalised crafts-related techniques. These works would include many characters and motifs. Yet what stands out are the picturesque figures that ironically embody the Portuguese condition, along with the countless representations of nature, which lead to a bestiary.

From the cat stretching out alongside him, in a famous self-portrait, to the leaping frogs smoking cigarettes in the panels in the Tabacaria Mónaco, a cigarette shop in Lisbon, there are countless examples of Bordalo Pinheiro's interest in Portuguese fauna. Vasconcelos approached this universe after works which were drawn from figures of dogs made in porcelain such as those that can often be seen in the gardens and porches of many houses distinguished by the vernacular architecture of Portugal's countryside. *Passerelle* (2005) is perhaps

the most notorious of these works. *Passerelle* consists of revolving tracks, which are set in motion by the viewer, from which hang several figures of dogs made in porcelain that go round and are gradually broken due to the fact that they bang against each other, as can be seen by their shards left on the floor.

Vasconcelos adopted eleven works from Bordalo Pinheiro's bestiary according to the physiognomy and psychology of the depicted animals. Thus the enraged cat is counterpoised to the head of the solemn horse, which makes a pair with that of the donkey or the bull; the haughty pose of the wolf is mingled with the ferocity of the lizard and of the crab; the melancholic frog contrasts with the slender snake; the delicateness of the lobster is confronted with the authority of the wasp. Vasconcelos wraps these works with doilies – whether common or of luxurious, as can be seen in her using Azorean lace in works from the last few years. The many colours of the doilies exalt the sensual nature of the painting and of the ceramic glazing of the ceramic pieces. These elements thus function as a second, protective skin, which underlines the comeliness that emanates from the ceramic pieces.

5.2. Monuments and Built Heritage

In Portugal, Vasconcelos regularly deals with monuments. Instead of the presumable reading of the narrative that is underlying them, based on a rhetoric of the celebration of a determined feat, the treatment that Vasconcelos subjects them to turn them into an echo-chamber for their symbology. Vasconcelos's approach is defined by an attraction for memory; however, the artist is also interested in the sense of the place that the built heritage generates today. This can be seen, for example, in a work such as *Throne to Saint Anthony* (2001), in which she transformed the whipping post of Lisbon's city hall square into an altar using candles, plastic flowers and statuettes, among other elements. In 2008, the monument she appropriated was the Belém Tower, which is also an icon of power. She dressed it with a necklace made up of buoys and nautical fenders, elements which hark back to the Portuguese naval voyages, an epic period to which this building refers to.

5.3. From the “White Cube” to the Palace of Versailles

Art has always been shown in palaces or churches. In Europe, monarchs or clerics were the main sponsors of artists for centuries. In the meantime, the state has taken on this position, specifically through the reformulation of the mission of the museum in the middle of the nineteenth century. This happened due to several reasons, the main one being that there may have been a need to support the “imagined community” which is a nation. At the inaugural phase of this new existence of the museum, art was displayed in the same fashion as it was on palaces and churches. Throughout the twentieth century, as art became “modernised”, removing itself from social life, the way of showing it also became different. The display of art became subordinated to the ideology of the “white cube”, which postulated the connection between the place of the modernist artistic production – the studio – with that of its reception – the modern museum. This desideratum aimed at promoting a “disinterested” aesthetic experience. The modern museum thus neutralised the architectural structures and the decorations that characterise palaces and churches. Today all artists address the “white cube” in their practice, such is the importance that this scheme has taken on in display of art.

Vasconcelos granted art its primordial site, the palace, when she held an exhibition at the Palace of Versailles, in Versailles, France, in 2012. The Palace of Versailles is perhaps the most legendary of this

type of buildings given the events it witnessed between 1682 and 1789, a period during which it was the home to the French royal family. In that exhibition, Vasconcelos presented some of her most significant works, such as *Marilyn* and *Red Independent Heart* (2005) and *Black Independent Heart* (2006), but the context suggested the creation or recreating of a set of works. *Guards* (2012), for example, consists of figures of lions made in marble wrapped in crochet work, thus evoking the marble interiors of the Queen's Guards Room, where it was exhibited, as well as alluding to a 2006 work, *Vigorous and Powerful. Golden Valkyrie* (2012) is a work that was also suggested by the context. The work belongs to the series of the “Valkyries”, and was exhibited in the centre of the Gallery of Battles. The work and the surrounding architectural structure were so interconnected that nothing would separate them – it was as if the *Golden Valkyrie* had always been there.

5.4. From the Palace of Versailles to the Ajuda National Palace

Vasconcelos's exhibition at the Palace of Versailles stood out due to the capacity she showed to understand the atmospheres, on the one hand, and to integrate the works within them, on the other. This cross-reading of atmospheres and works also presides over her exhibition at the Ajuda National Palace in Lisbon. One can see that on a calling of attention by Vasconcelos to the queens who personify the lifetimes of both of these buildings: Marie-Antoinette in France and Maria Pia in Portugal. *Wig* (2012), for example, was exhibited in the Queen's Bedchamber in the Palace of Versailles, while in the Ajuda National Palace it is presented in the Hall of the Portrait of the Queen. *Maria Pia* (2013) and *Tropicalia* (2013) are presented in areas of the Ajuda National Palace that are also dedicated to Maria Pia, the Queen's Bedroom and the Queen's Dressing Room, respectively. The works reflect the personality of the characters: the first of these is an oval-shaped volume with several limbs, from the tips of which natural and artificial hair hangs; the second is Bordalo Pinheiro's “wasp” wrapped in crochet work; the third is a hairdresser's trolley from which crocheted “sleeves” sprout, entangling it.

The parallels between the exhibition at the Palace of Versailles and in the Ajuda National Palace can also be seen in the work *Marilyn*, for example. The Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles, intended for important events, received the work in 2012; now it is being presented at the Throne Room of the Ajuda National Palace, where significant ceremonies took place, including that of the Kissing of the Hand. *Stained Glass Window* (2012) and *Lilicoptère* (2012) are other works that the Palace of Versailles and the Ajuda National Palace share, but the perception of which on the part of the viewer is better in Lisbon. *Stained Glass Window* is a tapestry work from Portalegre in Portugal, in which the abstract motif made of a dynamic intersecting of lines and colours reverberates in the King Luís Bedroom, being related to the other existing elements. *Lilicoptère* consists of a Bell 47 helicopter transformed with such different materials as dyed ostrich feathers, Swarovski crystals and Arraiolos woven rugs. The Room of the Ambassadors – of which one of the most outstanding features in the domed ceiling that highlights the soft tones of a blue sky with clouds – is the ideal framing for such a special “flying machine”, a sort of magical royal coach for a Marie-Antoinette of today.

At the Palace of Versailles, Vasconcelos's works were mainly exhibited in impressive rooms, befitting a kingly building; in the Ajuda National Palace this also takes place (on the piano nobile), but along with an occupation of many small spaces (on the ground floor and in

the access to the central axis of the piano nobile), of which the domestic character was used to advantage. Works like *Carmen* (2001), *Brise* (2001) and *Deslunado* (2004) clearly express the stylistic diversity with which Vasconcelos deals with intimacy. In the first case, the work is a chandelier made out of plastic earrings and strips of velvet; an aria from the first act of the 1875 Bizet's opera *Carmen*, sung by Maria Callas, is its soundtrack. *Brise* consists of a settee made of plastic flowers and other materials, among which one can note mothballs. *Deslunado* is a "tower" made out of linen drying racks on which lamp-stands are hung upside down.

Vasconcelos has already exhibited the whole set of the Bordalo Pinheiro bestiary, but is in the Ajuda National Palace that these works most stand out. This is due to the gracefulness with which they are shown, as they are hidden or mixed in with the furniture of the many rooms in the building. Works like *War Games* (2011) and *Full Steam Ahead (Red #1)* (2012), which have already been shown abroad, are now unveiled in Portugal and engage in dialogue with the elements of the rooms in which they are housed. *War Games* consists of a Morris Oxford VI with its inside full of figures of plush animals and plastic toys, whilst its outside is covered by plastic rifles and intermittent

flashing LEDs. In the second case, the work is a "fountain" made of clothing irons that spout out steam. The works are respectively shown in the Vestibule, which connects to the outside of the Ajuda National Palace, and in the Marble Room, the decoration of which includes a winter garden, at the centre of which there is a fountain.

The vicissitudes of the Ajuda National Palace have stripped it of the sumptuousness of the Palace of Versailles. The story of the Ajuda National Palace is well known: its existence has been subverted by the fact that its construction was never completed and that it took so long to be considered a royal palace. However, instead of conditioning Vasconcelos's exhibition, these circumstances were at the base of its organising principle. Indeed, the exhibition in the Ajuda National Palace shows part of the works exhibited at the Palace of Versailles; new works; recent works yet to be presented in Portugal; and works that had rarely been seen since they were made. The exhibition at the Ajuda National Palace thus surveys Vasconcelos's artistic production since the early 2000s. This project does not only complement other anthological exhibitions of hers, but also brings about a knowledge or rediscovering of her works in the light of the profitable relationship they draw up with the Ajuda National Palace.

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