

JOANA VASCONCELOS AT THE AJUDA NATIONAL PALACE: ARRANGEMENTS OF MEMORY WITH COLOUR AND SHADOW

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1. An Indomitable Work:

Trans-contextual Impressions

The Ajuda National Palace is hosting the work of Joana Vasconcelos. For five months, the artist will show some forty pieces in an exhibition which unfolds, between the unusual and provocative, in the rooms, stairways and other spaces on the ground floor and piano nobile of the former royal residence. Yet again, this represents a bold attitude on the part of the artist in allowing her pieces to dialogue openly with historical eras: she has a vocational tendency towards incorporation (and confrontation) with spaces which exude the aristocratic and symbolic, as with the exhibition at the Palace of Versailles, France, in 2012.

Our gaze as viewers is divided between scrutinising a Neoclassically-styled patrimonial identity, which manifests memories of splendour and old nobility, and our fascination for the invasive objects imagined by Vasconcelos that have taken over the rooms at Ajuda. The artist creates her pieces out of materials like lace and tulle, wrought iron and plastic, tapestry and tiles, buoys and jewellery, bottles and cutlery, stainless steel and crystal, china and knickknacks – all under the rhythmic movements of needle and thimble, patchwork and traditional wares... And there are ready-mades and installations too, at times complex mechanisms with induced movements, games of light and colour, and rotating motors (in the case of *Garden of Eden* [2007-13]), inviting touch and the delight of discovery.

But this gaze, only apparently divided between different eras, becomes unambiguous once the enchantment multiplies and reveals an absolute consistency between the various visual seductions, the ethnographical cross-references and the multiplicities of interpretation – a uniqueness which, as it happens, is unexpected. And thus one understands how this form of aesthetic appropriation of a *historical place* is itself a metamorphosis with multiple meanings and symbols placed in dialogue – whether it be, for example, the installation of *Crossed Destinies* (2012) in the Music Room, thus evoking the arcane and eternal nostalgia of ‘being Portuguese’; or *Alorna* (2013), in the Pink Room, an ironic reference to the ceramics of Caldas da Rainha and regional production; or the ever so provocative *Tropicália* (2013), installed in the Queen’s Dressing Room; or even *The Bride* (2001-05) livening up the King João IV Hall in perfect communion with José da Cunha Taborda’s allusive painting to the restoration of the monarchy; not to mention the glamour of

Marilyn (2011), which alters the ambiguous official grandeur of the Throne Room, or also *Red Independent Heart* (2005), which conquers the King João VI Room and returns exuberance to Arcangelo Fuschini’s historical/mythological fresco on the walls, suggesting new trans-contextual discourses. A mention also for *Royal Valkyrie* (2012), placed in the gallery for temporary exhibitions, which was formerly the royal chapel, as if this legendary Nordic goddess, miscegenated in this textile laboratory in the fine family tradition of the Nisa region, had expanded in a queenly dream lost in the search for chimaeras...

To this capacity for dreaming (and irony) in the work of Joana Vasconcelos can be added the ability to interweave ideological commitments, to take up causes, social denunciation and political struggle – an indomitable aspect (which is as much a nuisance as it is well-aimed) where much of her success with the public in this day and age surely lies and might explain the huge popularity of her practice beyond these shores.

2. A Work of Patience in Confrontation and Dialogue with the Palatial Setting

It is often said that the history of art is nothing more than a discipline which seeks to re-open dialogue with the works, conversations which were interrupted by the conjunctures of the age and which, in being re-examined in new circumstances, reveal their meaning according to the “points of view” held in the act of their creation.

It is, in fact, these “points of view” – as Aby Warburg wrote in the old founding texts of iconology – which come into confrontation here, in slow transmigrations of knowledge, and pleasure, with our contemporary gaze. Catherine Pégard, in the context of the exhibition in the Palace of Versailles, had already observed the power of dialogue of Vasconcelos’s work, which incorporates the space in very strong trans-contextual moulds, and that goes beyond the boundaries of a precise era. Although there is debate on the use of the term ‘Neo-Baroque’ to ‘classify’ her pieces, as already suggested by Jean-François Chougnat, Gilles Lipovetsky and other critics (it would be a kind of ‘permanent Baroque’, according to Eugénio Eugénio d’Ors), the artist’s inexhaustible incursions into the realm of provocation and malice nevertheless still retain the knowledge of *timeless art*, at the margins of stylistic labelling, which strengthens its vital energies: an old knowledge with vernacular (Portuguese) roots and a capacity to glue memories to the foundation of *patience*.

Could it be because of all this that the words of Balthazar, a fictional character in Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* (1958), and alleged friend of the poet Constantin Kavafy, come to mind with regard to timelessness: "The only way to remain loyal to time," writes Balthazar, "is to intersperse realities, because at each point in time the possibilities are infinite in their multiplicity. To live (to create art) is to choose. To reserve our judgment perpetually, to choose perpetually." Or, as he also asserts elsewhere in this set of novels: "Art is long and life is short."

Here we have Vasconcelos shown in colours and forms, audacity and seduction, abstract experience, kitsch deviations and self-referenced ideas, resumptions of themes which have already become traits of her artistic identity and true icons. It is a 'chiaroscuro' face to face with tapestries, display cases of silver and porcelain, stuccoed walls and nineteenth-century frescos which invite us to discover her work, which is the same as to say discover Ajuda, one of the most emblematic and also least known and unloved monuments in Lisbon's heritage.

Here then is the meeting, in a process of *nachleben* so dear to Warburg, of distinct *layers of time*, of references to apparently dissonant but ultimately consistent forms which create objects that make sense by means of the bridges by which all the plausible discourses interlink. This, therefore, is the apparent paradox: we are better able to understand the *monument* that is the Ajuda National Palace, with its bright colours (some masterpieces are immediately recognised as such, as in the case of those by Joaquim Machado de Castro and his statuary in *la grande maniera romana*) and its shadows (many of the collections and decorative campaigns that continue to remain unvalued) after examining the work of Vasconcelos, which is provided here for us to discover. We understand more clearly the thematic threads of these pieces, situated between an aesthetic which feeds from popular culture and extreme sophistication, allowing us to contextualise the Neoclassical architectural space in which they are displayed.

3. Art Which Appropriates Historical Time and Multiplies Caustic "Points of View"

It could not have been easy for Vasconcelos to respond the invitation to show her work in the grandiloquent complexity and coldness of the Ajuda National Palace. The insertion of her pieces into the tour route involves a laborious recognition of the *spirit of the place*, which one can only truly feel if the qualities of the loaned space is unearthed...

It is important, therefore, to discover Ajuda, to attenuate that first image that it gives the people of Lisbon and the public in general of being a *difficult* monument, a space which is gloomy and inaccessible, elitist and closed and, for some reason, never completed (and which the royal family itself exchanged for Queluz), in order to understand its artistic qualities better. Its essential history has already been researched and written. Ayres de Carvalho published an indispensable book, *Os Três Arquitectos da Ajuda [The Three Architects of Ajuda]* (1976), which documents the vicissitudes of the construction process. Building work first began in 1795 and included infamous episodes in a process which was never truly finished. Everything began with a fire, as José-Augusto França recalls in another reference book, *A Arte em Portugal no Século XIX [Art in Portugal in the Nineteenth Century]* (1967). In 1794, the *Real Barraca da Ajuda*, where the court had been housed since the tragic earthquake that destroyed Lisbon in 1755, burnt down; the old architect Manuel Caetano de Sousa was then commissioned to draw up plans for a palace. However, this was considered too large and lavish in decoration,

so a new design was produced to replace it, smoothed by the death in 1802 of what was the "last of the Pombaline architects, a man of archaic style who took an age and a taste to the grave with him."

The resumption of the project, under José da Costa e Silva and the Genoan Francesco Saverio Fabri, faithfully followed the Neoclassical style, in a definition of tastes which, to quote França, reveals "a more civil, or more civic and, therefore, more modern royal residence". Construction recommenced in 1802 under the direction of these two architects of the "new generation" and, in a few short years, there rose "the first great national monument in which the forms of the academic Neoclassical style took shape: the monument in itself, as far as we can judge it today (despite being unfinished), is the very definition of Italian-style Neoclassicism, the like of which is to be found nowhere else in the country."

Vasconcelos realised the nuances that determined the various stages of construction of the royal palace and that is why the sequence of the pieces follows a display in which the discourse proposed accentuates the plural qualities of the rooms, which are Neoclassical here, anachronistically Baroque there and, in other places, reveal Romantic overtones and even some sterile cosmopolitan revivalism. Thus the example of *Red Independent Heart* facing Arcangelo Fuschini's little-loved fresco – painted in 1828, painted over in 1862, the subject of a casual 'rediscovery' in 2008, recently restored in 2010 and finally put on public display, without however attenuating the impressions of the academic fragility attributed to it – and helping to appease the gazes by accentuating a powerful 'feminine testimony' suited to the fanciful nymphs and ladies of the court portrayed accompanying Neptune in the triumphal return of King João VI and the royal family. If, as França remarked, in referring to names such as Fuschini, "the paintings which remain in Ajuda are hard, stereotyped, chromatically vague and lacking in intelligence", the perspective of the dialogue which this exhibition gives rise to appears to recreate a forgotten interest in these works by means of a complicit gaze, which allows us to discover ironies and sense the level of possibilities based on the possible recognition of an official style in times of crisis.

The Ajuda National Palace was little loved for a long time. We continue to see it as the headquarters of governmental agencies linked to the museums and cultural heritage. We forget, however, that it was *modern*, insofar as that was possible in Portugal at the turn of the eighteen hundreds. The "bad German taste" (as the rocaïlle of King José's time was caricatured) was buried here once and for all. França summed it up well when rightly recalling the new references that Ajuda incorporated, whether it be the spirit of the Royal Palace of Caserta in Naples (begun to a design by Vanvitelli), which left such an "unforgettable impression" on Costa e Silva, or the junction of this Neapolitan influence with those of the palladian architecture of Venice.

Vasconcelos underlines these impressions and intersecting styles in iconic pieces such as *Red Independent Heart*, which the grand King João IV Room confronts and allies with. In this case, its meeting with José da Cunha Taborda's mural painting *Aclamação de D. João IV* [The Acclamation of King João IV] (in which França glimpses the French influence of F. A. Vincent and leaves the impression that he was one of the most modern painters working here, as well as suggesting it was due to his militant liberalism that he was removed from the list of favoured artists for court commissions) is more than merely adequate: it is sublime.

4. Art with Crossed Destinies:

Auras and Paradises of Hearts and Valkyries

At first sight, it was a difficult task to confront and affront these pallial walls, with their austere experience, and these refined spaces, with their aristocratic decor, in most cases marked by a revivalist style that is the result of successive refurbishments. Nevertheless, the planned structure of Ajuda is majestic, even despite the grandiloquent coldness for which it is criticised due to a rationalisation that the long construction process jeopardised – and which the arrival of Romanticism mostly condemned: it was declared "a great and sad waste" by Count Raczynski in 1846!

The gaze that this exhibition attempts to provide is also a window of opportunity to see Ajuda from another perspective. You can appreciate the quality of the project, of many of the sculptures, tapestries and frescos; and you can appreciate, above all, how political vicissitudes, by interrupting the construction work on various occasions, introduced and altered styles, reducing "unity and normative authority" – and the building as a whole shows it. The construction work, which advanced at speed, was interrupted in 1807 when the French army, under Junot, invaded Portugal and the royal family departed for Brazil. It was restarted in 1813, with Fabri already dead, under the architect António Francisco Rosa and with the decoration of the halls. And, upon the arrival of the court from Rio de Janeiro in 1821, it was essentially finished, though "far from inhabitable". It was under the regency of the Infanta Isabel Maria, after the death of King João VI, and under the regime of the Constitutional Charter of King Pedro IV, that the construction work came to an end, though it was never completed on the west façade or north wing, and was finally halted in 1833 (when the court was already at Queluz).

It is in this shadowy Neoclassical scenario, with its aromas of arcane decadence and memories of deposed kings, that the red hearts, valkyries, lizards, lace, installations/machines and Vasconcelos's other auratic forms confront each other – and dissolve, pondering these nineteenth century interiors that the people of Lisbon still know so little about. The exhibition, therefore, is an interweaving of crossed destinies. By revealing itself, the artist's work also invites us to discover the unexpected virtues of the Ajuda National Palace: for example, the mural paintings by Cunha Taborda e Cyrillo Volkmar Machado; the tapestries, porcelain, furniture and paintings (which even includes two *Incêndios [Fires]* by Diogo Pereira and a *Santa Face* by El Greco!); and the sculpture by the Machado de Castro 'school'. The discursive accent which, with Vasconcelos's project, accentuates the scenographic effect of the wings of the palace is powerful, very particularly the monumental vestibule with twenty-five sculptures, nine of which by Machado de Castro and his "laboratory" (conceived as early as 1802), others by epigones and also by João José de Aguiar (a scholar from Pina Manique who studied in Rome, where he was a disciple of Canova, who created *The Anunciation*, possibly the finest Neoclassical piece in the whole Ajuda complex, with influences from other origins).

In her search for an iconography based on synonyms of identity and layers of knowledge, Vasconcelos, like the mentor of *Arte Povera*, Michelangelo Pistoletto, follows a kind of quest with a view to rediscovering the *other*, in a critical re-assessing of contemporary society and its malaises (sterile consumerism, social prejudice and new totalitarianisms), and on the path to a kind of *Third Paradise*, a new sign of *infinity*. This concept appears to interest the artist, as well as that of *aura*, formulated by Walter Benjamin. This notion, allied to others like *singularity* and *dialectical image* (a means of analysing world history

as a transformative process and not as a mere linear and positivist evolution), fits in well with the trans-memorial vision of the artist's work: "The uniqueness is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura."

This *auratic* dimension is visibly noticeable in many of Vasconcelos's sculptures and installations. The comparative mechanisms of taste and revulsion, avant-garde and massification, repression and rupture, run through her work and that could also be why her proclaiming of identifying and heritage values, in the near militant way she sees and enunciates them, causes some perplexity among certain elites in the domestic contemporary art world. But the truth is that this, by antithesis, also affirms a huge international acceptance.

5. In the Beginning Was the Land: the Artisanal as Alchemy

At Vasconcelos's origins lies 'craftsmanship': the delight in simple things that reveal a grandiloquence and which are the result of a collective dialogue based on cultural memories and reminiscences of arcane heritage. There is certainly something of Marcel Duchamp in this *modus operandi*, as Miguel Amado has pointed out, even in the power of imagination of which the artist is a master and for which her sculptures are renowned. But "not even Duchamp's detachment can hide what Joana Vasconcelos exuberantly manifests: the playing with the ability to play of someone who sees the pieces and laughs, just like the artist laughed when she first had the idea", says Raquel Henriques da Silva, for whom the artist's work projects, above all, "a conceptualism laden with affective relationships which questions the sacral and self-sufficient character most art is presented with in the social space that is the exhibition."

At its origins lies the *meticulous age-old tradition of the workshop* – or, better said, the '*manufacturing with poetry*', as the artist says with regard to the gradual nature of her creative process. Vasconcelos's studio in Rocha do Conde de Óbidos in Lisboa is a place bubbling with activity where various full-time workers/artists co-habit with many other people in areas of manual labour, with specialised zones, to which is added the library, the office which handles commissions, the management which interlinks stages and precise functions and even the community canteen, a socialising and discussion area. There is a concept of the art *laboratory* here, which accentuates this collective status of *manual workers of the memory* structured by a *rule* (like the old organisation of a master) and leads to the primacy of the '*ideas*' which drive what is created there.

One can speculate to what point this type of studio, in which the joint artistic responsibility of those involved is fully accepted, fits into a medieval tradition of artisans and artists working together, and where anonymity reigned and strict corporative rules controlled conduct. But the truth is that, while this applied throughout Romanesque and Gothic Europe, it also to a certain extent continued after the sixteenth century, since the assumption of the concept of artistic *liberality* and individuality ushered in with the Renaissance only superficially changed this way of doing things. The best Portuguese painters and sculptors at the time of King João III worked according to a regime which was very often diluted in 'partnership' collectives and, with the

Baroque age, this *modus operandi* with permanent laboratories of disciples was maintained in the case of large workshops inundated with commissions: the stone and marble masons who worked for the architect João Antunes; the workshop of the *fa presto* Bento Coelho da Silveira, painter to the court of King Pedro II; the Baroque factory of the oil and tile painter António de Oliveira Bernardes; and, at the end of the seventeen hundreds, the prolific 'laboratory' of Machado de Castro.

Vasconcelos's way of doing things falls into this traditional approach of research, conception and phased execution. That is why in her work there exists a first, incandescent dimension, which seeks the roots in the vernacular arts of the country's traditions, whether it be the gilding of church altarpieces and the reflections of polychrome and blue and white seventeenth and eighteenth-century tiles; or the 'plain' aspect of traditional construction; or the lace trimming of the fabrics in flights of decorative seduction; or the subtle variations of terracota and popular sgraffito. But whilst this first dimension explains the origins, the course and the identity (the stylemes, let's say), it does not explain the *power* of the work we are presented with, which is the result of *experience*. It is here that the challenge of the possibilities of intervention, the path of new scenography, the use of monumentality, the sinuous game of the lace trimming announcing discernible references, the provocation of the discourses, the search for precision in order to take up major causes in *politics* (the exposure of xenophobia and homophobia, for instance) as well as in *culture* (the safeguarding of threatened artistic heritage and the invitation to take full of enjoyment of it) begins – in order to, in a word, affirm (reconfigure) her *artistic territory* as an artist.

6. Art History in View of These Sculptures and Installations and Their Rebelliousness, Inconvenience, Mordacity and Causes

Returning to the world of art history, we ask: what are the aspirations and obscure purposes of an art like this, which is in search of enlightenment – and of light? This is a long and patient exercise, like the trans-time which confronts all the bravery in the world. As Lawrence Durrell put it, and as we have already quoted, “Art is long and life is short.”

Vasconcelos's installations seem at times to be living landscapes, almost like a variation of the Renaissance concept of *ars naturans*, suited to the mythical search for a *locus amoenus*, but they can also

be seen in terms of their power of political and environmental denunciation, a kind of *non-site* in which various signs overlap and miscegenate, bringing the impressions of many real landscapes together in the space of a hall or a gallery (we've already seen this in the exhibition at the Palace of Versailles). This type of animist (ontological) conception acting on a globalised world defines one of the central aspects of the artist's work and reveals what is perennial about it: the renewed impression of simple techniques, the tools of rural work and of industry, the patterns of the workshop, the smell of the land, the colours of nature, the ancestral fears, the ability to laugh at the tactility of essential elements – a continuous movement, drawn somewhere between the ephemeral and the inexhaustible, strengthening the discourse of the forms.

If we return to the vocation and the *raison d'être* of art history and criticism, searching for meanings, the foundations of memory, a whole territory in which art and its history continue to merge with a vital need, all of this is there in Vasconcelos's pieces... The author of treatises Francisco de Holanda called this the field of *Eagles*; Arthur C. Danto would call it *art world*; I would prefer to emphasise the *Anthropology of the arts* aspect, since what is always most important is to learn to appreciate the work and aesthetic qualities of men and women as artists and beholders.

Of course, these times of globalisation are not a bed of roses. In an era like our own, in which there is a danger of individuals succumbing to indifference and a kind of global forgetting, there is a pressing need to give meaning to these activities, and for that we have art as the most eloquent of mouthpieces and the disciplines that study it, such as History, Aesthetics, Anthropology and Sociology, whose calling is precisely to explain (at least as much, if not more than, to describe) the deep meaning sealed within the objects of its analysis, that is, the trans-memory accumulated in the living traits cultural production. For that reason, the *iconological gaze* re-assumes a growing importance in the praxis of art historians, who scrutinise works, and their connection to *critical fortune* (in its more positive and less positivist sense) increasingly becomes a structuring element to be adhered to seriously and responsibly. It is also for this reason that Vasconcelos's work achieves greater visibility in its haste to be fully discovered, at the same time as it manages to dissolve itself in places of cultural heritage such as the Ajuda National Palace by offering it new meanings.

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