

{ TRAFARIA PRAIA }

.....

WITHIN
THE ART

Carlos Fortuna

.....

I ALWAYS THOUGHT OF ART AS SOMETHING EXPERIENCED FROM THE OUTSIDE. THAT IT IS APPRECIATED, APPROPRIATED, AND CONSUMED ON THIS SIDE OF A BORDER... A BORDER THAT I CAN FEEL DISSIPATING AND DISAPPEARING AS WE ENTER THE *TRAFARIA PRAIA* IN VENICE. THIS OLD *CACILHEIRO*, OR LISBON FERRYBOAT, IS MOORED ALONGSIDE THE VENETIAN GIARDINI AND HAS NOW BECOME AN ARTISTIC OBJECT. THROUGH JOANA VASCONCELOS'S IMMENSE ARTISTRY, AND THROUGH THE ILLUSION OF GETTING ON BOARD THE OLD FERRYBOAT, WE FIND OURSELVES WITHIN A CREATION-SHIP. AND WE FIND OURSELVES WANTING TO STAY THERE, FOR QUITE SOME TIME.

This is a unique experience, an unusual situation, made all the more pleasant by the fact that we are surrounded by common things and well-known environments that comfort us. Starting with the old ferryboat, which had been set apart from life and put in the scrapheap. Suddenly, through a stroke of genius, the terminal fate of this object was suspended and altered. No longer scrap iron, the *Trafaria Praia* is transfigured in the hands of the artist. It is now made of tiles, of cork, of cheap fabrics, of LEDs. The *Trafaria Praia* has become art. I will now call it the *TP* in order to highlight this change in its nature.

Perhaps cities are the only other entities that, like the *TP*, can be lived from within. We live in them intensely, and in that gesture we transform them all the time. This is how it is with Lisbon, and also with Venice. All cities change, even those that are deemed eternal.

Yet they change at different speeds, according to the rhythms of their lives. Perhaps Venice, which lives according to human pace, may change more slowly than Lisbon, which lives subordinated to the fast pace of engines.

Venice, a serene city—*la Serenissima*, as it often referred to—changes its physiognomy intermittently. At present its mask is that of the face of the Venice Biennale, a remarkable showcase of art from across the world, of which the *TP* is a part; its silhouette alters the usual view of the hosting city. The *TP* is thus a symbolic mark of Lisbon in Venice that also forces a temporary change in the latter's landscape and identity.

The *barca rinata* slips with soft harmony into the regular and intense traffic of vessels between the Riva dei Partigiani and the Punta della Dogana, on a journey where one can see the island of San Giorgio Maggiore and the Piazza San Marco. As it goes by, it alters the colors and the glow of the Venice lagoon, marked out by the *vaporetti*. The colourful, shiny *TP* is the intermediary in an artistically renewed relationship between Lisbon and Venice. They have come together again under the sign of the journey, renewing their long history as cities connected to the sea, distant trade, and cosmopolitan places.

The trip is always an adventure. So is the *ars movendi* of Vasconcelos, who knows how to morph the meaning of things and thus exposes herself, as a consequence, to various and controversial aesthetic, historical, and political judgments. She skilfully uses a technique that she puts at the service of the manipulation of unexpected materials—more than 600 meters of fabric, 7,250 tiles, 11,000 LEDs, many cubic meters of cork—to finally overcome them—the technique and the materials—with an unrestricted imagination. And things change. . . as happened with the *Trafaria Praia*.

Change is not always clear. Sometimes, many times, ambiguity prevails. In this transfiguration of the old ferryboat into an artistic object, the social biography of the *TP* has been the most significant element—the way it was culturally redefined and brought back to use. Rescued from an agonizing end of a long life, the ship was towed to Venice, setting sail from Lisbon, from its home on the River Tagus, on a glorious, sunny Saturday morning. At the beginning of this journey, it presented itself, in dapper style, to old friends from the Trafaria village. Farewell party? Celebration of a comeback? Maybe both...

The trip—material and symbolic at the same time—would constitute its ultimate transmutation into a new object. This is the status of the old *cacilheiro* when it (re)appears in Venice. From now on, it will not carry any more people between the hubbub of Lisbon

and the suburban left bank of the River Tagus. Now it is only destined to challenge minds and bodies and to generate the pleasure and emotion associated with art. After carrying out this journey, the *TP* will never die. It will remain forever in the photographs, videos, and catalogues as well as in people's accounts and memories.

In Venice, one enters the *TP* through a unique portico that announces "Pavilion of Portugal," installed next to a cork-clad pier. The ambiguity that surrounded its metamorphosis is increased and prolonged a little further. The *TP*—which was once a ship and is now a floating expression of art—is also granted the condition of a "pavilion." But a special pavilion, as it is different from the others. Representing Portugal, it is said.

But is it really Portugal that is represented? Or is it Lisbon, rather, that has come to embrace Venice? Or is it the loyal community of the Trafaria village that is symbolically here? All of them and none at the same time? It is necessary to abandon the temptation to decipher the enigma. That would certainly be the artist's advice. After all, it is in that refusal that one may find the *raison d'être* of the masterworks that, since ancient Egypt, have not only been observed, but have also enigmatically held the power to see those who are looking at them.

Nowadays art is not spatialized, nor does it have a land of its own. Neither "Portugals" nor "Lisbons" nor "Trafarias." If it has a floor of its own, it has to be moving. Like water. Translucent, transmutable, inconstant. Fixed to the liquid floor of Venice, this *TP* belongs to the free realm of creation. New relationships and new languages are woven into it. That is a navigation commanded by Vasconcelos. With an artistically trained route that is nevertheless conceptually renewed at each stage.

Vasconcelos, like the wise skippers, knows the crossed games of the tides and winds of this stormy ocean upon which she sails. She challenges established conventions and routes, questions hierarchies, and doubts the linearity of paths. She creatively cultivates folds in time and space, surprising the borders of creation. And thus she makes disappear that which separates exterior and interior. In art, the inside is outside and the outside is inside.

That is why the reborn *TP* only exists as a whole. Objectivized. Inside and outside of it, one can feel the same undulations of the deep guts of the ocean. It is as if the shine of the tile panel—the apparent exterior of the *TP* updating the silhouette of Lisbon—were projected uninterruptedly onto the scintillating and disconcerting blue of its interior, which is made of fabrics, LEDs and amazing erupting forms. It is as if, in stepping into the interior, we are setting foot directly onto the sea floor... which is actually there, beneath our feet.

And, indeed, we cannot help imagining the “spume of history” connecting this ship, Venice, and Lisbon, which is at the moment far away, yet bonded to this place through long threads of commerce and water, among other things. How can one decipher what is inside and outside of these cities? Ambiguous, they always seem to be themselves, but they are always in a process of magmatic and liquid renovation. And that is what makes us like cities, and likewise creation-ships. Whatever our viewing point is, we are always implicated in the production of the images of them.

The old ferryboat now seems to be a city. Perhaps an imagined city which, as such, needs to be dematerialized and turned into pure representation in order to be fully seen and understood. Such an interpretation requires the mobilization of aesthetic devices of assessment that are socially and culturally assimilated. Assimilated slowly and over a long time. That is how we produce art, generate culture, and build cities. And by changing these, we change the world.

But this capacity to generate change is more limited than it seems. The change that renovates art, transforms culture, and pacifies cities is slow and difficult. Simply because we do not produce and control art, culture, or cities. On the contrary, they produce and control us. And they keep us inside them, making us believe we are outside, acting and thinking freely.

This occurs with the inevitability of one only being able to experience the *TP* from within. Unlike what I once believed, I am beginning to think that we are destined to live inside things. It is from them that we can expect changes in the cities, culture, and art that we live in. That is the great historical and enigmatic function of art and artists.