

{ TRAFARIA PRAIA }

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FOUND OBJECTS,
TILES, AND TEXTILES:
ON A SHIP-PAVILION-WORK

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Found Objects and the Practice of Joana Vasconcelos

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THE PORTUGUESE ARTIST JOANA VASCONCELOS IS A COMMENTATOR ON THE REAL. SHE INVESTIGATES THE PRESENT THROUGH A CRITICAL READING OF WESTERN MENTALITIES, WHICH SHE DECONSTRUCTS BY CONSIDERING THEIR MYTHOLOGIES AND ICONOGRAPHIES. HER WORKS TAKE THE FORM OF SCULPTURES THAT EXPLORE MAINSTREAM VALUES, HABITS, AND CUSTOMS TO EXAMINE SOCIAL ISSUES OF GENDER, CLASS, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY. HER PRACTICE ADDRESSES THE TENSIONS BETWEEN HIGH AND LOW CULTURE, THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPHERES, THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL, TRADITION AND MODERNITY.

The artist takes her inspiration from narratives, items, and images that are part of her everyday life. These things play a role in shaping a particular context—such as that of the city (Lisbon) and the country (Portugal) where she is based—but they also have universal resonance, speaking to anyone, anywhere. In her meticulous re-elaborations of them, she often employs craft-related materials and calls upon artisanal techniques that are specifically affiliated with “women’s work.” The final outcome might deliberately look “made at home,” or it might seem shiny and slick, sumptuous and luxurious. No matter what, it appeals to the senses, establishing a sort of baroque-oriented aesthetics.

Vasconcelos is in many aspects an heir of Nouveau Réalisme, a French movement of the 1960s that sought “new ways of perceiving the real”—as its manifesto stated—and pursued a poetic recycling of industrial existence to achieve it. The artists made their work from plain, normally manufactured but often modified consumer goods, otherwise known as found objects. They juxtaposed them in assemblages, usually with the intent that they would often retain their functional qualities despite the manipulations.

Through her affiliation with Nouveau Réalisme, Vasconcelos also belongs to a lineage inaugurated by Marcel Duchamp’s readymades of nearly 100 years ago. Duchamp’s radical proposition was that a manufactured item can be raised to the category of art if it is designated as such by an artist. *Bottle Rack* (1914), which is simply a bottle rack, as the title suggests, illustrates the principle of the readymade: a found object, presented on its own, without mediation, as a creative output.

The act of appropriating a given image, amplifying it in some way, and fabricating it with different found objects or techniques is one of Vasconcelos’s signature conceptual strategies. An example is *The Bride* (2001–5), a work that subtly refers to Duchamp’s quintessential *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23). Otherwise known as *The Large Glass*, it depicts an erotic encounter between a “bride” and nine “bachelors.” To make it Duchamp employed both chance procedures and laborious craftsmanship, a trait also noticeable in Vasconcelos’s practice.

The Bride takes the form of an oversize chandelier whose “jewels” are actually tampons, not crystal or glass pendants, thus conveying the effect of an eccentric variation on a flowing white bridal gown. Vasconcelos also consistently explores social issues in her practice. In the case of *The Bride*, by associating a decorative piece characteristic of palatial salons with feminine sexuality, she makes a statement regarding the condition of women today, who are in many ways still captive to the dictates of phallocracy.

The Venice Biennale

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The Venice Biennale is an event dedicated to art held every two years. When it was founded in 1895, it was modeled after the 19th-century “great exhibitions” that displayed national industrial innovations, the first of which was held at London’s Crystal Palace in 1851. Later it came to focus on art. Today, the Venice Biennale welcomes hundreds of artists and other important players of the international scene for its open-

ing in late May or early June, and over the course of the summer it receives hundreds of thousands of visitors. It consists of a main exhibition, which is put together by a guest curator, and numerous “national participations”, which are determined by the governments of the various countries.

The key sites of the Venice Biennale are a park along the lagoon (the Giardini) and part of an old complex of armories and shipyards (the Arsenale). In the Giardini, there are 28 pavilions owned by 30 countries, all of which have been built since 1907. Each has different architectural features, somehow attempting to embody the national sensibility. Various other venues all over Venice accommodate countries that do not have a pavilion in the Giardini. In 2013 there are 56 countries in this latter group.

The Venice Biennale was the first biennial, and it remained the only one until 1951, when another of these events was established in São Paulo. The São Paulo Biennial was modeled after its Venice counterpart, with national participations alongside a main exhibition, but this arrangement was abandoned in 2006. With the recent boom of biennials, which now take place in multiple cities across the world, the Venice Biennale has become only one among many, and yet it continues to be arguably the most significant of them all. The fact that the national participations are still integral is perhaps what makes it special.

In the early 20th century, most of the featured European countries regarded the Venice Biennale as an instrument of nation-building. It could be argued that this political imperative makes less and less sense today, as most countries have fixed national identities. Given the current intensification of transnational power, however, and the consequent erosion of nationalistic sensibilities, countries from all over the world seem to increasingly feel the need to be part of affairs like the Venice Biennale in order to cling to what remains of old-fashioned national pride (in the most idealistic sense of the term).

Thus, and perhaps ironically, a critique of nationalism inevitably informs one’s national participation in the Venice Biennale. For example, some countries invite an artist of another nationality, while others present an exhibition with artists of various origins. Most countries select an artist and a curator born or based there to develop a project, but challenge themselves to come up with a concept that, without turning upside down the nation-specific premise, contests it somehow, or encapsulates some degree of criticism of a nationalistic enterprise.

Portugal at the Venice Biennale

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Portugal does not have a pavilion in the Giardini. Documentation elucidates that the government's considerations about building such a structure date back to 1930 and that, after the establishment of democracy in the April 25, 1974 revolution, there were some efforts made in that direction, although with no results. The lack of a pavilion in the Giardini has always been considered an inconvenience, even an embarrassment, by the various players in the Portuguese cultural field.

Indeed, it might have served as an excuse for Portugal's absence from the Venice Biennale for most of the 20th century. But starting in the late 1990s, the government finally began to make being there a priority of its cultural policy, so there has always been the need to secure for each edition a temporary venue. These have ranged from a *palazzo* to a *fondaco* in the city center or along the Grand Canal. But these locations, which have been mostly remote, have kept Portugal far from the epicenter of the event.

Since 1997 Portugal has followed the prevailing model of national participation, selecting a domestic artist and curator to develop a project. Typically, both are well known in the country, but under-recognized internationally. In the past, the purpose of the national participation has mostly been about cementing the reputations of the artist and the curator at home. But my vision has always been the opposite—that it should be about promoting younger, mid-career artists and curators abroad.

I believe that this is a much better way to allocate national resources and, more importantly, a far more effective strategy for raising the profile of the Portuguese scene internationally. Other examples of this line of thought have been the recent national participations of countries such as Ireland and Austria. Those artists and curators very effectively used their presence at the Venice Biennale to attract the attention of the international scene.

The selection of Vasconcelos to represent Portugal this year aligns with this way of thinking. She debuted at the Venice Biennale in 2005, catching the eyes of the event's visitors with *The Bride*, which graced the entrance of the Arsenale alongside posters by the New York-based feminist collective Guerrilla Girls as part of *Always a Little Further*, the main exhibition. By then she was already an acclaimed Portuguese emerging artist, but her international career had yet to be developed.

Vasconcelos’s 2010 retrospective at Lisbon’s Berardo Collection Museum confirmed her as an important mid-career artist in Portugal. She continued to build her reputation in Western Europe with the inclusion of the piece *Contamination* (2008–10) in “The World Belongs to You,” a group exhibition held at the Palazzo Grassi/François Pinault Foundation in Venice in 2011. She then had an exhibition at the Château de Versailles in 2012, where she was not only the youngest artist ever to show, but also the first woman, and the first from an arguably “peripheral” country in terms of world power relations. But internationally she is still up-and-coming, and the project at the Venice Biennale is a key step toward major worldwide recognition.

Floating Pavilion

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Sociologists advocate that a country is a constructed concept, envisioned by the individuals who perceive themselves as part of its society—an “imagined community.” This proposition is promoted through references that shape the identification of a group with a common territory: flags, anthems, monuments, and so forth. Therefore, I believe that any project for the Venice Biennale ought to take into consideration, on some level, that national identity is contingent by nature. Furthermore, it should ask what it means to represent a country. The answer, to my mind, lies in the philosophical definition of representation. “To represent” is “to stand for”—one thing stands in for something else. The pavilions in the Giardini operate in this way, standing in for countries.

Vasconcelos and I decided to turn to our strategic advantage the fact that Portugal does not have a pavilion in the Giardini. We recognized it as an opportunity to avoid “translating” a territory into a building, as had been the typical approach. Rather than utilizing a building somewhere in Venice, we thought of offering up an edifice on water—a floating pavilion. This gesture of “deterritorializing territory” parallels the current understanding of national identity: If it must be built on a daily basis, thereby implying some inherent instability as part of its natural condition, a floating pavilion is the ideal metaphor for it. Furthermore, it would mean that Portugal’s national representation in the Giardini (or at least next to it, to be entirely precise), a wish since 1930, would finally be achieved.

Trafaria Praia

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A floating pavilion would be original, certainly, but we still risked having it be seen as just another building to showcase the oeuvre of an artist. I did not want to curate just another

exhibition, and Vasconcelos did not want to just present a new group of works. Both of us wanted to do something unique. So we looked at Venice—where we would be—and at Lisbon—where we were—and pondered a context-specific proposal that would consider the historical relationship between Portugal and Italy, which had evolved through trade, diplomacy, and art.

For example, the sharing of knowledge in the field of cosmography and cartography was widespread, as proven by the fact that a copy of the Venetian monk Fra Mauro's *mappa mundi* was commissioned for the Portuguese court of King Afonso V. Lisbon and Venice specifically played key roles in broadening the European worldview during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance by establishing networks between East and West. The project would update these historical references by considering a fundamental aspect Lisbon and Venice share: an urban landscape along a waterfront.

Lisbon and Venice are, both today and in the past, distinctive for the vessels that arrive and depart from them. For example, many ships built in the Venetian Arsenal departed from the city to Portugal, England, and Flanders on trips that could last from one to two years. Vessels are a fundamental element of the Portuguese collective unconscious, reaching back to the caravel, in which Portuguese navigators of the 15th century began exploring the West African coast and venturing into the Atlantic Ocean. They were a pivotal instrument in the “age of discovery” and encapsulate Portugal's deep bond with everything related to the sea.

Vasconcelos thought of constructing an allegorical correspondence between the iconic Lisbon ferryboat, the *cacilheiro*, and the picturesque Venetian *vaporetto*, as both are the vessels intimately associated with their respective cities. The hypothesis emerged of bringing an actual *cacilheiro* to Venice to be a floating pavilion. We found the *Trafaria Praia* at a dockyard in Cacilhas—a parish on the south bank of the River Tagus—belonging to Transtejo, Lisbon's ferryboat operator. (Cacilhas is a key hub of Transtejo's routes, and it is from that name that the term “cacilheiro” derives.) The ship was waiting to be dismantled or sold after having been decommissioned in 2011. It underwent major transformations in Navaltagus, a shipyard on the outskirts of Lisbon, starting in late January 2013.

The *Trafaria Praia* was towed from Lisbon to Venice from May 4 to May 21. There, it is moored next to the Giardini's *vaporetto* stop and sails around the lagoon at regular intervals since the opening of the Venice Biennale. Sailing was a key factor in the project's rationale, because it brings to mind the fact that *cacilheiros*, much like *vaporetti*, are a means

of public transportation. The *cacilheiros* carry passengers across the River Tagus on a daily basis, and until the building of the main bridge into Lisbon in 1966, these ferryboats were the only way of getting from the city to the south bank.

Cacilheiro customers are primarily commuters who live in Lisbon's industrial southern suburbs—historically one of the most unionized regions of Portugal—and work in the city. Thus, the ships have always had blue-collar and middle-class associations and are a well-known, politically charged symbol in Portugal. In fact, the distinctive stripe around their hulls is painted in orange rather than the customary naval blue, thus being a variation of red, a left-wing-related color, and a remnant of the Portuguese post-revolutionary process of the mid-1970s.

The *cacilheiro* is, for Vasconcelos, important in the evocation of the “imagined community” that is Portugal, allegorically materialized in the millions of passengers that such a ferryboat might carry during its lifetime. This mass of people stands for the citizens of Portugal—natives, based there or abroad, and immigrants. Furthermore, a *cacilheiro* is hardly a luxurious ship, and thus its presence in Venice as a floating pavilion parodies the yachts of the multimillionaires-cum-collectors that dock in the city during the opening of the Venice Biennale.

Great Panorama of Lisbon (21st Century)

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The *Trafaria Praia* was a found object; informed by Duchamp's assisted readymade principle, Vasconcelos changed it without removing its functionality. On the outside of the ship, she applied a large-scale panel of Portuguese tiles, known as *azulejos*, hand-painted in blue and white, that reproduces Lisbon's contemporary skyline. The work is based on another large-scale panel of *azulejos*, the *Great Panorama of Lisbon*, attributed to the Lisbon-based, Spanish painter Gabriel del Barco and created around the year 1700.

The *Great Panorama of Lisbon* depicts the city before the legendary earthquake of 1755 and is a quintessential expression of the baroque-style golden age of tile production in Portugal. Vasconcelos's work is, therefore, both a citation of the past and an analysis of recent times. It evokes the relevance of *azulejos* in Portuguese imagery and alludes to the changes that Lisbon, and Portugal, have experienced in the centuries since the first work was created. Hence her titling of the new mural *Great Panorama of Lisbon (21st Century)*.

Vasconcelos has made other works that involve ceramic coverings. In doing this she evokes the material's frequent deployment in architecture in Portugal, especially on the facades of buildings. *Great Panorama of Lisbon (21st Century)* operates in the same manner; *Trafaria Praia*, the ship-cum-edifice on water, has Lisbon on its facade. If *Trafaria Praia* could be considered a body, then the tiles would be its skin. Intriguingly, Vasconcelos is subverting one of her current trademarks, the wrapping of glazed earthenware models of animals in doilies. This time, it is the ceramics that encase the found object.

She intends the work to function as a kind of mirror, but rather than reflecting the present scenery, of Venice, it projects the urban landscape of its origin, Lisbon. The Bugio and Vasco da Gama towers are pictured at the two far ends of the mural, which come together at the stern, while the prow shows the Praça do Comércio (known in English as Black Horse Square), a key area of the historical downtown quarter. The experience of the work is particularly enchanting in Venice, because whether one is riding on the *Trafaria Praia* or on a *vaporetto*, the urban landscape comes alive and passes by as if on a filmstrip.

Valkyrie Azulejo

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On the *Trafaria Praia's* deck, Vasconcelos created *Valkyrie Azulejo*, an installation of blue-and-white textiles and fairy lights that connects the interior of the ship with its exterior; one might imagine it as somehow the reverse of the mural. The piece echoes some of her past works, such as *Contamination* and the series "Valkyries" (2004–ongoing), from which its title derives. The "Valkyries" are large-scale suspended sculptures, much like Alexander Calder's mobiles. They are patchworks—small bits of cloth in different colors, patterns, and textures, sewn together into organic forms resembling undulating sleeves, flexible tubes, tentacles, or protuberances. These works often interact with the surrounding architectural elements, hanging from the ceiling at different points and various heights, "crawling" the walls, or "creeping" around the floors (strictly in the case of *Contamination*).

In a similar manner, *Valkyrie Azulejo* is a complex medley of fabrics all over the ceiling and walls, from which crocheted units, intertwined with strings of blinking LEDs, emerge in various sizes and shapes. The piece envelops the visitor, conjuring a cavelike setting with a surreal vibe. To those familiar with the Surrealists' exhibitions, it will immediately bring to mind Duchamp's contribution to New York's 1942 "First Papers of Surrealism." André Breton commissioned Duchamp to design the installation, and he responded by tangling a mesh of white string webbing throughout the mansion-like rooms in order to "contaminate" them.

Valkyrie Azulejo evokes the deep ocean, which has always sparked the imaginations of artists and novelists. From Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* to the paintings of J. M. W. Turner, the deep ocean has been a source of narratives, populated by strange creatures and tragic shipwrecks. With this new work Vasconcelos calls upon this collective imaginary to create a fantastic, almost mystic, and psychologically engaging environment—a sort of threshold to a magical universe straight out the Bible story of Jonah and the Whale. The constant rocking of the ship and the roar of its motor make the ambience even more sensorial. If *Trafaria Praia* is a body, then all this movement and sound signifies its breeding.

Lounge and Public Programs

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The quarterdeck of the *Trafaria Praia* is clad with cork to give it a trendy look, typical of a lounge. This interior design solution fit in well with the vibrant atmosphere of the Venice Biennale preview period. Resident DJ Henriq played music all day long, and guest DJ Severino animated the late-afternoon cocktail parties. This zone also hosted numerous, very well attended public programs. At all of these times *Trafaria Praia* was an “active” space, much like the cutting-edge, state-funded galleries that have been operating in Europe since the 1990s under the auspices of New Institutionalism.

In the mornings during the period of the preview there was “What Art, What Future, What Future for the Art?,” a series of roundtables that addressed topics about the Portuguese cultural field. These included the historical problems of national representations at the Venice Biennale, and the city as an intellectual subject. The speakers included such scholars, curators, and critics as Rosário Salema de Carvalho, Moritz Elbert (from the Colectivo de Curadores), Ughetta Molin Fop, Carlos Fortuna, Alda Galsterer, Filipa Oliveira, Luísa Soares de Oliveira, and Paulo Cunha e Silva.

In the afternoons there was “New Music, Old Traditions,” a cycle of concerts that explored contemporary musical trends informed by ancient cultural expressions. Participants included Jonas Runa with Spiridon Shishigin, Jin Hi Kim, and Eddie Prévost, who formed the Cosmic Ensemble; Os Músicos do Tejo; and Quarteto Arabesco with Ana Quintans and Marcos Magalhães, as well as with Pedro Jóia. They performed several different musical genres, from Portuguese 18th century compositions to classic *fado* to experimental electronica.