

{ TRAFARIA PRAIA }

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LISBON WITH VENICE  
INSIDE IT:  
THE DECK OF THE  
*TRAFARIA PRAIA*

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“The fact is that Portugal is not a very real place, I mean, with respect to the European context. Portugal is a peculiar case: It is not the typical model of a European country, that is, it is not the French, German, or British model.”

Joana Vasconcelos<sup>1</sup>

Preamble

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IN VENICE, THE *TRAFARIA PRAIA* WILL BE A NEW STEP FORWARD IN THE TYPOLOGY OF THE ASSISTED READYMADE, A DUCHAMPIAN REFERENCE THAT DESCRIBES MUCH OF THE PRACTICE OF JOANA VASCONCELOS. IT CONTINUES THE CONSTRUCTED, ARCHITECTURAL DIMENSION THAT HAS ALWAYS CHARACTERIZED HER SCULPTURES AND INSTALLATIONS, BUT THIS IMMENSE FLOATING EDIFICE, A BRIDGE-SHIP BETWEEN TWO CITIES WHOSE HISTORIES AND SYMBOLS ARE MIRRORED IN THE SEA, IS A NEW PEAK IN HER OEUVRE.

Firstly, this installation is a political manifesto. Those who know the troubled episodes of the participation of Portugal at the Venice Biennale—namely, the absence of a pavilion of its own and the perennial difficulties of renting a dignified and suitable space—also understand that all of this is regarded by the Portuguese artistic elite as a failure. The circumstance evokes past and present ghosts, from the times of the António de Oliveira Salazar dictatorship to the utopian misgivings of the revolution of April 25, 1974, as well as the current crisis in which Portugal is governed by a *troika* that justifies the frailty of its cultural policies. Vasconcelos, who is determined to confront the “unreality” in which

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Agustín Pérez Rubio, “Interview with Joana Vasconcelos on Multiculturalism, Tradition, Feminism, and Sculpture,” in Gilles Lipovetsky et. al., *Joana Vasconcelos* (Porto: Livraria Fernando Machado, 2011): 321.

the Portuguese people live, has resolved the question with her overwhelming capacity to create. The pavilion is a *cacilheiro*, or Lisbon ferryboat, which will be moored next to the main entrance to the Giardini, as if greeting the countries who possess that which Portugal does not: a pavilion of its own and sustained cultural policies.

At the same time that it grants an existence to the nonexistent Portuguese pavilion, the *Trafaria Praia* opens a gleaming narrative around the concept of the *locus*, or place, which is so dear to Vasconcelos's practice. It evokes the liquid bodies of two of the most beautiful cities in Europe and the importance of passenger boats, with their efficient circulations: *cacilheiros* in one case and *vaporetti* in the other. Through them one can sense history—phantasmagoric memories of ships of the past, from the 15th and 16th centuries, when Venice and Lisbon ran the world's trade routes, and both were ports of arrival for rich and exotic goods coming from China, the Indies, and Arabia.

The *Trafaria Praia* also embodies the image of Lisbon as the capital city of an empire that extended to Brazil, and brings this image to Venice through a tile panel in which Lisbon's coastline over the River Tagus is depicted. This work is a re-creation of one of the most spectacular pieces from the Portuguese 18th century baroque period, in which geometry becomes art in order to address architecture and the urban setting as well as its symbolic dimension.

Lisbon, as viewed from the River Tagus, will thus be displayed in front of a view of Venice, in a mirroring of two cities whose design was determined by geography and brought up to date by history, generating a reality that is based on representation. It has been said of these two cities—and still is—that they are remarkable views, cosmopolitan landscapes with their feet steeped in water.

The work that Vasconcelos is presenting at the Venice Biennale is not only a rejuvenated *cacilheiro*, saved from certain death in order to sail at leisure in Venice. Indeed, the work also suggests, with humor, an alternative direction of Vasconcelos's political manifesto: As they are replaced by more modern boats that their passengers are unable to bring themselves to love, the *Trafaria Praia* has been transformed into art. It has become a museum item. This is the phantasmagoric destiny of everything that Europe was, and it is offered for the enjoyment of the public. Whether they are viewers or tourists, they are different from the taciturn passengers who make the home-to-work, work-to-home commute every day. For these new users, Vasconcelos now provides a peculiar journey that invites us to come aboard. . .

### Approximation

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While the inner skin of the *Trafaria Praia* is being prepared, it is an unforgettable experience to allow ourselves to wander around the areas of Vasconcelos's studio where several groups of women are working. It is there that they choose fabrics of the most varied textures, cut them into unexpected shapes, sew them together, and knit, composing vigorous polyps and tentacles that rise up to us with a corrosive humor.

In a recent essay, French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky deals with the particularity of that production unit which, in the textile sector, is mostly female.<sup>2</sup> There is there an efficient chain of value that, in a cosmopolitan dimension, maintains the characteristics of the feminine tasks of the past, between the scrupulous following of the rules of production and the sudden decision to contradict them, obeying the irrepressible desire to break from routine and personalize the object being made. An external observer inevitably thinks of these different possibilities when looking at this team of young female assistants. Sometimes something about their clothes, makeup, or gestures is so unusual that there seems to be an organic pulsing between the work and the intimate moods of those who are weaving it...

In the task at hand, the most extraordinary thing is the display of the samples, set out on tables, which will cover the inside of the ferryboat. It is a luxuriousness of blue and white, the exclusive colors chosen by the artist, echoing the blue and white of the outer tile panel, thus paying homage to the palette of the great Portuguese tile production of the 18th century. The writer Paulo Cunha e Silva says that Vasconcelos cannibalizes Portuguese stereotypes.<sup>3</sup> This notion is accurate, particularly if we consider the conceptual thinking of Brazilian modernism: a sort of visceral love for a particular aspect of a culture that compels us to ingest it and re-elaborate it, mixing it with other, equally succulent particularities, initiating a process of mourning through ideas of theory and the anthropology of culture.

Thus, the memory of Portuguese tiles—which lined churches and adorned the palaces of Portuguese nobles—is an integrating semiological endeavor that bears the kitschy intensity of the diversity of its patterns and subjects: cottons, silks, linens, Lycra, nylon, some plain, some patterned, or with lace, feathers, and sequins. Vasconcelos's decisions are subject to what is available on the market and then to the efficient freedom of her female team. Thus, the *Trafaria Praia* is a peculiar kind of “open work,” in the sense of the term coined by Italian scholar Umberto Eco, suggesting many levels of successive re-creating, which enriches the contradictory meanings of the final piece.

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See Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, “Joana Vasconcelos: l'art réenchanté,” in *Joana Vasconcelos*, 300–301.

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See Paulo Cunha e Silva, “Tricotando a pele ou a arte da deslocação,” in *idem*, *Joana Vasconcelos* (S. Mamede do Coronado, Portugal: Bial, 2009): 271.

In this case, Vasconcelos is for the first time using LEDs in conjunction with textiles. The assistants are sewing these tiny lightbulbs using the same gestures with which they knit, sew, or attach a rainfall of sequins. The innovation starts there; without disturbing heritages or traditions, there is an undoing and recomposing of the aura of urban crafts. It was this peculiar method of functioning that Lipovetsky called “hypermodernity.”<sup>4</sup>

#### Lisbon with Venice Inside It

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Visitors to the object-boat will see and feel the extraordinary metamorphosis in Vasconcelos’s work since the series “Valkyries” (2004–ongoing), which morphed into *Contamination* (2008–10). These, in their successive re-creations, are large-scale sculptures that are mainly soft but presented with mythical grandeur. They are like bodies apparently without a skeleton, bringing to mind old-fashioned rag dolls, but also spiders and octopuses with strange tentacles. Or sea urchins from the bottom of the ocean, of which the poet Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen used to say that she didn’t know if they were plants or animals. When on view, these works hang down from the ceilings, rub against the walls, and occupy the floor with a variable geometry that is adapted to the site and transmuted into stage designs.

When it was exhibited at Lisbon’s Berardo Collection Museum as part of the solo show “Netless” (2010), *Contamination* was each day seen by joyful groups of visitors. They examined the craft-related process of its making (the stitches, the knitting, the crocheting, the extraordinary variety of the cloths) and I have no doubt that many of them took notes and patterns for the renovation of their own domestic decorations. Children and young people settled into the big, inviting body, rummaging in the protuberances, hiding in the unexpected rings, or trying out a comfortable seat to talk on their mobile phone, play hide and seek, or engage in courting.

Taking into account the wear and tear inflicted by these thousands of visitors, a team of assistants from Vasconcelos’s studio set themselves up on site to fix the work as needed. And perhaps they took advantage of the occasion to alter patterns, place new fittings, consider new criteria for making the work, and discuss uncertainties about its durability with the admirers/users. So, even though the title of the work might suggest the idea of a plague, which keeps on growing and spreading, the softness of that fragmented body—an immense toy for some, a fetish for others—turned risk into a party, derision into a contagious humor that, due to its colors and forms, also conjures references to Chinese dragons, Rio de Janeiro carnivals, and the gaudy image of the whole world’s patchworks. Through the power of her

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Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, *op. cit.*, 302. It is worth quoting: “This enchantment is characteristic, as it carries the very marks of our hypermodernity. Not a post-modernity, whose very prefix signifies an afterwards, a break with a modernity decreed dead, but a hyperbolisation, an extreme perfecting of values and processes that constitute modernity itself. An exacerbated modernity now investing right into the past to incorporate it in turn into a movement of openness and creative autonomy. After the modernist exclusion of tradition, it is time for its hypermodern inclusion, its recycling into the orbit of the ‘nothing is forbidden.’”

“relational aesthetics,” Vasconcelos confronts—with an affectivity that generates a sense of liberation—the “partitioned times” of the contemporary condition.<sup>5</sup>

In Venice, inside the *Trafaria Praia*, there will be a radical change from the “Valkyries” and *Contamination*. The sculpture-body of these works will be now attached to the walls and ceilings on the deck as preemptory high-reliefs, anxious for movement and contact with other bodies, suggesting or demanding affection and attention through the tentacles and polyps that will invade the space filled by visitors, who will be under a dim light, provoking giggles. That apparently tamed sculpture-body, like a wonderful skin in blue and white, will present itself to visitors, granting them caresses with what might seem like velvet or rare birds’ feathers, a reference to plastic products intended for the hyper-consumers of common goods that we all are.

This forest of tricks has a vast semiological dimension, as is characteristic of Vasconcelos’s practice. The work might be the belly of the whale (making us feel as if we are Jonah) or a conniving alcove, (in)discreetly eroticized. It is impossible not to think of the dragging shapes of the nights of the Venice carnival, or, on a more erudite level, the Spanish artist Mariano Fortuny, whose clothes and stage designs were once brought together in Venice’s Pesaro Palace, today operating as a museum.

In the context of Vasconcelos’s spectacular oeuvre, *Trafaria Praia* has a great conceptual significance. If she is, as was stated by Cunha e Silva, a plastic surgeon who invents a new skin for objects, here she moves into the depths of her assisted readymade, converting into textiles a reflection of the various perspectives of 18th century Portuguese tile production.<sup>6</sup> In this creative leap there is a hallucinatory pulsing—another way of articulating her surrealistic aesthetics—serving the strategies of her artistic manifesto, which is clearly committed to the act of sharing, firstly and foremost within her team, but also with the expectations of all visitors. There is also an homage to Venice, which lives inside a Lisbon ferryboat both mysterious and shy, muffled within the inviting rustling set out by the altered “Valkyries”.

But the *Trafaria Praia* reminds me of much more than the Venice of Fortuny. Vasconcelos once said, “Handcraft gives you three things: time, repetition, and, then, when things are repeated over and over again, they become abstract.”<sup>7</sup> I believe that this extraordinary trajectory through the manual, repetition, and seriality toward abstraction is at the base of all history painting, from Raphael to Titian to Rubens, ending up in the romantic Delacroix. In the 19th century, Delacroix would state: “The heart beats faster when there are big walls to paint.”<sup>8</sup> The sharing of this splendor is the major theme of Vasconcelos’s work on the *Trafaria Praia*’s deck.

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On the concept of “relational aesthetics,” see Jacques Rancière, *Sobre políticas estéticas* (Barcelona: Servei de Publicacions de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2005). The concept of “partitioned times” is appropriated from an essay by Stephen Wright: “Whose Door? Whose Alien?,” in *Art Criticism and Curatorial Practices in Marginal Contexts* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: The International Press of the Association of Art Critics, 2006): 50–53. Available online at [http://www.aica-int.org/IMG/pdf/Addis\\_Ababa.pdf](http://www.aica-int.org/IMG/pdf/Addis_Ababa.pdf) (last accessed March 2012).

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Paulo Cunha Silva, *op. cit.*, 272.

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Agustín Pérez Rubio, “From Micro to Macro and Vice Versa: A Conversation Between Agustín Pérez Rubio and Joana Vasconcelos,” in Jacinto Lageira and Agustín Pérez Rubio, *Joana Vasconcelos* (Lisbon: ADIAC Portugal and Corda Seca, 2007): 164.

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Jack Spector, *The Murals of Eugène Delacroix at Saint-Sulpice* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1967): 158.