CONTEMPORARY PORTUGUESE THEATRE
EXPERIMENTALISM, POLITICS AND UTOPIA
[WORKING TITLE]
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COORDINATION
Rui Pina Coelho
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A Transdisciplinary Space: Projecto Teatral, Karnart, Visões Úteis and Circolando

Areia, collective creation
dir. André Braga | Circolando, 2011
(André Braga) | photo João Tuna/TNSJ
We might think of the emergence of groups such as Projecto Teatral, Karnart, Visões Úteis or Circolando, as the product of a moment in which Portuguese theatre, following decades of isolation and castration, sought to catch up with what was being done elsewhere in Europe. The context in which they appeared, throughout the 1990s, was characterised by an effort to re-establish the very foundations of Portuguese theatre. This materialised itself in projects of a more experimental nature. The strong creative drive reflected the companies’ wish to claim a place for themselves — to do things their own way.

**Projecto Teatral**

It is almost impossible to talk of theatre groups which managed to establish a place for themselves without Projecto Teatral coming to mind. The collective, established in 1994, by João Rodrigues, Maria Duarte, Helena Tavares, André Maranha and Gonçalo Ferreira de Almeida, has produced an increasingly subversive and controversial body of work, and tends to distance itself from not only more media-oriented or commercial circuits — with the exception of the big 2016 retrospective promoted by Culturgest and the Maria Matos Municipal Theatre — but also from a more conventional definition of theatre. It wasn’t, however, always so. Projecto Teatral’s first performance was a production of Jean Paul Sartre’s *As Trojanas* [The Trojan Women] (dir. Maria Duarte and Elsa Valentim, 1994), in which there featured a number of elements traditionally associated with theatre. Over time these would disappear from the group’s performances. Next came *Ciclo Inconsular* [Inconsular Cycle] (1996), which was based on three non-dramatic texts (*Le Roi des aulnes*, by Michel Tournier, *Giacomo Joyce*, by James Joyce, and *The Wasteland*, by T. S. Eliot) and was directed by Elsa Valentim, Rogério de Carvalho and João Grosso, with Maria Duarte appearing as the only performer. It was a performance constructed on a “profoundly experimental, visual and performative [base] [...] [framed] by a rigorously thought out scenic design” (Vasques, 1996). In 1997, a production of *As Criadas* [The Maids] by Jean Genet (dir. João Grosso) marked the end of Projecto Teatral’s initial phase, which, though characterised by a certain experimentalism, had still been clearly locatable within the field of theatre.

In *dissidências* [dissents] (1997), there were fewer creative elements involved than one might expect of a typical theatre production (in the programme, only the artistic director was mentioned), and the space chosen for the performance was also alternative: the western tower of the Cordoaria Nacional. But it was with *mesa* [table] (1999) that the theatre group’s work really turned a corner. Sitting around a table in the Galeria Fio de Prumo — the former Sidul sugar factory — six performers devised the event from the idea that each of them had of what a “table read” might be, avoiding terms such as “performance”, “character” or “actor”. As early as *mesa*, a certain sifting of the elements involved in theatre production can be noted in the group’s work, as the separate moments of the play’s construction were isolated and turned into art objects in themselves.
This refinement resulted in intense sensory encounters — *estufa* [*greenhouse*]¹ (2005), for example, engaged not only with the audience’s sight, but also their sense of smell —, the group’s performances coming to be based around the construction of objects and an idea of space itself as a concept, promoting emotional, intellectual and personal involvement. *câmara* [*camera-chamber*] (2010) is the most representative example of this: an immersive event to be experienced individually, with just one audience member at a time entering the scenic structure, the performance developed from the double meaning of the word “câmara” in Portuguese — burial chamber and camera obscura. On the Maria Matos Municipal Theatre’s stage and substage, there was an anechoic chamber — naturally silent and dark — inside which was an installation formed of a stack of red bricks, a microphone and a single ray of light coming in through a small opening. This, in turn, served as an invitation to the viewer to peep through the crack, where they’d find a looping video projection of a moving landscape — a simulation of the view from a travelling train.

The body having lost its place somewhat, space and objects became the main pillars of creation for the group. This gave rise to works which seemed to try and define theatre in the negative — by what it is not — presenting the audience with an attempt to identify the bare minimum required to justify the label “theatre”. These performances question preconceptions and challenge traditional ideas of theatre, as the limits of the creative territory are explored via a hybrid zone in which artistic languages cross over one another and
where performance, video, sound, minimalist installations and conceptual art all share a common space. This close affinity with visual arts became yet more prominent in the retrospective *nenhuma entrada entrem* [no way in go in] (2015), which invited viewers to get up close to the various objects that the group had created over the course of twenty years (1994-2015), the combined aesthetic and discursive coherence of which merited an exhibition.

The marginal nature of these art objects is restated in the locations chosen for their presentation — locations with which a close relationship is established. The group almost always chooses to stage its productions in places not forming part of conventional theatre circuits; these have included galleries, houses, or, for example, in 2005, with the production of *Transiberiano* [Transiberian] (a journey on the train of the same name, simulated via projected images), in the former library of the School of Agronomy (Instituto Superior de Agronomia).

Creators of an aesthetically stunning, earthly, tightly produced and coherent universe, Projecto Teatral has carved an ever more definite place for itself on the border between theatre and visual arts. Despite the group rejecting the label “transdisciplinary”², this term would seem to hover undeniably over a number of Projecto Teatral’s performances, their connection to theatre maintained through an exploration of its foundations. Certain aspects characteristic of the theatrical process and language are isolated — as in [*mesa*] or «*teatro*» [«theatre»] (2003), for example — and theatrical convention is questioned as its lines are blurred and transgressed through repeated recourse to other artistic languages.

**Karnart**

Theatre’s contamination by the visual arts is a feature which also characterises the work of Karnart — a collective which, though officially founded in 2001 by Luís Castro, Vel Z, Maria Campos, Fernanda Ramos and Filipa Reis, already brought with it, in the artistic path of its mentor, Luís Castro, a back-story which proved fundamental in the birth and exploration of a concept underpinning all of the group’s creations: “perfinst” (performance + installation)³. This concept, which has been altered and fine-tuned across the years, reflects a need to find a category suitable for the creations of a company which developed its own methodology, a technique for the ideal performer (the “perfinster”, who should combine an actor’s expressive capacity, a puppeteer’s skill and capacity to distance his/herself from the performance, a dancer’s physical ability, and a scientist’s rigour and curiosity), and a hybrid language — the product of the convergence of installation art, video projection and performance.

Despite designing performances for proscenium stages, the group refuses to accept the traditional layouts of such locations, instead coming up with an alternative approach to these conventional spaces. In *Pecado* [Sin], based on *O Pecado de João Agonia* [João Agonia’s Sin], by Bernardo Santareno, with artistic direction and dramatic composition by Luís Castro (1998), for example, the stage is laid out like an arena — a space of confrontation and battle between
Húmus, based on texts by Raul Brandão
dir. Luís Castro | Karnart, 2010
(Mariana Lemos) | photo Patrícia Rego
Commedia Purgatorio, based on texts by Dante Alighieri
dir. Luís Castro and Vel Z | Karnart, 2016
(Mônica Garcez) | photo Alípio Padilha
João Agonia and his family’s intolerance of his sexuality —, with raised levels symbolising a higher dimension which is almost divine, free of prejudice. Space, in this context, thus takes on a dramatic dimension — it produces meaning. “Perfinst” is, however, more than anything, a question of “site-specificity”. It has meant the use of many non-conventional spaces such as art galleries, houses, or the Espaço Karnart, which, between 2002 and 2009, was located in a 19th century building formerly occupied by the Lisbon School of Veterinary Medicine. The unique characteristics of this space were worked into the performances, like the marble-topped dissection benches used to display and manipulate installations.

“Perfinst” performances are, for the most part, specifically designed for the space in which they are to be put on, inhabiting and transforming a location, taking advantage of its particular nooks and crannies, as in the Monumental art gallery, where Humus [Humus], based on the book by Raul Brandão, and directed by Luís Castro (2010) was staged, and which provides a most emblematic example:

Creatively using the various areas of the Galeria Monumental […], Luís Castro conceived […] a stream of actions that the actors/performers […] carried out rigorously and with great precision, but which also occurred alongside an evocation of the oneiric. He thus grazed against one another: fantasy and pain, desire and fear, life and death. […] The performance was split up into various parts and each scene took place in a different area of the gallery: Room 1, Room 2, Back Room, Gallery, Patio, Black Room. This illustrated not only how it was possible for different atmospheres to be created in the various different architectural settings (each of which was modulated by different lighting conditions), but also the circulation that the audience was prompted to undertake, as they, from the fourth scene on, could choose the action they wanted to watch, free as they were to move between the various spaces. […] Some of the choices of setting revealed an intelligent appropriation of the particular location — simply, and without imposing meaning, but, at the same time, with room for various possible readings, the audience’s imagination left free to fill in that “loud astonishment” which, according to Raul Brandão, is the place of speech and the root of feeling. (Serôdio, 2011: 18-20)

In Humus, we experience the freedom of movement offered to the audience — a freedom which is in fact the responsibility of choice for the performance’s driving narrative line, as well as the viewer’s stimulation, invited as they are to visit these places, to emotionally feel the spaces, to think about the issues raised and to decode the various possible readings. In summary, the viewers are invited to fight for the creation of their own performance.

The various possible readings of a “perfinst” build up from the relationship between its objects — an installation or a series of installations — and the text (read in voice-over), which remains ambiguous throughout. Such antagonism lends the performance
greater dramatic density, making it more improbable, enigmatic and prone to decipherment. The figure of the “perfinster” also contributes to this density, manipulating the objects and transforming the space through careful and deliberate movements — adding, removing and modifying the elements of which it is composed.

Yerma, based on Federico Garcia Lorca’s play (2005), was the first part of a trilogy dedicated to the theme of family and establishes a crucial moment in the development of “perfinst”, as the first performance in which there is a strong paradigmatic relationship between the object and the actor.

Objects take on a central role and exist in great numbers, divided into a number of categories in the company’s archive: crafts, textiles, geological objects, dolls, religious items, flowers, embalmed animals, etc... These constitute a collection reflecting the rich and varied nature of the world, and are methodically catalogued and organised in the “objectothèque” at Karnart’s Cabinet of Curiosities. Indeed, the impressive archive is one of the company’s creative bases, with some of its performances being constructed from a pre-selection made by Luís Castro, which is then made available to the actors so that they can contribute on a given subject or text, as was the case in the creative process which resulted in Ilhas (Unknown Islands), by Raul Brandão, 2012). Each of the objects carries with it a certain story from its existence before it entered the archive, the reason for its inclusion, as well as the history of its use in the collective’s work, being familiar to all. Given the group’s ecological concerns, in
the case of natural objects, these are never violently removed from their original settings, for example.

Ethics and a will to participate in the public sphere are thus to be found at the heart of Karnart’s work, and serve as an indication of the ecological, social and political preoccupations which define both the group’s dramaturgical work and the visual aspect of its performances. In *Salvesave* (2000) — which focused on Mozambique’s disastrous floods of the same year, in an attempt to raise awareness of the devastating effects of climate change — one can already see the presence of an ecological impulse. In *O Convento* [*The Convent*] (2011), which takes for its base the characteristics (environmental, cultural, sociological and anthropological) of a given landscape — the Monchique mountain range in the Algarve’s interior — a family living modestly in an old abandoned convent seeks an alternative, more sustainable way of life. In this play, another of Karnart’s recurring subjects and methodologies is revealed — one which also features in *Portucalidades* [*Portucalities*] (2001): the use of fieldwork and an up-close experience with a community as a production’s base. This earlier project — a performance in various parts, presented in various different regions of Portugal — had developed from the particularities of each, guided by a concern to highlight their cultural specificities and also the warning that a certain loss of character and extinction of traditional, artisanal values could be underway.

Another important feature of the company’s work is revealed in the performances in which questions of social marginality and minority rights are raised, as in *Hermaphrodita* [*Hermaphrodite*] (based on *Hermaphrodita*, by Eugénio de Castro, dir. Vel Z, 2015), where a hybrid body and its sexuality was explored using a video projection onto a body-become-canvas. Plain to see in this piece is a political bent and the intention to make the audience confront alterity: to encounter, to consider and to respect the other.

**Visões Úteis**

Social concerns and intervention in the public sphere is something which also features heavily in the work of Visões Úteis, a collective indissociable from the place where it came into being in 1994: the city of Oporto. The company was founded by Carlos Costa, Nuno Cardoso, Ana Vitorino, Catarina Martins, Lucinda Gomes, Pedro Carreira and Albrecht Loops, around a manifesto written collectively — a fact which is indicative of the group’s spirit, and also the influence that the historical vanguard had on its formation. The directives for Visões Úteis’ creation are laid out in that initial manifesto: collective playwriting, a mixing of different artistic languages, and a constant search for original ways to put together performances — performances in which the *Gesamtkunstwerk* [total work of art] concept is taken to be something fundamental. Motivated by ethical and political concerns, the collective’s work is based on a search for, and reflection upon, contemporary artistic production processes, and on social responsibility for one’s community.

Connection to that community and the centrality of urban space gave rise to an interesting branch of the company’s work: landscape performance (or
Coma Profundo, dir. Ana Vitorino, Carlos Costa and Pedro Carreira
Visões Úteis, 2002 | photo Paulo Pimenta

Conceived in close connection to the city, the performances are expressly created for and from the route to be walked. The spectator, equipped with headphones and an audio device, is guided by an original soundtrack, which consists of a reading of a collectively written text, music and ambient sounds. These art objects were also created for other geographies, such as in Errare (dramaturgy and direction by Ana Vitorino, Carlos Costa and Catarina Martins, 2004), for Parma, in Italy, but most frequently the audiowalks are dedicated to Oporto and reveal a desire for social and community-based intervention.

These landscape performances — a fusion of theatre, music and urbanism — are closely tied to a city which has, throughout the years, been inhabited by a series of generations, as in Coma Profundo [Deep Coma] (dramaturgy and direction by Ana Vitorino, Carlos Costa and Pedro Carreira, 2002). This audiowalk carries within it the idea of the transience of life and civilisations, and the association of this with the transformation of the urban space and the impact this has on those who inhabit it. It is presented as a warning of the desertification of the city, along with the associated social and cultural issues, such as the gentrification to be witnessed in the Foz Velha area (and which now, in 2017, affects other zones of the city). This walk accounts for a Oporto working on two different tacks: divided between the past — the era of the old Foz inhabitants, which were the inspiration for the performance — and a modernity exiled in sealed condominiums, turned in on itself, a mirror for our individualist society which ignores the public sphere,
closing itself off from the surrounding community and the Other.

Ópera fiXi \textit{[fiXi Opera]} (2013), directed by Kaffe Matthews in collaboration with Ana Vitorino and Carlos Costa, is an interesting adaption of landscape performance that maintains the same interventive character. Influenced by the company’s ecological ethics\textsuperscript{7}, this opera, which warns of the effects of water pollution, is heard and seen following a route plotted along the banks of the Douro river, where a number of performance points are to be found. Using a bike adapted for the purpose — fitted with speakers and a location finder — the cyclist-spectator listens to the soundtrack especially designed for the route. The experience was inspired by contemporary fishing practice on the Douro river, the river itself, and by the phenomenon of sex-change in fish as a result of water pollution — a factor which explains the audience’s encounter with male mermaids and female fisher(wo)men. The site-specificity and community/social intervention of these pieces are likewise present in the creations designed for a route around northern Portugal’s prisons, which formed part of the Projecto Liberdades \textit{[Project Liberties]}\textsuperscript{8} (1997–1999).

Three cycles can be picked out in the course of Visões Úteis’ development: a first instance (1994–1999) characterised by collaboration with invited directors working on texts by various authors — Kafka, Ionesco, Genet, Dostoyevsky, amongst others — of which the important \textit{Porto Monocromático \textit{[Monochromatic Oporto]}} (dir. Nuno Cardoso, 1997) appears as the first concrete realisation of the founding manifesto’s
intention. In keeping with the idea of a total work of art, the company created a fragmented performance which was developed — through the devising technique — from the urban experience of Oporto, along transdisciplinary lines, as theatre, painting, photography, music, dance and video were combined.

Next came a second phase (1999–2008), more focused on the search for new discourses and on “lab work”, in which the input of the artistic directors prevailed, and which concerned itself more with collective and original dramatic creation based on improvisation. Nowadays, this is considered one of the essential characteristics of the group’s work. Upon moving to a new space (Fábrica Social) in 2009, a new era began, in which the group has enjoyed improved production conditions and has ensured greater community involvement, promoting activities in parallel to their artistic creations, and also welcoming new creative structures (via the project Artistas Associados [Associated Artists]). Visões Úteis continues to call for new languages based on the cross-over between various different artistic disciplines, and for new ways of organising creative processes.

Circolando

Circolando began in 1999, in Oporto, on the initiative of the duo André Braga and Cláudia Figueiredo. Their training (in physical education and contemporary circus techniques, and sociology, respectively) greatly shaped the development of this cultural cooperative, which emerged in close associated with the language of contemporary circus and also from a desire for
transdisciplinary creation. Later distancing itself from contemporary circus’ heritage, and the earthly, rural, oneiric, childish aesthetic which marked its first years of life, the company has remained very much attached to collective creation. Currently, its productions arise from a dialogue between theatre and dance, with some recourse to other artistic disciplines such as poetry, music, video and visual arts, thus preserving the multidisciplinary character at the heart of the group’s work.

From its first performances designed for the public arena — *Caixa Insólita* [*Odd Box*] (2000) and *Rabecas* (2001) — Circolando has adopted a transgressive identity, basing itself at the crossroads between contemporary circus, dance, physical theatre, puppetry, music and visual creation. However, it was with *Giroflé* (dir. André Braga and Cláudia Figueiredo, 2002), created in an attempt to find an “absolute audience”, that the company consolidated the transversal aesthetic which characterised its performances up until 2011, which is when *Areia* [*Sand*] (dir. André Braga and Cláudia Figueiredo, 2011) appeared — a work which brought with it rupture and transition to the present creative context. *Giroflé*, a wordless poetic manifesto composed of a series of scenes and intense physicality, defended communism with nature and, in its ability to inspire empathy in any spectator (on account of what was essentially its privileging an emotive and sensorial discourse) satisfied the group’s search for a more universal appeal. In this production, a staging feature characteristic of the company’s early years can be found — the arena, which had previously been abandoned when the
cut was made with the artistic discourse of contemporary circus. Circolando’s staging aimed at evoking its itinerant and circus origins, which, in Giroflé, meant a metal structure built in a dome shape not unlike the inner part of a tent, and inside which a celestial garden was installed.

One particular feature characteristic of Circolando creations is the idea of a work-in-progress. Even when a performance opens, its final version has yet to be fixed, and thus it ends up being altered in the course of its confrontation with the audience. This “in progress” creative process was maintained even beyond Areia — a dance solo by André Braga, on a sand-covered stage, with a musical accompaniment by Tó Trips —, which served as a sort of creative reset for the group, as they incorporated the simplicity illustrated by the objects on stage. Scenic structures requiring a certain level of construction made way for simpler elements, presented just as they were — such as the sand in the performance of the same name, or the tyres which invaded the “arena” in Noite [Night] (created by André Braga, Cláudia Figueiredo, Paulo Mota and Ricardo Machado, 2015). These are objects which are quite distant from the iron constructions of Caixa Insólita (dir. André Braga, 2000) and Giroflé.

This new impetus seems to have split Circolando’s work into two separate branches: one more intimate, in which the very aesthetics and language of creation are questioned and new forms of artistic expression and working methodologies are sought, as in Noite — where improvisation took on a driving role in the performance’s construction; and another branch which is more outward-facing, closely establishing a dialogue with the community and exploring social and political issues more explicitly. Examples of this latter approach are the performance Estufas [Greenhouses] (dir. André Braga, 2013) and the series Espírito do Lugar [A Spirit of Place], in which we find a certain complicity with the land, from which the performances take off.

Estufas, a theatre-dance performance about sleep and dreaming, welcomed the participation and collaboration of a number of figures from the local community, relying on a certain itinerancy on the part of the spectator. Beginning in the Bairro do Barril neighbourhood of Águeda’s historic centre, it ends in the Alta Vila park, with all the actors — amateur and professional — brought together in a mass encounter. Until that final moment — which brought about its own performance, Rios de Sono [Rivers of Sleep] — the audience visit five “greenhouse-rooms” in a mixture of inhabited and abandoned houses. Artistic creativity around a specific place (in this case, Oporto) develops with the performances Espírito do Lugar 1.0 (2015) and Espírito do Lugar 2.0 (2016). Here, performance, dance, physical theatre and video are interwoven, and take on the form of “walkscapes”, based on the idea of walking as an aesthetic practice — the spectator being presented with a suggestion for a journey through various different spaces, and contact with the discourses associated to each. The route traced in Espírito do Lugar 1.0 (dir. André Braga, 2015) went from Bonfim to Campanhã, and in Espírito do Lugar 2.0 (dir. André Braga and Cláudia Figueiredo, 2016), from Cantareira to Foz do Douro — areas characterised as marginal in a gentrified
Espírito do Lugar 1.0, dir. André Braga
and Cláudia Figueiredo | Circolando, 2015
(Costanza Givone and João Vladimiro) | photo Lauren Maganete
Oporto, but which are home to a significant proportion of the city’s elderly and impoverished population, rescuing them from invisibility and oblivion. Guided by local residents, the performances are shaped by the experiences of those individuals, inviting the walker-spectator to enter warehouses, abandoned shops, yards, patios, terraces, homes and other spaces which remain excluded from the city’s principal trajectories. Dialogue with the local community is also present in *Arraial [Carnival]* (dir. André Braga and Madalena Victorino, 2012), a theatre-dance performance involving the participation of choreographer, Madalena Victorino. Based in the cultural and visual universe of northern Portugal’s *fêtes* and pilgrimages, in which the sacred and profane meet, this performance was put on by a professional cast working together with sixty amateur actors selected from the local communities of the various places in which the performance was put on.

With the exception of the site-specific performances — in which the relationship with space is quite plain to see, and in which this forms part of the creation’s raw materials — Circolando’s spatial aspect has the effect of echoing the working models from two of the company’s key periods. These are: circular structures which allude to a heritage in contemporary circus, and which dominated the group’s initial years, and spaces which have been devastated, deserted — as seen in more recent creations — a sort of ruin upon which a process of discovery of new creative forms and techniques was established.
This desire to discover new forms of expression constitutes an element common to the work of all four companies, whose creations feature a crossing of various artistic disciplines, prompting reflection on the normative concepts of theatre’s spectacle. Space — an element which strongly impacts on aesthetic and dramaturgical conceptions — is, in these collectives, re-affirmed as one of theatre’s principal creative resources. Inhabitable and transformable, just as happens in Karnart’s “perfinst”, or in Projecto Teatral’s object-creation, space and the work carried out around it constitutes a vehicle via which connections with, and intervention in the community can be made, as in Visões Úteis’ performances or in Circolando’s “walkscapes”. Whether connected to a more conventional definition of theatre, like Visões Úteis, or more distant from it, as is the case for Projecto Teatral, these structures have certainly claimed for themselves independent voices and territories within contemporary theatre practice, through a collective and continued endeavour in thinking about and creating theatre.

NOTES

1 The performance was presented a number of times between 2005 and 2007 and was staged in the patio of a ground-floor apartment in São Bento, Lisbon. It used a structure built by the collective: a greenhouse where they planted various kinds of vegetables, and which the public could visit.


3 The 1996 performance Comb, staged at the ICA and Smith’s Galleries, in London, is just one example of a Luís Castro creation in which the first seeds of Karnart can be seen to be growing.

4 Karnart’s Lisbon base since 2015.

5 Nossa Senhora do Desterro Franciscan convent, in the Serra de Foia in Monchique. It is a Public Interest Heritage site currently in ruins.

6 Visões Úteis’ first audiowalk, it was an audio-spatial experience inspired by the work of Canadian artist, Janet Cardiff.

7 In an attempt to reduce its ecological footprint, Visões Úteis deducts a carbon tax from its modest annual income, which it donates to organisations dedicated to protecting the environment.

8 Trilogia da Punição (A Máquina, A Metamorfose and O Veredito) (Punishment Trilogy (The Machine, Metamorphosis and The Verdict)) created from Franz Kafka’s world. The performances were created by Ana Vitorino, Carlos Costa, Catarina Martins and Pedro Carreira, and put on in various prisons around Portugal.

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