

THE BODY AS TEXT IN ERNESTO DE SOUSA SANDRA GUERREIRO DIAS

Com o seu corpo / com a sua história / com a sua parada / tentando concentrar num só agora e aqui / o enunciado e a enunciação / em actos (...). [With his body / with his story / with his stop / trying to concentrate on a single here and now / the statement and the enunciation / in actions (...).] (Ernesto de Sousa, 1979)

In 1984 Ernesto de Sousa took part in the exhibition *Atitudes Litorais* [Coastline Attitudes], organized by José Miranda Justo at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Lisbon. In the catalogue Sousa published a document entitled “Notas para acompanhar o fim do fim do mundo” [Notes to follow the end of the end of the world]. The first item was: “Interdisciplinaridade e paradoxologia” [Interdisciplinarity and paradoxology]; the fourth was: “Comunicação e incomunicação (ou transcomunicação)” [Communication and *uncommunication* (or *transcommunication*)]; and the sixth was: “Desejo e prazer (o teu corpo é o meu corpo é o teu corpo)” [Desire and pleasure (your body is my body is your body)] (Justo 1998, p. 293). The visionary artist, curator and art critic devoted himself to a quest for an experimental interdisciplinary between art and poetry, art and life, life as body and aesthetic operator, as intervention tools in the great cultural turn towards the information society.

The concept of the *aesthetic operator*, coined by Bruno Munari, was brought from Italy in 1969 when Ernesto de Sousa participated in “Undici Giorni di Arte Colletiva” [Eleven Days of Collective Art], in Peio (northern Italy), designating an understanding of the artist as the subject and the action of an aesthetic process defined by Sousa as living art, “arte viva”. He added the notion of *Feast*, understood as a specific aesthetic experience, inaugural, laboratorial and celebratory. The *Feast* as a project was explored by the author through happenings, actions, involvements, environments, performances, and performing arts in general, assuming the configuration of an event or catalytic event. The principle of *uncommunication* is quintessential to this theory and aesthetic praxis. It is highlighted by those notes as systematization, but reflected upon by the author through experimentation all along his life and work. *Uncommunication* is emphasized in several different works as erasure or creative disturbance [“Desire”]. This silence is understood as a decisive way towards transformation and renewal of aesthetic practices – the *transcommunication* foreseen by the author and planned for Portugal, undergoing severe changes during the 1960s and 1980s, and upon which he thought and wrote abundantly.

Stating this specific communication as a keystone principle of his thought and aesthetic action, Sousa proposes an art of silence, embodied and emancipator: “A arte para a revolução não é arte sobre ela ou a pensar nela. É abrir no saber que a prepara o vazio que a transfigura. [...] E assim saberemos que alguma coisa de nós começa a ser neste exato aqui” [Art for revolution is not art about itself or thinking about art. It is to open the emptiness that transfigures it in the knowledge that prepares it. And thus we shall know that something in us has begun in this exact here] (Sousa 1997b, p. 57).

In this framework the curator highlights the key role of Portuguese Experimental Poetry (PO.EX), with which he discussed endlessly during those decades, allowing it a prominent place in his aesthetics theory, inscribing it diametrically in the vast, eclectic landscape of his artistic reflection, as well as promoting and operationalizing the reunion between sociological performance and the aesthetic principles of that poetic group and his theory of performance as propelling event. Underlining the predominance of the experimental poetic project as an aesthetic operation of “libertação metódica instrumental” [methodical instrumental liberation] (Sousa 1998a, p. 196) of language, Ernesto de Sousa was also a visionary as he advocated the metamorphosis of literature by intermediacy and performative agency, as he wrote, for instance in 1973 regarding E. M. de Melo e Castro:

Quer dizer que a leitura se transforma ela própria em operação estética, devendo, portanto, instituir-se com novos códigos constantemente renováveis: aventura, continente a descobrir. (...) Pode dizer-se que, em geral, as próprias palavras convencionais estão em perigo. Também sobre elas se pode exercer a liberdade. Não só, como antes, na sua consistência semântica, mas também na sua existência física e operacional [Meaning that reading is itself transformed into a cosmetic operation. It should therefore be instituted with new constantly renewable codes: adventure, continent to discover. (...) It may be said that, in general, conventional words themselves are in danger. Freedom can also be exercised upon them. Not only, as before, in their semantic consistency, but also in their physical and operational existence] (Sousa 1998a, p. 195–96).

The close dialogue and collaboration between Ernesto de Sousa and PO.EX established over these decades was thus theoretical and also demanding explanations, producing essays and disseminating some of the



O TEU CORPO É O MEU CORPO / YOUR BODY IS MY BODY / TON CORPS C'EST MON CORPS is a title under which Ernesto de Sousa grouped a series of actions, performances and exhibitions. This includes graphic, photographic and filmic production, poetry and mixed-media pieces made between 1972 and 1988, among which *Luiz Vaz 73*, *Revolution My Body nr. 2*, *Tu cuerpo es mi cuerpo / Mi Cuerpo Es Tu Cuerpo*, *Identificación con tu cuerpo*, *Olympia*, *Tradição como Aventura*.

The works that are part of the cycle “Your Body is My Body” are marked with the stamps above.

guiding principles of that group of poets, such as poetry as matter and language of research, festive territory of experimentation, living object and enhancer of events and change. As a curator, in the organization of exhibitions and events, debates and conferences, he always invited experimental poets to attend and participate. It can even be said that Ernesto de Sousa was one of the responsible for poetry on the street¹, not just in April but also before and after. His aesthetic theory is based on the notion of art as a body, event and performative practice of constant significant plethora, which according to the author was necessary to experiment, to make happen as research, and to celebrate on stage, the *Feast*, stage of history and aesthetic revolution by excellence.

This was drafted in 1978 by the author in a text entitled “Performar” [To Perform], published by the magazine *Opção* [Option], #101, in which Sousa digressed critically on the art of performance in Portuguese periodical press, outlining an early theory. In this text, the critic identified with the Portuguese early post-revolutionary period some of the most paradigmatic manifestations of the sort, pointing out an intimate convergence with poetry:

(...) até certos ‘Maiores’ de Portugal, foram acontecimentos que relevaram de uma existência estética, independentemente de desígnios mais ou menos conscientes e lúdicos dos participantes (‘A poesia deve ser feita por todos’; ‘A poesia deve ter por fim a verdade prática’). Dir-se-ia que durante dois anos (e será um período ‘mais longo’ da história moderna) se viveu em certos meios de Portugal, em autêntica performance; em ato de performer... cumprir o que se pensara ou sonhara agora e aqui (*paradise now*). Como se o acontecer contivesse todo o acontecimento, todo o consenso, todo o futuro. Era aquele ‘escrever no chão e deixar-se inscrever pelas paixões da rua’, a que se refere Maria Velho da Costa: ‘casas sim, barracas não’, ‘o poder a quem trabalha’ foram versos mais densos, mais estéticos, que toda a literatura que os estudantes de Belas Artes e outros espalharam pelas paredes de Paris em 68 [until a certain May in Portugal, those events originated from an aesthetic existence, regardless of more or less conscious and ludic designs of the participants (Poetry must be made by all; Poetry must target the practical truth). During two years (and a longer period in modern history) certain Portuguese groups lived in authentic performance; in performing acts; to fulfill what was thought or dreamed here and now (*paradise now*). As if the event contained all events, the entire consensus, and the whole future. It was as ‘writing on the floor and letting be inscribed by street passions’. According to Maria Velho da Costa, ‘yes to houses, no to shanties’, ‘power to the workers’ were more aesthetic and denser verses than all the literature that the students of Fine Arts and others spread throughout the walls of Paris in 1968] (Sousa 1998c, p. 309).

The social and political instability in the Country since the beginning of the Colonial War in 1961 caused during the 1970s, before and after April 25, a series of manifestations, movements and artistic actions in dialogue with the climate of the time. They explored the paradigm of happening, the ‘aesthetic existence’ Ernesto de Sousa advocated so often and that in the following

years met an expressive expansion in Portugal, much due to his action as creator, curator and critic. This is the context of creation of the organization of *Alternativa Zero: Tendências Polémicas da Arte Portuguesa Contemporânea* [Alternative Zero: Polemical Tendencies in Portuguese Contemporary Art], a memorable event in Lisbon in 1977 that guided the transition from Portuguese art into modernity and became preponderant in the affirmation of poetry as performance of that art of silence that required rediscovery and reinvention.

Organizing this exhibition and identifying the Portuguese status concerning the exploration of the power of words, Ernesto de Sousa highlighted the need and responsibility on the part of artists to rethink the very revolution through praxis. In 1975 the author wrote: “é na prática que pode com rigor avaliar-se o alcance revolucionário de qualquer produção estética” [practice alone allows the accurate assessment of the revolutionary reach of any aesthetic production] (Sousa 1998e) – trying to combine in a single event, experimental and seminal, a ritual and festive experience of word-action. *Alternativa Zero* was held in the National Gallery of Modern Art in Belém (Lisbon), with the collaboration of the Portuguese Secretariat of Culture. The event was an extraordinary moment in the Portuguese art scene due to the propositions displayed and the renewal they represented regarding previous periods, impressive audience number and participation, uncommon in events such as these, as well as the fruitful dialogue inspired between performance, Feast, happening and exchange. Partly drawing on the *Documenta* model of exhibition from Kassel (Germany), by Harald Szeemann, visited by Ernesto de Sousa in 1972², and also on the *Fluxus* movement (he was in contact with Ben Vautier, Robert Filliou, and Wolf Vostell), he gathered around fifty artists whose works touched on conceptual trends and post-conceptualism in Portuguese art, disrupting the traditional models of art theory, production, presentation and consumption.

Concerning experimental poetry, some of the most symbolic pieces were the poetic installations “Não há sinais inocentes” [There are no innocent signs] (1976), by E. M. de Melo e Castro, and “Poema D’Entro” [Poem In’side] (1976), by Ana Hatherly. These precursory, emblematic works were based on a performative situation-based theorization of language, in which they all converged, curator and poets. “Poema D’Entro” was an installation in a small room measuring 4x4x2 meters, painted in black. On the four walls were half-torn white posters, and the remains of their lacerations were scattered on the floor. The cubicle was lit with low intensity projectors, creating shadow effects and an atmosphere of immersion in space and into the poem. This was enhanced through the effect of a flashing light, highlighting the organic vividness and vibrating, pulsating rhythms of a living body.

The audience was invited to experience the exercise of rupture in a semiotic and graphic way, physically, ripping down the white posters hanging on the black wall, and in a historical and political way, in a more literal sense – given the clear suggestion of those blank posters to the empty noise of the political campaign posters proliferating on the city walls throughout the country. The challenge could also be interpreted as an interactive invitation to tear down the traditional models of language symbolized by paper and two-dimensionality.

“Não há sinais inocentes” was an intervention consisting in the unexpected distribution throughout the gallery of 30 traffic signs in white painted wood. The poet presented his work briefly through loudspeakers, inviting the public to interact with the installation, to paint and spread the objects, to give shape to creative energies and utopias. This happening took place to the surprise even of the organizer, and the improvised integration of these elements on the scenic space of the exhibition resulted in a collaborative, experiential and experimental action between the public and the other artists participating in the exhibition, since the objects were arranged throughout the gallery in a convivial, ludic atmosphere.³ In this case, the traffic signs may be understood as signs and words of order and action outlining alternative routes towards an utopia built by all, or at least instigating the unveiling and discovery of this other path, zero, alternative restart and inscription of the beginning in gestures and bodies, experienced through creative, experiential immersion on the stage of a new historical momentum that was intended for inauguration through such exposition and action.

The converging trends from these interventions are opening artistic research to a festive aesthetic universe of critical experiences stemming from conceptualism, poetry and visual and performing arts. Here they shared a radical reflection on language that had been developed for long by experimental poets and critics such as Ernesto de Sousa through his thinking and action. In the exhibition comment published in the journal *Colóquio/Artes* that same year, the author stated that *Alternativa Zero* was a manifesto event rather than an exhibition. It proposed to intervene and enhance new experimental poetic dynamics, targeting a future here and now of the action-word:

Un mot un point. As palavras vanguarda começar. Absolutamente novo absolutamente começar rutura. E até as palavras aparentemente gastas arte cultura. Ou a sua contestação semântica anticultura antiarte. E a palavra alternativa. Sim, um parêntesis, a palavra alternativa. Depois falaremos do zero. (...) / o verdadeiro começar é uma distância e o paradise now uma utopia para já (...) / Não esperar. Lutar (...) sim engagé militante (...). Mas entretanto alternativamente viver a plenos pulmões ó alegria ó alegria ó alegria. Lutar e porque alternativamente viver. Viver a plena alegria e porque alternativamente lutar [One word, one point. The vanguard words start. Absolutely new absolutely start disruption. And even the seemingly worn out words art culture. Or their anti-art anti-cultural semantic dispute. And the word alternative. Yes, a parenthesis, the word alternative. Afterwards we will address zero. (...) / true start is a distance and ‘paradise now’ an immediate utopia... / Don’t wait. Fight (...) yes engaged militant (...). But in the meanwhile alternately live at the top of our lungs, oh joy oh joy oh joy. Fight and because alternatively live. Live to full joy and because alternatively fight] (Sousa 1997a).

This struggle and significant opening of the arts and poetry to performance, celebration and performative experimentalism was unprecedented in Portuguese art. However, Ernesto de Sousa had already rehearsed it in a previous work, also paradigmatic of his action and thinking in this scope, precisely entitled *Nós não*

estamos algures [We are not somewhere] organized by the critic at the theatre 1 Acto in Algés in 1969. The title was based on an excerpt from *A Invenção do Dia Claro* [The Invention of the Clear Day] by Almada Negreiros. It alludes to the “Deserto” [Desert], “tempo só de silêncio” [time of silence only] (Sousa 1998d, p. 22) that required embodiment, in order to become a tangible space and time of language, a statement of presence, vanguard and future.

With music by António Silva, Helena Cláudio, Clotilde Rosa and Jorge Peixinho, this event deserves reference here mainly because it starts from a poetic text, exploring its bodily-performative and scenographic characteristics. It combined music, poetry, slide projections, film, theater, happening. In essence, it was an intensely prepared multimedia event. Rehearsals lasted about six months, becoming an exercise, a performance-celebration of a meeting between a group of artists and the audience. The exploration of the concept of *Feast* was the propeller of the event, applied to the constitutive elements of performance art: openness to improvisation from performers and public participation, exploring the flowing variables of time and space to become performance. Performance as celebration, inauguration, creative workshop, socializing, discussion and debate, as reported by Ernesto de Sousa:

Aí experimentámos alguns meios, processos e formas decisivas para o nosso trabalho; projeções simultâneas, associação de acontecimentos teatrais a acontecimentos musicais, envolvimento (com um poema de Almada), liberdade relativa de participação do espectador e toda a sua difícil problemática, autofinanciamento (com a venda de um cartaz do Calhau, baseado numa frase da *Invenção*, e sorteio de exemplares fotocopiados desta obra esgotada), convívio (as sessões terminavam em ceia) e debate não dirigido. Houve efetivamente muita discussão e além de aberta esta ‘obra’ foi mesmo obra polémica (...). [There we tested some media, some processes and forms essential in our work; simultaneous projections, association of theatrical events to musical events, involvement (with a poem by Almada), relative freedom of participation of the spectators and all its difficult problems, self-financing (by selling a poster by Calhau, based on a sentence from *Invenção*, and lottery of photocopies of this sold-out piece), conviviality (the sessions ended with food tastings) and free debate. There was a lot of discussion and besides as open ‘work’, it was in fact a controversial work] (Sousa 1998b, p. 169).

It was controversial because a happening in itself is always controversial, but above all because it outlined a concept of an innovative ‘poetic spectacle’. It was poetry being thought of as an involvement where the staging is embodied in the materiality and semiotic diversity of the words. Moreover, as can be seen in the text from the intervention, an explicit, free-flowing experimental invitation to live life as a “total spectacle”.

In addition, from the aesthetic point of view, it is important to underline the experimental radicalism of the aesthetic concepts underlying this work. The body was the primordial element. The following testimony about the performance and in particular about Jorge Peixinho, by Fernando Calhau, is illustrative and representative:

Para Jorge Peixinho aquilo também foi ótimo porque foi uma ocasião de ele mostrar aquilo de que gostava, e que era capaz de fazer, no fim de contas. E sobretudo, de ter um desafio de usar instrumentos que não usava por sistema. Aliás, usava instrumentos que não eram instrumentos, como também usava músicos que não eram músicos: o Peixinho limitava-se a pôr as pessoas em fila, a apontar para elas e a dar-lhes indicações para fazerem barulho ou tocarem um instrumento. Era como se tocasse um xilofone com as pessoas, no fim de contas [For Jorge Peixinho that was also great because it was an opportunity for him to show what he liked, what he was able to do. And above all, a challenge to play instruments he didn't usually play. In fact, he used instruments that were not instruments, and also used musicians who were not musicians: Peixinho just lined people up, pointed at them and gave them indications to make noise or to play an instrument. After all, it was like playing a xylophone with people.] (Sousa 1998b, p. 170).

In short, *Nós não estamos algures* was a poetic happening. It was not the first of this nature in Portugal, since experimental poets were some years ahead with the collective happenings and exhibitions *Visopoemas* [Visopoems] and *Concerto e audição pictórica* [Concert and pictorial audition], in January 1965, and *Operação 1 e 2* [Operation 1 and 2] and *Conferência-Objeto* [Object-Conference] in 1967. Nevertheless, it is a groundbreaking, symbolic event in the history of Portuguese poetry and performance, and of the work and thinking of Ernesto de Sousa, as a key contribution to a theory of poetic performance.

The abovementioned experiences, works and aesthetic doctrines depict the variation and expansion of some of the founding principles of Ernesto de Sousa's thought and action. They stem from *Feast* as catalyst for change and from the body as work in itself. Ernesto de Sousa was an actor engaged in history and historical situations, in poetry as a praxeology project, and in language as a liberator. Daringly, he set out to rethink Portugal through an initiatory epistemological constellation, donating his own body as an offering, to become the stage for language and silence, enacting experimental texts.

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- 1 The expression goes back to the famous posters by Maria Helena Vieira da Silva and Sophia de Mello Breyner designed under the motto "Poetry is on the Streets" (1974) and created to celebrate the Revolution of April 1974 in Portugal.
- 2 Regarding which he wrote the long panegyric '100 days of the 5th Documenta', stating that: "Ritualmente. É uma palavra a fixar. Estamos no centro da vanguarda artística contemporânea, e perante uma das preocupações mais nobres: criar novos ritos, de convívio, de festa, de FESTA, de FESTA" [Ritually. It is a word to remember. We are at the core of contemporary artistic avant-garde, and before one of the noblest concerns: to create new rites, of conviviality, of feast, FEAST, FEAST] (Sousa, 1998d, p. 56).
- 3 According to the testimony collected in an interview by the author to Melo e Castro, by e-mail (12.04.2014).

PRESENTING THE PO-EX.NET: THE DIGITAL ARCHIVE OF PORTUGUESE EXPERI- MENTAL LITERATURE ÁLVARO SEIÇA

Po-ex.net is a digital archive of Portuguese experimental literature that was initiated in 2005. This literary database is coordinated by Rui Torres, at the University Fernando Pessoa in Porto, Portugal, and it has been developed under two main cycles.¹

The first cycle sought to conduct a survey—inventorying, documenting, researching, and disseminating knowledge—about the varied founding facets of experimental literature in Portugal. This initiative collected and digitized printed matter, including magazines, exhibition catalogs, and performances from the 1960s that comprise the first instances of experimentalism in the arts, particularly experimental poetry. The publication of the two anthologies or *cadernos* (chapbooks) *Poesia Experimental 1* (1964)—edited by António Aragão and Herberto Helder—and *Poesia Experimental 2* (1966)—edited by the same authors and E. M. de Melo e Castro—marks a breakthrough in the scientific, research-based, social, ludic, experimental, and political approach to literature, the visual arts, performance arts, and music. Authors Álvaro Neto (Liberto Cruz), Ana Hatherly, António Aragão, E. M. de Melo e Castro, Herberto Helder, Jorge Peixinho, José-Alberto Marques, and Salette Tavares emerged in the artistic scene as rebels with a cause—to transgress, agitate, recreate, and to renovate the arts as a plural and interdisciplinary adventure.²

However, the heterogeneity of these authors' practices, both in media and content, became visible from the outset in the first issue of *Poesia Experimental* and the outcomes that forked from its publication. Furthermore, Melo e Castro edited the magazines *Operação 1* (1967) and *Hidra 2* (1969), in which several of the authors from *Poesia Experimental*, as well as the younger artist Silvestre Pestana collaborated. Their creative production had a wide-range scope, being infused with a truly open and experimental character. Their practices clustered around concrete and visual poetry, conceptual poetry and art, sound poetry, "object-poetry," "poetic action," happenings, and exhibitions.

Taking this perspective into account, the first cycle of Po-ex.net focused on building a digital archive of the

1960s works, particularly the 1964 and 1966 chapbooks, the literary magazines, and the exhibition catalogs of *Visopoemas*, *Operação 1* and *Operação 2*. In addition to boosting the engagement of several researchers and a number of published articles and books on these topics, key outcomes of the first stage include the digital remediation or recreation of concrete and visual poems in ActionScript, which the project labelled as *releituras* (rereading). All these materials were published in a CD-ROM and made available online in open access, allowing the public to access these reenactments, the original digitized editions, as well as the critical discourse that contextualizes the project.³

The second cycle assimilated the development of experimentalism via its expanded forms in the 1970s and '80s, by collecting new material related not only to experimental fiction and intermedia poetry—visual, sound, and videopoetry—but also to cyberliterature (Barbosa 1996). Indeed, the experimental practices increased in number, genre, and explicit sociopolitical intervention, given the long-standing fascist dictatorship and the 1974 Carnation Revolution. Therefore, from the late 1960s until the late 1980s, among several new magazines, anthologies, publications, and exhibitions, a whole new group of authors joined the conversation with performances, installations, videopoetry, computer-generated literature, and digital poetry.⁴ Thus, in this context emerges the first version of the Po-ex.net database, built in DSpace, providing biographies of the authors and a theoretical framework.

In 2014, after nearly ten years of effort by rescuing, digitizing, and emulating works, the full archive was posted online. A great part of the printed material, which had long been out of print, inaccessible, or only accessible via secondary sources (e.g. Melo e Castro 1988) was then freely disclosed to the public. Among these works, the reader finds E. M. de Melo e Castro's videopoems (1968, 1980s, '90s, '00s) and digital poems. Ana Hatherly's (1983) impressive scholarly work on visual poetry from the Baroque period can be read and seen. Pedro Barbosa's first 1970s and '80s works of computer-