

Túlia Saldanha: Inside and Outside the Box¹

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Túlia Saldanha: Dentro e Fora da Caixa

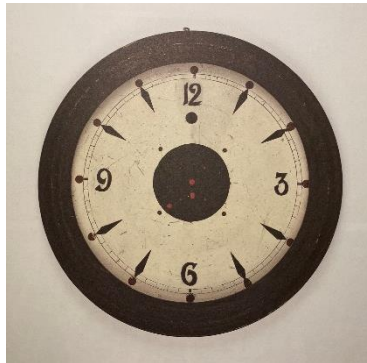


Fig. 1. Túlia Saldanha, *Untitled*, 1970. Courtesy of Luiza Saldanha

Among the artworks that Túlia Saldanha (1930-1988) left us, we can find a wall clock, referenced as “Untitled” (Fig. 1), from 1970. It is an *objet trouvé*, that was appropriated by the artist, who painted some red dots on its surface.

This clock has no clock hands. Deprived of its function, it is an object suspended between the past and the future; it alludes to all the time in the world or no time at all. It remains in the present, leaving us adrift in an unlimited duration, with no specific hours or minutes.

Preceding the objects that Túlia Saldanha started to produce in 1971, this piece emerges, in some way, as a synthesis. Or perhaps as a program, as a temporal dimension is clearly one of the threads that run through Túlia Saldanha’s body of work – which spanned from painting, drawing, and objects to installation, performance, and to various collaborative projects she engaged in.

Born in 1930, in Macedo de Cavaleiros – a small village in the north of Portugal –, Túlia Saldanha began her trajectory as an artist with no specific artistic education. In fact, she first became interested in art at the end of the 1960s – when, after a complicated marriage and subsequent divorce – which diverted her from a socially pre-determined role as a wife and a mother – she settled, with her two daughters, in Coimbra.

It was in this city that she got involved in the activities of CAP – *Círculo de Artes Plásticas* [Circle of Visual Arts], an organization created in 1958 by a group of university students and

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committed to the promotion of different initiatives in the fields of artistic creation and pedagogy. Filling a cultural void in that context, CAP became a center for artistic experimentation but also a community determined by a strong sense of sharing and collaboration.

It is important to bear in mind that, in Portugal, the 1960s and 1970s were a period of profound socio-political and cultural transformations. Throughout most of this period, the country was still under the rule of a dictatorship – that had begun in 1926 and lasted for 48 years.

The 1960s were further complexified by the colonial war, a conflict that amplified the feelings of discontent and revolt that had long been present in a country that remained disconnected from the social, cultural and economic dynamics that were evolving in different international contexts – a situation that would ultimately change with the Carnation Revolution on the April 25th, 1974.

In the realm of the arts, the 1960s marked a stark departure from the long-standing conservatism of official cultural programs that had dominated the national scene for decades. These years witnessed the emergence of extensive artistic experimentation, particularly in the scope of the New Figurations, as well as the cross-pollination and blurring of artistic categories. This experimental attitude gained increasing prominence, and, in the following decade, it unfolded into new formats through the incorporation of photography, film and video, and intersected with conceptual, processual and performative approaches.

1. From the past

It is within the previously described backdrop that we can understand Túlia Saldanha's journey as an artist. In 1968, she first engaged with the artistic dynamic of Coimbra by participating in several collective exhibitions³ at CAP, where she initially exhibited paintings.

Expanding her practice, in the early 1970s, she started to develop a series of three-dimensional artworks designed as immersive environments – spaces meant to be explored, experienced, and even inhabited.

The first of these works, which is often described as “an installation with objects” is from 1971, and was set at the “black gallery” of CAP, being titled *ontem hoje amanhã nunca? uma hora vi quandotueraspequenina muitasvezes àtarde naturezamortaqueimada...*, [yesterday today tomorrow never? onehour I saw whenyouwerelittle manytimesintheafternoon burnt stilllife] (Fig. 2).

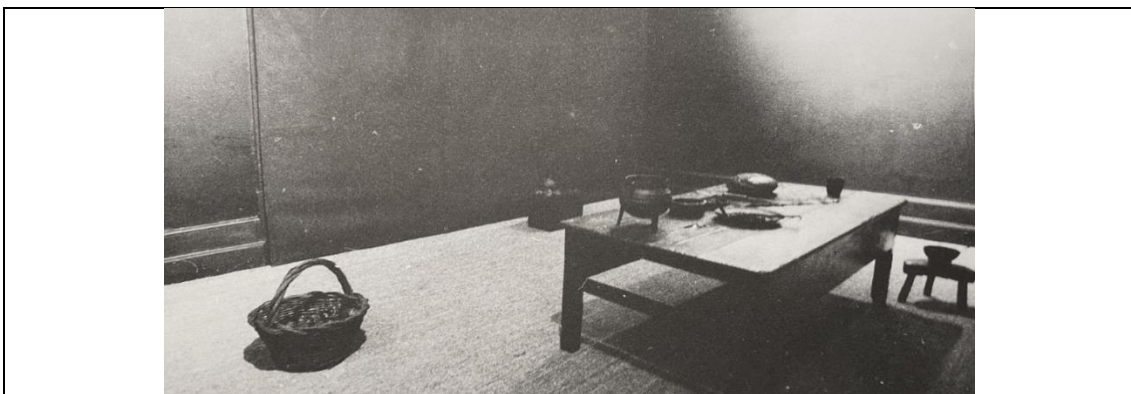


Fig. 2. Túlia Saldanha, *ontem hoje amanhã nunca? uma hora vi quandotueraspequenina muitasvezes àtarde naturezamortaqueimada...*, [yesterday today tomorrow never? onehour I saw whenyouwerelittle manytimesintheafternoon burnt stilllife], 1971. Courtesy of Luiza Saldanha

3 Namely, *Exposição Desenho, Pintura; Exposição de Pintura* and *Exposição de Colagem e Pintura*, organized, respectively, in 1968, 1969 and 1970.

Let's try to imagine this first installation based on the remaining documentation.

Picture yourselves stepping into a semi-darkened space, a room with black walls, where a large wooden table stands. On and around this table, various objects are arranged, all of them charred or painted in deep black.

As your eyes adjust to the dimness, among these objects you identify a low wooden bench, a wicker basket, an iron pot, a saucepan, a ladle, a clay jug and a tray. Despite being physically present, these blackened objects evoke another time, an absent time, appearing as survivals, or even tragic remnants, of a past time. They create a palpable tension between the past and the present, a juxtaposition of times, as although being associated with a phenomenological experience in space and at our fingers reach, these objects assume a spectral character.

Evoking the domestic space of an old rural kitchen, these objects, which – let's keep imagining –, we probably contemplate in silence, without daring to touch them, retrieve memories and connect to past experiences. They are, somehow, between the here and there. They reach us as echoes, as fragments of experiences that we may inevitably intertwine with Tília Saldanha's personal history, yet, simultaneously, they summon an ancestry that, to a certain extent, we all recognize.

These are everyday objects that have been displaced from their original context. And not only displaced but also burned, left without marks or signs of their previous history, yet carrying the weight of that erasure.

However, much like *shou sugi ban* – a traditional Japanese technique used for preserving wood through fire, which not only preserves but also reveals the beauty of the textures of charred wood – burning, an act of destruction, may, for Tília Saldanha, serve as a means of preservation and sublimation. It may be a way to (re)connect with time, to mend fractures, to bring an origin into the present – and, within that present, turn it into a new point of departure.

The overlap between the past and the present, articulated through the presence of objects and their confrontation with the viewers, is traceable in other installations, such as *Picnique* [Pic-nic] (Fig. 3), from 1972, that was presented as part of a collective environment set by artists from CAP. In this piece, a table was adorned with the charred remains of a meal, alongside a small bench, a radio, a large jug, and a picnic basket.



Fig. 3. Tília Saldanha, *Picnique* [Picnic], 1972. Courtesy of Luiza Saldanha

Similarly, *Banquete* [Banquet] (Fig. 4), from 1976, featured a wooden table covered with a lace tablecloth, upon which twenty-one objects, either burned or painted black, were displayed.



Fig. 4. Túlia Saldanha, *Banquete [Banquet]*, 1976. Courtesy of Luiza Saldanha.

While the kitchen of the first installation evoked a sense of timelessness, as implied by the relationship between certain words in its title - "ontem" (yesterday), "hoje" (today), "amanhã" (tomorrow), "nunca" (never) – *Picnic* and *Banquet* are more directly related to an ephemeral time, as suggested by their titles. In fact, these works allude to a communal act: a shared meal, represented by the black objects that remain as documents of that gathering.

2. In the present

The possibility of creating a space for meeting or gathering became increasingly central in Túlia Saldanha's work, as shown by the various "Rooms" she began to develop over time.

In 1973, as part of a collective event⁴ at CAP, she presented a sound environment, titled *Sala Preta nº1* [Black Room No. 1] (Fig. 5) – an empty room, painted black and illuminated by four light points positioned in its upper corners, and where the continuous sound of a tape recorded in a café in Coimbra could be heard.

⁴ More specifically, the "aesthetic operation" *minha coimbra deles tua coimbra deles dele coimbra deles nossa coimbra deles vossa coimbra deles*.

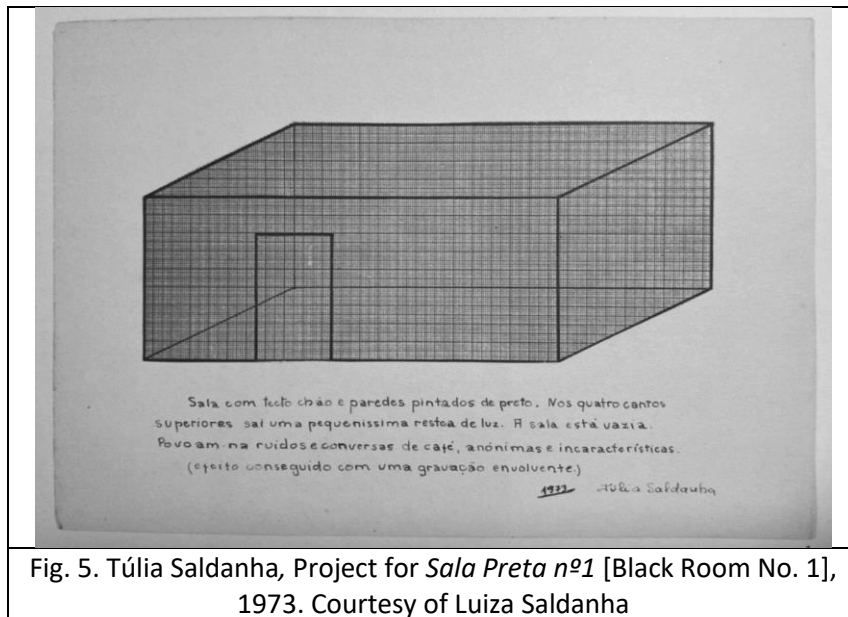


Fig. 5. Túlía Saldanha, Project for *Sala Preta nº1* [Black Room No. 1], 1973. Courtesy of Luiza Saldanha

Subsequently, she designed the *Sala Preta nº2* [Black Room No. 2] (Fig. 6), which was initially presented as a project in 1974⁵, and later constructed in 1977.

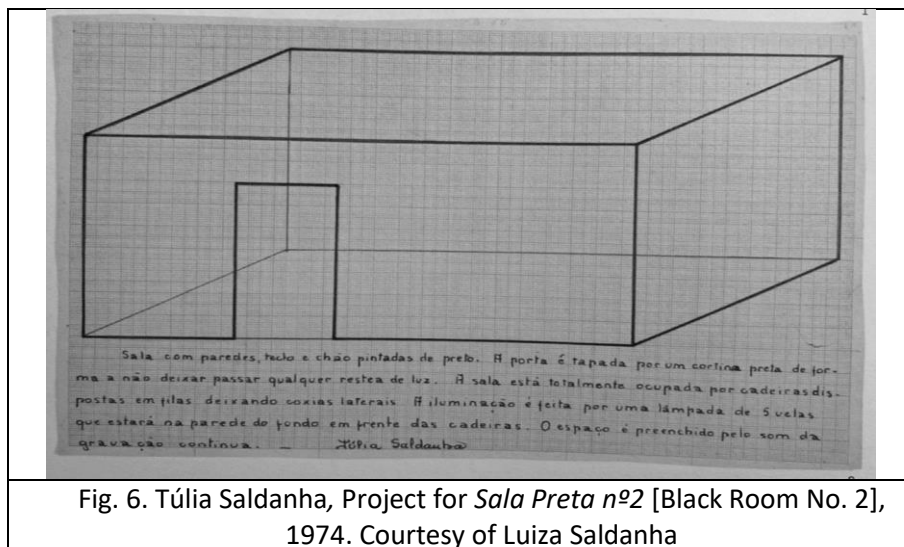


Fig. 6. Túlía Saldanha, Project for *Sala Preta nº2* [Black Room No. 2], 1974. Courtesy of Luiza Saldanha

In fact, it was in the period following the Carnation Revolution that Túlía Saldanha got more deeply involved in some initiatives with strong social and relational dimensions, and marked by a festive and celebratory atmosphere – as exemplified by *Semana da Arte na Rua* [The Art Week on the Street], an event which took place in Coimbra between May 30 and June 10, 1976, extending into public sphere. In that context, she presented the "Sala de Descontração" [Relaxation Room] (Fig.7 and 8), which, again, was installed at CAP.

Contrasting with her previous works, this room was predominantly white and bathed in soft, diffuse, lighting. Its surfaces were draped with stage paper, and the floor was covered by rubber foam. At the center, there was huge pile of thin paper strips. Envisaged as a setting, it served as a space to be freely embraced by the visitors – a place to relax, to play, or simply come together in the present.

⁵ More specifically at the section "Projectos – Ideias", organized by Ernesto de Sousa in the scope of EXPO AICA SNBA, in Lisbon.

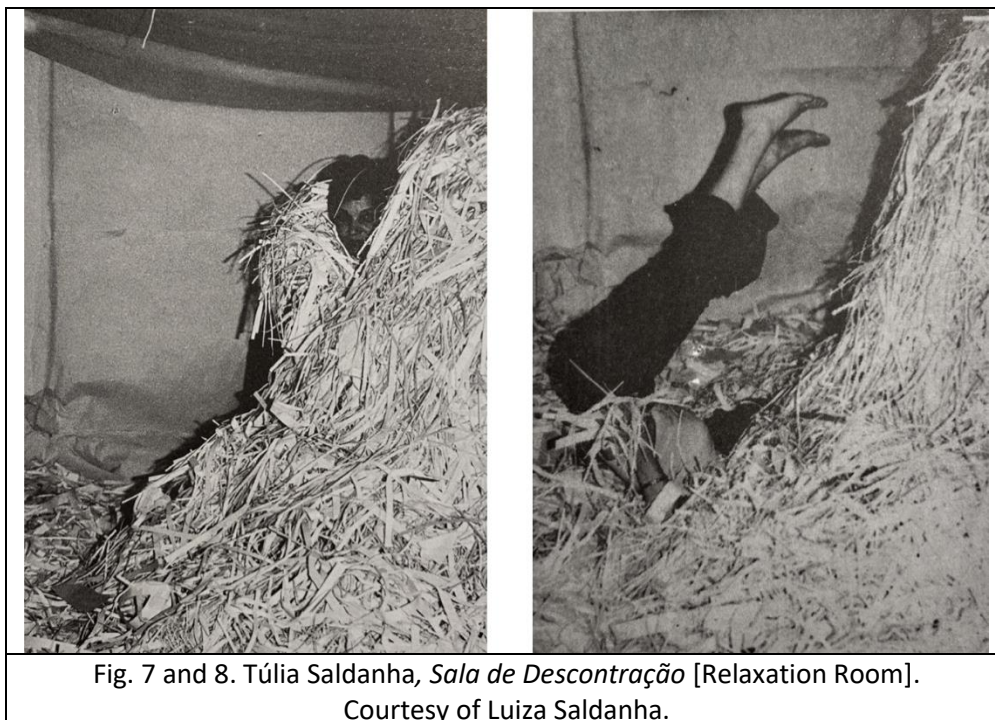


Fig. 7 and 8. Túlia Saldanha, *Sala de Descontração* [Relaxation Room].
Courtesy of Luiza Saldanha.

Both, the *Black Room No. 2* and the *Relaxation Room*, were restaged in 1977, as part of *Alternativa Zero* – an important exhibition held at the Modern Art Gallery in Belém, Lisbon, and that became a pivotal reference regarding experimental and conceptual art in Portugal during the 1970s.

Engaging with multiple international dynamics, *Alternativa Zero* challenged the boundaries between art and life, and featured process-oriented approaches and time-based experiences. Many of the artworks that included in the exhibition emphasized a collaborative nature and contributed to the creation of bonds between the viewers. Following the concept of “open works”, as proposed by Umberto Eco (1962), they called for participation.

Actually, the interest in a relational and participatory dimension led Túlia Saldanha to reactivate previous works, as happened with *Banquet*, which she presented as a ritualistic action on June 12, 1979, at the Diferença Art Gallery in Lisbon.

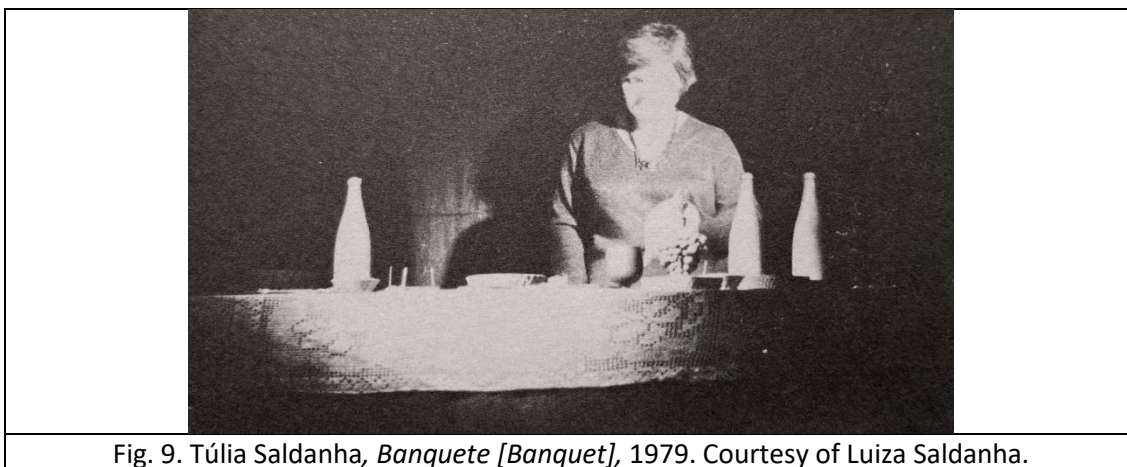


Fig. 9. Túlia Saldanha, *Banquete* [Banquet], 1979. Courtesy of Luiza Saldanha.

Let's imagine again. In a black room, the artist stands before a table adorned with black objects and black food (Fig. 9). However, the audience remains separated from this space, situated in another room, divided from the first one by a black curtain. Despite this physical

divide, they can follow the sequence of actions through a live video feed broadcast on a closed-circuit monitor.

In a subsequent phase, where observation turns into participation, the audience gains access to the initial room. Here, amid conversations, they not only witness but also taste the remnants of the earlier performance (Fig. 10).

We can imagine the excitement, the interactions, the buzz, the engagement. The hesitation about what is edible, the joy of discovering the flavors. Life circulating through what in Túlia Saldanha's early installations seemed to invite to silence and introspection.



Fig. 10. Túlia Saldanha, *Banquete [Banquet]*, 1979. Courtesy of Luiza Saldanha

3. To the future

Looking at the pictures of Túlia Saldanha's environments, we can keep imagining what it must have felt to experience those spaces. What might have felt to experience those spaces within their historical context.

We know that we're looking from the outside – outside a space and outside a time, to which we don't belong. From this perspective, these environments were ephemeral, are part of a past – but this implies that we are essentially accessing them through documentation and memories.

Moreover, their anchoring to a past time, and the fragility of their construction – as these works were dismantled, or even destroyed, after their presentation – are part of the reasons that led Túlia Saldanha's environments to have limited visibility and relevance in the history of art in Portugal until very recently.

Primarily dedicated to painting throughout the 1980s, Túlia Saldanha did not reproduce her environments during those years. After her passing in 1988, it wasn't until the late 1990s that, in the scope of an exhibition dedicated to the *Alternativa Zero* and organized at the Serralves Museum in Porto, in 1997, that one of her rooms, *Black Room No. 2*, was reconstructed. Set as box, the room was based on the project the artist had designed, but, despite including descriptions of some materials, the project had no specific dimensions or instructions for its installation.

In 2014, for the first comprehensive solo exhibition dedicated to Túlia Saldanha at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, a similar strategy was employed to restage several of the "Rooms" – which were presented as a sequence of black boxes. It's however significant to point out that, regarding Túlia Saldanha's early installations with objects – and taking into account the loss of many of the charred objects that constituted them – the curators, Liliana Coutinho and Rita Fabiana, decided to showcase the remaining objects on a table. In addition to this presentation, a sequence of slides was displayed, featuring images that documented the original configurations of those installations.

Experiencing these environments today is undoubtedly a distinct experience from the original one. It is an experience that takes place in the realm between presence and absence. Drawing from the concepts proposed by Pip Laurenson, it is an experience that somehow interplays "authenticity, change, and loss." (Laurenson 2006)

Nevertheless, perhaps it is important to remember that a common thread among Tília Saldanha's environments was her motivation to create spaces for communal gathering and sharing. Spaces that subjectively engaged bodies and created connections, crafting lasting memories of shared moments. In this regard, they are and always will remain relevant, showing us that, sometimes, to be together inside a box can be a way to think outside the box.

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