

Looking into Kiluanji Kia Henda and Bruno Moraes Cabral ‘Terra (In)Submissa’: poetical narratives as political means.

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Observando Terra (In)Submissa de Kiluanji Kia Henda e Bruno Moraes Cabral: Narrativas poéticas como meios políticos

In the Department of Museology of Lusófona University, it is evident the small number of theses from doctorate students that come from an art-related background or that have given central attention to contemporary art. We have searched for the combination of the terms ‘Sociomuseology’ and ‘contemporary art’ in the Scientific Repository of Lusófona University ReCil for thesis in Museology as well in the Cadernos de Sociomuseologia and we can see that are very few works that explicitly this combination in the title, keywords or abstract. One of the few exceptions to this day is Luzia Gomes Ferreira with her thesis “The poetics of existence on the margins: paths of a museologist poet through the artistic circuits of African Lisbon”, defended in 2018 and supervised by Professor Marcelo Cunha. Her work seems to have inaugurated in the department not only a consistent first-person narrative thesis in which her impressions and thoughts are put straightforwardly, but also as a work dedicated to art galleries and art museums in Lisbon in Sociomuseology. In her thesis, she analyses – and shares her rather honest impressions on – the presence/absence of African art in the Portuguese capital. Ferreira attempts to clarify the blurred relation between Sociomuseology and contemporary art as means to take the visual arts away from the elites:

“Galleries determine tastes, promote and project artists and, most of the time, art museums absorb these artists, in order to legitimize what galleries have already projected on the market, creating an art system with all possible symmetries and asymmetries. Being silent about the role of galleries in the museum field limits the various possibilities of understanding the processes of production and circulation of theoretical and non-theoretical discourses about contemporary art. Furthermore, it does not contribute to the deconstruction of visual arts as an artistic aspect that belongs to economically wealthy social groups.” (2018, p. 119)

Ferreira highlights this negligent posture from museum studies towards art galleries and contemporary art in general and questions why contemporary art is not considered a patrimonial heritage from a museological perspective, although many museum collections are constituted of artistic objects (2018, p. 118).

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Clovis Britto, suggests a rather subversive approach to museum epistemics and points out to poetical and decolonial perspectives as means to overcome the limitations of disciplines (2019). Clovis Britto has used the work of poet Manoel de Barros

“as inspiration to ‘uninvent’ objects, distort the look. [...] just like the strategy of the poet, the museological exhibition can approximate distinct things, from fragmented trajectories that are isolated from their original purpose and inserted in a new context, as a result of a poetic gesture (things syntax)” (Britto, 2019, p.12).

Drawing from these ideas, a short film by Angolan and Portuguese producers will be analysed in order to build a dialogue between artistic practice, museums, and traumatic memory: *Terra (In)submissa / The Land of (In)subordination* by Kiluanji Kia Henda and Bruno Moraes Cabral from 2023.

As means to contribute to the sociomuseological approximation with the arts, we identify a similar rebellious posture between these two major disciplines, not only by determined museums practices or specific artists but by a confluence in the political positioning that

Sociomuseology has been dedicated to the identification of museological practices that go against globalising tendencies due to their local and communitarian nature, assembling local and independent narratives, as exemplified by the eco-museums, favela museums, indigenous and quilombo museums and other “bottom-up” initiatives (Chagas et al., 2018, p. 74). This transgressional nature of the ‘socially engaged museum’ also attempts to subvert hegemonical narratives and promote social justice (Pereira, 2018, p. 94).

According to Primo (2014), there has been tensions between the “resistance identities” – based on local memory, history and often stigmatized groups – and the “legitimizing identities” – that promote national and homogenous culture through institutional power. These two forces are comparable to what has been succeeding with arts. On the one hand there is art as means to politically reflect upon reality, on the other, there is mass culture as means to create supposedly neutral narratives and social segregation.

Tensions are also visible when Julian Stallabrass puts into contrast the socially oriented use of art by the state and the commercially oriented by corporations:

“There are areas where state and corporate uses of art come into greater tension. The state seeks to counter the hollowing out of democracy and the decline of sociability caused by unrestrained consumerism – the very result of the corporations’ actions. The corporations’ main purpose is to sell goods to an increasingly cynical public, suspicious of conventional marketing methods. The direction of state policy is towards social inclusion and a broadening of the art audience. The interest of corporations lies in art’s very exclusivity and association with elites and celebrities, a privileged realm that confers upon them the sanction of high culture and access to continued media coverage and profits. The more transparent that relationship becomes, the more art is tainted by it, appearing to be just another part of the general run of mass culture with its wearying apparatus of publicity and celebrity.” (Stallabrass, 2006, p. 99)

According to Stallabrass (2006), the neoliberal agenda has used art as an instrument of its own, reducing the art world into fashion and commodity, at the same Primo and Moutinho (2021) make a very similar critique on Neoliberalism and discuss how communitarian museums are actually another front of cultural militance in face of globalized narratives, also pointing out to the the ongoing silencing over capitalist exploitation system and how it's becoming rarer to see direct criticism in the public debate. Museums and other institutions are being forced into a numb working mode in order to survive, and the global tendency has been the silencing of historical contradictions and the weakening of local social contexts. Stallabrass also delves into the globalized tendencies of the Bienals and exposes the creation of a homogenous, international and cosmopolitan cultural event that tends to ignore the local social life and muffle the contradictions of the 'global-cities' (2006 26-8).

As a reaction to the legitimizer narratives and in order to avoid the fragmentation of communitarian activity, Judite Primo alerts us that the issues and contradictions of each local context must be understood in the perspective of "class struggle, work force and surplus-value" (2014). These evident Marxist concepts are among the foundational ideas that tint some of the recent museological shifts and part of the Sociomuseological research. Also, "there are many artists who in differing degrees critically examine the affinity between contemporary art and capital", while a frequent and standard point of view turns a blind eye to this affinity (Stallabrass, 2006, p.6).

Considering these first thoughts, why is it that we find a very reduced number of works in the field of Sociomuseology related to contemporary art? Is this due to the fact that it is a lot more common to see historians, anthropologists and sociologists pursuing an academic career within Sociomuseology as opposed to artists, cultural managers or gallerists? Luzia questions: if Museology can dialogue with other areas of knowledge, why not establishing a dialogue with contemporary art?" (2018, p. 118).

Terra (In)submissa

The recent piece of Kiluanji Kia Henda and Bruno Moraes Cabral entitled—*Terra (In)submissa / The Land of (In)subordination*, from 2023, is a 17-minute video that has been exhibited² in Aljube museum, in Lisbon, between February and March 2023 as a video-installation.

There are two important contexts that should be taken into consideration before looking into the piece itself. The first one is the role of the Aljube Resistance and Freedom Museum, which is dedicated to the various elements that compose the Portuguese Revolution of 25th of April of 1974. The museum – installed in a building that was one of the prisons of the regime – offers a historical context of life inside the Portuguese fascist and colonial regime, as well as the struggle and the organization of those who fought under secrecy.

Other important factor is that 2024 marks the 50 years of the Revolution and there has been intense celebrations throughout the country. Between the wide number of issues that these celebrations arise, a subject that has gained more popular attention in recent years is the

2 Temporary exhibition – Terra (In)submissa. Link to the event in Aljube museum website. <https://www.museudoaljube.pt/expo/terra-insubmissa/>

question of the Liberation Movements of the colonized people in the Portuguese occupied territories in Africa as having played an important role in breaking colonial rule. Against that sense, official portuguese narratives often refer to the conflict as ‘Colonial War’, however there has always been criticism over this reducing terminology since it does not comply to the perspective of the former Portuguese colonies³ and also due to the fact that it’s been recognized by Portuguese historians that the origins of the 25th of April are indeed rooted in African resistance movements⁴.

The thematic core of Henda and Cabral’s video-installation is the resistance to colonial rule and the idea of freedom itself. In their film, the two producers have created a combination of poetical and fictional visual language that contrasts with the brutality and violence of the concentration camps and prisons of the Portuguese colonial empire in mid 20th century in Angola.

The short film introduces itself in a split screen mode with apparently the exact same close-up shot of a waterfall side-by-side. A metaphor of the running grey water images is created by a male voice narration that poetically builds a dream for freedom. The dream to freely flow between the hands of the oppressor, like the river through the rocks, soon becomes a dream to wash away the blood of the beheaded and the tortured bodies from the floor.

The hazy images of this river filmed from above, create a tense atmosphere with the constant water mist of the fall in the foreground together with the ambient and tranquilizing noise. Whilst we observe these tropical, green and wet landscape, the metaphors continue when the narration voice wishes to infiltrate the red soil and “water the leafy trees of the fruits of insubordination”.

This first part of the film introduces the spectator to a violent and unfair context, but also to a dream for freedom, without giving – yet – any information on time and space. The last scenes of this block of poetic narration end with a first overview of a dense tropical forest behind the same water mist that now serve as a metaphor to the evaporating freedom of the man of “this Earth”, just like water does in its path of glory and amnesia. It is important to point out that the whole film is in Portuguese language with English subtitles. In this last section of the film, the voice says “*A água também se evapora, tal como a liberdade dos homens desta terra*” – directly translated into: The water also evaporates, just as the freedom of the man of this land/earth. In the subtitles, *terra* has been literally translated to *earth*, and not *land*. Land is commonly used when referring to a place of origin. This apparent mistranslation seems intentional due to the fact that Earth has been written with capital E, and in Portuguese the word *terra* can be used as reference to planet earth as well as place of origin. Thus, the artists have opted to keep the word “Earth” when apparently referring to a place of origin, adding the same polysemous nature as in Portuguese. This could have been an attempt to amplify the meaning of the phrase – as if freedom could evaporate for all the people of this planet – or to recall to a previous excerpt of the text, when the water that has washed the blood of the beheaded would now water the red

3 Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and Cape-Verde.

4 For more on this perspective: Meneses, M. P., & Martins, B. S. (2013). *As Guerras de Libertação e os Sonhos Coloniais: Alianças secretas, mapas imaginados*.; Paço, A. S. do, Fontes, J., Peres Cabreira, P., & Anderson, P. (Orgs.). (2019). *O 25 de abril começou em África* (1a. edição). Húmus.

soil and the fruits of insubordination – as in the title. This “Earth” could also be Africa and all the other countries that have endured European rule.

Afterwards, the viewer briefly taken to a greener scenery, where the mist of the waterfall becomes part of the humid rain forest (Image 1) – that is likely to be in Angola – but soon is brought back again to close up shots of the forest, whirlpools of the flowing water and puddles in the rocks. The voice persists, and leads the viewer to what seems to be a low energy moment of the narrative. The standing water is compared to our soul that rots when “imprisoned in the chambers of the empire”. “Drinking the poisoned water from the structures of power”, says the voice while a green puddle is shown.

We are brought back to the first waterfall image in one of the two screens, and that is also when the first human figure appears from the back: a black young man, shirtless, looking to the slow-motion falling water. We can only see his skin and his hair, giving the viewer mixed feelings of a positive but reflexive moment after the recent deep thoughts. A second dream for freedom is expressed by the narrator, wishing that it all comes in the shape of a long storm, washing away terror and oppression and that it will apparently embrace a more positive approach.

The right side of the split screen keeps showing the upper back of the young black man in front of the waterfall, while the left split slowly fades in three paragraphs of text. The text is a decree-law from 1954, that is part of the Indigenous Statute, an organized set of laws created by the Portuguese empire in the first half of the 20th Century in order to establish the social and racial control of the occupied Africa.

The text is clear when states that Indigenous are those of “black race” that do not share the expected social habits to be granted public rights as the Portuguese, and that the Estate will provide the means, through work and labour, to transform their primitive behaviour into progress. The image of the young man is substituted for a black and white archive still photograph of black men digging in what looks like a construction site and a disharmonic out of rhythm soundtrack slowly takes place of the previous constant hiss of the waterfall. Some of those men are shirtless, and the one on the foreground is apparently barefoot, with a hoe in his hand.

The spectator is fully transferred to this archival sequence of what appears to be different points of view of the same site in both of the splits of the screen, before another decree-law is shown on the left and other archival images are shown on the right. We can identify plantations and black African men working the land and also in small factories, while the text explains the differences of the work in the penal colony, in the correctional farm and in the colony in general. Forced labour is explicitly named: “compulsory public work.”

Several archival images are shown in a double slideshow along a constant and distressing soundtrack. A report from the colonial inspection is a last text that appears before ending this first cycle of archive photographs. This report regards the “inhumane” conditions in which prisoners were found in the Luanda penitentiary, and urges its closure due to lack of light, air and overcrowding.

Subsequently, the viewers are brought back to the same man facing the waterfall. However, the camera now seems closer to him, despite one can only see the back of his neck and his hair. Now rhythmic drums fade in, while archive images show white men on suites in a

landscape similar to the previous working sites. Black men are seen barefoot in uniforms in a kind of line, with papers in hand, while the white men shake hands in the foreground. A priest and an improvised mess apparently take place while the voice of Salazar is heard on top of the drums. It is incomprehensible, but this block – that is dedicated to discipline – ends with a very symbolic image: a white man pointing on a black board using a stick to a single black man, and it is possible to read in Portuguese the first lines of the board in chalk hand letters: ‘The Family: Family is constituted of father, mother and children. Since remote times men has felt the need to live in the family core...’.

Another set of images is shown side-by-side with a text. The information is signed by the political police of Angola and indicates that São Nicolau farm is composed of compulsorily fixed farmers: 345 sentenced men, 97 volunteer women and 70 children. The inform also declares that there are no high fences of barbed wire because it could draw attention and raise suspicion that it could be a concentration camp.

The archive image sequence continues in parallel to the mixed soundtrack of drums and Salazar speech. The man in the waterfall appears in a closer shot and we can now see his face from a side view. His inexpressive look directs to the split screen on the right where we see the disciplinary strictness imposed to African men, sometimes in uniform, sometimes shirtless and barefoot, while the audio is the same continuous out of tune note. This heavy contrast between archival photographs and contemporary visual creations ends here with this powerful and tense meeting.

The final block of the film is introduced by a performance sequence, made by stop-motion technique. The same man that was seen in the waterfall is now in a rocky scenario, his arms – and soon his body – lay under a pile of stones in a type of metamorphosis. The sort of popping and tickling guitar sound accompanies the rocks that cover the body. As if the body was part of the ground and after many years of violent history, it’s seen breathing and moving the rocks before a black-out frame takes us to a green rocky mountain region. The same narrator comes back with a musical background and plays around the poetics of a body transformed into stone, with no fear of being black, and feeling in his body “the fervor of being a free man”. This is the first time where we can see the face of this man, while hearing the narrator speaking. Now the freedom is stated, the man looking over the mountain top and the uplifting music compose the scene. The narrator presents a critical point-of-view upon the greedy and hatred he can now see from above, feelings that led the “rats” to a “sewer and leave behind a trace of mourning” – probably referring to the war.

The bright scene of this confident and vigorous man on top of a mountain, in what seems to be the unfinished concrete structure of a house, which could be interpreted as type of watch tower from where he sees the unique Angolan Pungo Andongo rounded rocks and decides his future; as if he has taken over the crumbling structures the Portuguese left behind. The narration reaches a sort of climax in this poetic chant of war, pain and rebirth. The *stoneman* eagers to be human and no longer resilient to serve as workforce in the plantations. It is said that what was once a silent and bitter song during the night, is now a chant of revolt, and the voice became a sharp machete. This could be related to the fact that Angolans strived through a long period of civil war after their independence from Portugal in 1975, and the machete as a symbol of the Angolan national flag.

'Fuck Resilience!' is shouted many times in the end scene, while a natural skyline is showed; screams are heard from far away. These last cries of people who have endured colonial violence for so many years are at the same time a desire for renewal.

Henda and Cabral used various elements of film such as narration, screen split in two, text and archive photographs to create a poetical atmosphere with explicit political tone. The double screen gives this dynamic effect that allows two images to be shown at the same time and, as a figure of speech could be interpreted as more than one point of view. Moreover, the usage of archival stills of at least 60 years ago and contemporary footage that can be inserted simultaneously, intensifies this contrast of past and present, of restrained liberty and freedom; submissive and insubordinate, as the title suggests. The dual screen also embodies the sense of duality, evoking different moments in time, while simultaneously depicting the unity of one land, one Earth and one people.

The producers have opted to deal with the violence perpetrated against the Angolan population through racism and its founding elements such as the characterisation of the indigenous, the segregational legal system, forced labour and imprisonment. These elements are central in contemporary discussions about the Portuguese Empire and evoke questions that still need further addressing.

The objective vocabulary of the laws that are presented as written text on the screen pushes the viewer into a deeper mood, together with photographs from colonial rule shown as crime evidence. The brutality and crudeness of legal language can be seen as direct aggression to the labouring people that appear in the other split of the screen in the photographs.

The pace of this documentary-fiction, is a circular spiral between poetry – when the speechless black man appears and somehow personifies the narrator – opposed to the crudeness of the colonial archives previously shown. In the end of the 19th Century, European powers rushed among themselves to build proofs of their own domination in African territory in order to be entitled and deserving of their share in the Berlin conference (Souza & Santos, 2023). Nonetheless, the images produced by the Portuguese Empire in the 1960's as proof of their progress in bringing social development to Angola and the other former colonies, are now used in a context of freedom, as evidence of the racial system and forced labour.

Terra (In)Submissa brings into Angolan perspective the brutal 13-year war launched by Portugal to suppress the African liberation movements. The subversive tone of the film is not only present in the use of the archival photographs as crime evidence, but also by the opposition between the black and white images symbolizing colonialism and the beautiful vast valley that our character glimpses into by the end symbolizing a brighter future. The narrative is pervaded with sorrow and pain until this turning point that can be related to the end of the war and the triumph of independence after years of colonialism.

Various debates can be triggered by Terra (In)Submissa regarding the conflictive memory of colonialism and African independence. Merging the poetic narrative and archival content, the film is able to point out to major traumas that still pervade European and African societies such as racism as a tool of colonial rule. On the other hand, the subjective dimension evokes an Angolan point of view on the succeeded through elements such as the accent of the narrator and the visible Angolan landscape. This could be interpreted as an attempt to take these

debates on racism and colonialism away from European epistemologies and present it from an African perspective.

In the year preceding the 50th anniversary of the Portuguese Revolution that put an end to the fascist and colonial regime, it is crucial to remember the racist pillars that sustained it. Artistic production and subjective narratives are free to merge fragments of memory, documents and images as means to unthread the complexity and uncomprehensive brutality of the past. As Clovis Britto has suggested, the poet is free to approximate fragmented things and put them into different contexts, just as the museums.

The Aljube museum has had a distinctive approach to the memory of the Portuguese Revolution when considering the range of activities such as film exhibitions lectures and original exhibitions that took place in 2023 pointing to African liberation, women and LGBTQ memory during Estado Novo. In this regard, it is worth remembering that it was also at the Ajube Museum that the films '48' and 'Natureza Morta' were presented in 2020. These two films, authored by Susana de Sousa Dias were created with the use of archival images from dictatorial period in Portugal, including prisoners' mugshots, and audio testimonies of the photographed. As Henda and Moraes Cabral, Dias' work also puts past images into confrontation with a present perspective of the resistance against the regime. The mugshots were created in the context of control, repression and imprisonment, parallel to the labour fields photographs presented in Terra (In)Submissa in the colonial context. Now these images are inserted in artistic productions that through subjective narratives are able to present it as evidences of the oppression.

The Political Police 'PIDE' archives of Salazar and Marcelo Caetano's dictatorship in Portugal and Africa are pervaded of human rights violations evidences and have been partially accessed. However, it's usage in documentaries, theatre plays and books with testimonies has been growing (Pimentel, 2016), and may be a way to promote symbolic justice and become another layer of collective memory around this difficult past.

Conclusion

On an epistemological level, the rebellious poetic identity that Clovis Britto builds in his theses – where the apple eats Eva – might be analogue to the attitude that we have been trying to identify and that can approximate art and Sociomuseology. Britto (2019) argues that an attitude that could 'unread' and 'unmake' the established and hegemonic understanding of museums will be able to broaden the limits of discipline, and by this matter, pluralize museological thinking, reinforcing the political aspect of this poetical identity. Similarly, Sociomuseology could be seen as the tool that is capable of presenting "singular answers to specific problems, and above all, explicitly assume political and poetical commitments" (Chagas et al., 2018).

Among the many analyses of art works by Julian Stallabrass, he identifies the existence of artists that are in fact working based capitalist criticism under a social optic. Despite being critical on 'free-art' and considering it a necessary tool for the free-market, he sees the "pale" but "continual breaking with conventions" artistic practice (2016, p. 5). We support our argument that Sociomuseology needs to approximate itself from art using this 'pale' artistic actions and reflect on these global movements.

On the practical level, contemporary art is not a tool to be used by museums, but museums and art being tools for each other. Not only will museums benefit from artists that

reinterpret collections but art – in its critical and socially committed stances – may also enrich itself when connected to museums with shared premisses.

Considering that, and instead of imagining a ‘Socioartistic’ branch of the performative and plastic arts dedicated to identify and reflect upon the critical artistic practice, we continue to inquire on the reasons why contemporary art museums and galleries have been operating in a distinctive system from the ones observed by Sociomuseology. As it has been previously argued: maybe the massification of culture and commercially oriented institutions have created a distant gap between Sociomuseology and the Arts that became challenging to overcome.

Nevertheless, we glimpse on artistic and museological practices that go beyond empty discourses and tend toward reimagining unsolved social traumas – in this case, the African liberation war, decades of colonialism and racism.

In that same way, the Aljube museum presents itself as a communitarian museum – in the sense that it has originated from the struggle of tortured and imprisoned antifascist resisters and not as a result of the interest to profit. Although the Portuguese are only now building a substantial museological structure to address the memory of the resistance against Estado Novo – specially with the inauguration of the Museu Nacional Resistência e Liberdade in the last 27th of April, in the date that celebrates 50 years of the freeing of the political prisoners from Peniche jail – the addressing of the troubling past of dilacerating colonialism in Africa until mid 1970’s has been for long silenced in major cultural debates.

We can imagine that opposed to the commodification and constant rebranding of the fashion world that makes ‘everything that is solid melt into the air’, being able to confront contradictions with poetry and artistic criticism is an act of resistance itself. An artistic perspective could go beyond the expectations of any market and not only add layers of reinterpretation to controversial collections and archives, but stimulate critical thinking to the spheres of social life that need further appreciation and poetization.

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