

Visuality and Experimentalism: Two Commented Examples in Contemporary Portuguese Poetry



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Abstract

While looking into the ways in which two contemporary Portuguese poets have helped bring visibility to visuality and experimentalism, this paper addresses two main issues: the public and the private present in poetic representations. It also points out to the location of feminine voices from and through experimentalism both as an aesthetic movement and as a tool towards the search for voice and belonging. My aim is to question the current validity of experimental poetry as a political practice.

A study of Ana Hatherly's and Conceição Riachos' poetry focusing on how they form visuality in a beyond-the-page dynamics also leads us to examine the aesthetic means by which these poets make public their specific private worlds of feeling, their ways of seeing their surroundings – in a process that Carlos Mendes De Sousa and Eunice Ribeiro Ribeiro (in their *Antologia Da Poesia Experimental Portuguesa* - 52) styled *performance* and *happening*. Sousa and Ribeiro's understanding of these coincides with RoseLee Goldberg's (1988), in whose work performance and happening imply the political and psychological aspects of representation, together with the act of improvisation; and this is arguably also found in Richard Schechner (2006), as well as in current notions of

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body art, of how performance is weaved along theatrical instances, and of how presence is unstable and always under construction.

According to Juliana de Almeida Ferrari Rosa, in *Estudos da Performance, Ética e Pedagogia: Desconstruindo a Lei do Pai* (2008), each performance writing, signs are open and the writing moment is constantly reviewed. While rediscovering Judith Butler's works, Ferrari Rosa signals the capacity performance has to allow for subjective expression, as public discourse (Rosa 27, 129) to which most of experimentalism as an aesthetic movement objects.

Regarding the context in and from which the chosen poets here mentioned write, one must notice that under the dictatorship years (and even beyond those days) Portuguese society faced censorship, repression, conservatism and isolationism. This created the perfect environment for experimental poets to transpose to art the political and cultural situation encountered in order to transgress it by opposing it to mainstream, accepted or traditional artistic discourse. This was achieved by means of a mixture of different types of media and communicative devices for and in the creation of poems, as well as the breaking of rules related to rhyme and metre. Moreover, while Experimentalism spread in many parts of the world at the same epoch, one of the suggested ways out of Salazar's nationalist project was the elaboration of a resistance that combined with an attention to internationalism in art. In fact, universalism does play a fundamental role in Experimental poetry, along with the concept of lack of authorship put into practice: art unveils itself every time it is appreciated and diversely reappropriated.

In fact, Experimentalism attempted to connect Art to Democracy, relate the sense of expression to audience and social meaning. In order to accomplish this, experimental poetry flourishes in visual, verbal and vocal possibilities that can be characterized as *performance* poetry. They happen as moving and moveable spaces of transgression, where political resistance is translated into

cultural rupture. In the Portuguese literary scene, the decades from the 1950s to the 1980s established different associations between rupture in art and social and political belonging. Even though poetic practice moved from the oriental influence of ideogramatic calligraphy and the haikai also present in the Brazilian and Swiss-German inspirations, it created a visual syntax that aimed at the translation of the industrial culture of economy in Concretism to the assimilation of other poetic traditions and tendencies that continuously reported to both Brazil and Anglo-Saxon experimentalism. This gave rise to a national Portuguese Experimentalism officially recognized with the publication of the POEX texts and Ana Hatherly's poems and exhibitions, along with other important figures such as Salette Tavares, Eugenio M. de Melo e Castro, António Aragão, Alberto Pimenta, Alexandre O'Neill among others.

In *Antologia da Poesia Experimental Portuguesa*, out of the twenty representative names chosen for the outline of the history of Experimental Poetry in Portugal, there are only three women: Luisa Neto Jorge, Salette Tavares and Ana Hatherly (the latter is regarded as the great leader of the movement). Two foundational anthologies were published in 1973 and 1985: *Antologia da poesia concreta em Portugal* and *Poemografias: Perspectivas da Poesia Visual Portuguesa*.¹ Exhibitions, catalogues, newspapers and magazines have also been highly relevant for the dissemination of experimentalism, namely the *Poesia Experimental* journal organized by Ana Hatherly and Eugenio M. de Melo Castro. Together they published theoretical texts and documents of Experimental Portuguese Poetry called POEX (1981) that allowed them to declare communication occurs in a "semiotic forest" – which, in other words, entails viewing verbal-vocal-visual-gestural communication as inevitable components of poetic happenings known as *performances*. The challenge is made present in the social and aesthetic spheres – the latter a metonym of the former. It is with Ana Hatherly that poetry goes out to the streets and acquires the shape of protests in

installations and exhibitions such as the 1977 episode called “rotura” at the Fundação Luso-Americana in Lisbon. In the wake of this, visualizing the word goes far beyond its sociopolitical status, it becomes itself a *happening* and, as such, it is very much public in its depiction of social themes as privately interpreted by the poets/public/coauthors: the image/poems “rotura” (“rupture”) and “Variação V” and “Variação XV”.

Such a reconfiguration of spaces and silences creates some disturbing live images the status of which as poetry might be doubted – were it not for the dialogue they enter with the past and tradition; the silence that rises from tearing apart the past and, at the same time, the joyful and jokey game of words by Salete Tavares entitled “O Bule” (“the teapot”) which includes a direct allusion to Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen in the middle of “the teapot teapot teapot teapot...”. Through such exemplary references to a mother-figure of feminine poetry, together with the performative tearing up of conventions in the “rotura” (rupture) moment, Experimentalism is able to pay tribute to the past.

Although the impression one gets is that resistance was achieved in broader terms than those that were specifically women-related, it also focused on the position of women in society. There is an episode, for example, in which Hatherly elaborates on “The woman invaded by time (a homage to Henry Moore)”. It is a poem about a critique of the reproduction of the submissive role of women in the sculptor’s work. We may therefore argue that Ana Hatherly’s production recovers the deconstructive work of the so-called three Marias (Maria Velho da Costa, Maria Isabel Barreno and Maria Teresa Horta), censored in 1972 for their *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, a revolutionary epistolary and poetic text that harked back to Mariana Alcoforado’s *Portuguese Letters*, and is widely seen as one of the most historically relevant poetic texts written by women in Portugal. In fact, the *three Marias* brought a new visibility to women poets as these three poets crossed the bridge of silence in humour, hybridity (of literary

genres and language) and as they spoke about themselves in a much freer way than previous women writers. There, experimentalism had a very specific and innovative role: that of deterritorializing patriarchalism and reterritorializing women's voices in art, by means of what the poet Eavan Boland calls the "place of imagination" and "the rhetoric of imagery" (Boland 128). The imagination cannot occur outside subjectivity and the "rhetoric of imagery" implies going back to the past, recovering it, in order to go beyond its many faults, mainly, the absence of women's voices and visibilities.

If one were to go further into the issue of womanhood and poetry, one might have to ask how visuality is constructed differently by men and women. To start with, one can think of poetry's public spaces as built by the common (initially, private) themes that help create images and that are presented by women poets, such as the relationships between mothers and daughters, motherhood, the body, the diverse forms of silence in society that are oppressive, the challenges of breaking stereotypes recognized by public institutions (the state, religion and education, amongst others). Yet, how can one adapt the discussion around the issue of impersonality in poetry and the peculiarity of subjectivity and women in experimentalism, as it was first approached by John Keats' "negative capability" and, later, by T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative"? Women writers and feminists argue that women have long been silenced and have had more than enough "negative capability" for too long. The fact that experimentalism is far more explicitly political, when compared to other poetic movements, creates a deeper need for women to make room for their own voices and visibilities (in the visuality of happenings and performances) than ever before in the history of Portuguese poetry.

Together with all the experimentalism that Hatherly's poetics involve (revealed in the ways the speech forms overlap), it also questions sexual and national frontiers, as in the previously mentioned Variation (Variação) poems.

Therefore, in Hatherly's work the period following the 1974 revolution tended to foreground the performance poem, as a way of showing that language is constructed and not imposed. Examples of this attitude included her participation in *Alternativa Zero*, a 1977 exhibition organized by Ernesto de Sousa, and the 1989 launching of the *Claro-Escuro* magazine, dedicated to baroque themes in the arts as well as to the Brazil-Portugal and Portugal-Spain relations (explored as additional manifestations of resistance based on the paradigm of silence as also on centre-margin dynamics in national arts). For Ana Hatherly, "concrete Poetry and Experimentalism, which followed it, among other aspects, have contributed to the expansion of the concept of the poem as written object, emphasising visual representation as a simultaneously synthetic and polissemic possibility" (Hatherly, *Poesia do Mundo 2* 197).²

In this sense, visual poetry resignifies and communicates that which was so new in the space of plurality. If experimental poetry questions traditional form and reception, it also creates a space for the reinsertion of women's voices in the poetic world. It presents a subversion of the muse's order, that is, the inversion of the muse's place from the object to the subject of her own community's history – an element that proves common to other countries' poetics, Ireland being a case in point. In fact, little has been written about Experimental poetry in the Irish literary context, with the exception of Catherine Walsh, Aodán McCardle, Maurice Scully and a few others. Again, the presence of women is as scarce as in the PO.EX project of Experimental Portuguese poetry³, which displays a total of twenty-five poems, out of which only three are by women (and precisely the same that appear in Sousa and Ribeiro's anthology).

Further, Hatherly's work points to the various possible levels of poetic experimentalism from a woman's voice. If language is a universe and transforming it implies the use of multiple resources that lead into performance, speaking for the country, while subverting the order and rules of syntax, Hatherly

breaks the female silence as subject – which had already happened in rather private terms in the poetry of Breyner Andresen, for example, and which will appear in Hatherly's later volumes of poetry. The poet also records the experience of reinscribing the woman's body in an infinity of possibilities, through endless name attributions and in humourous word games, for example.

Nevertheless, this brief problematization of issues concerning experimentalism in Portugal also aims at questioning the possibilities surrounding experimental poetry and the depiction of subjectivity and the private. In this sense, one must notice that as the voices of women turned to public affairs, it is both apparently and increasingly more difficult to deal with rather private matters and to display a more intimate hue, in concrete and experimental poetry, unless the authors involved in such actions return to pen and paper and stick to experimentalism on the page: we can see this in Hatherly's *A Idade da Escrita* (1998), *Itinerários* and *O Pavão Negro* (both from 2003). How much can private visual (yet, written) poetry be compared to performance poetry?

This question could work as a metonym to an earlier elaboration by Perfecto Cuadrado Fernandez⁴ on Portuguese poetic productions in the framework of what is commonly described as ideological and artistic avant-gardes. While referring to the history of Experimental poetry in Portugal, Fernandez returns to Ana Hatherly's synthesis on the aims of experimentalism and on its political implications and aesthetic consequences: the influence of visuality in a possibly social opposition to neocapitalist values and consumerism. Fernandez concludes that an art of intervention (name it experimental, performative or visual) can no longer work as such. This assertion, however, seems to disregard both Ana Hatherly's own current claims on the effects of Experimental poetry today, as well as any further consideration on the issue of visuality, the private and the public. The present essay does not provide

definitive answers on these issues, but, while paralleling the poetry of Hatherly's and Riachos', it attempts to delineate their power and market distribution, therefore questioning the unstable positions of margin and centre as well as the need for voicing the private values of (and established by) women nowadays.

The author of six volumes of poetry and works in anthologies published both in Portugal and in Brazil, Conceição Riachos' concerns vary in theme and style. The main preoccupations of her poetry include the desire for and the understanding of writing as social practice, literary and national belonging (usually dealt with humour), linguistic awareness, and dislocation as experienced by a woman out there. Even though there are considerable changes in the way Riachos approaches language in space and on the page, in the course of her works she allows for a more complex reading of the themes presented. Visuality is a constant, as is the lyrical-aspect of subjectivism and the fragmentary disposition of words along lines within which visual representations work as metonyms of fragmentation regarding both the self and society. One of the most relevant aspects in the highly lyrical discourse found in Riachos' works is the level of privacy with which it becomes public. The best example of this is the poem "Expição" in the 1998 volume *Ritos de Passagem (Rites of Passage)*:

<i>Expição</i>	<i>Atonement</i>
Pendurei a alma	I hung the soul
num estendal	on line
ao sabor do vento	to the wind
e da maresia	and the sea air
Apanhei-a ao fim	I caught it in the end
da tarde	of the afternoon
Era branca	It was white
seca	dry
e fria	and cold

This brings the immediate image of the clothesline, itself a Portuguese icon of the intermingling of the public and the private spaces of social and personal discourses. Clotheslines in Portugal are public spaces of the private, with clothes to be dried exposed outside windows for public appreciation, as if they were countering an apparent lack of attention to them. That which is almost invisible (for it pertains to the private world) is made present for public and anonymous eyes, as are the images that flourish from the visuality constructed along Riachos' verses: from the excessively dramatic verses that appear in the poem "Lar" ("Home") in *Olhares* (1998), in which the lyric-I asserts

Debaixo	Below
de um céu	a leafy
frondoso	sky
erguerei	I shall rise
a minha casa	my house
é lá	up there
que vou guardar	where I shall keep
a nuvem do desencanto	the cloud of disenchantment

to the more elaborate visuality present in the metalanguage of

<i>Temporal VI</i>	<i>Storm VI</i>
Presa ao corpo efémero	Stuck to the ephemeral body
da escrita	of writing
a poesia é luz perene	poetry is perennial infinite
infinita	Light

or the visuality of the poem entitled "eros" in the book *instantes* (2002), illustrated with photographs by Maria João Baginha. In this work, the poetic *instants* enter a dialogue with the photographs that in limitless ways translate an

incapacity to communicate, so as to fully address ideas and feelings. Such is the case of *modos de ver (ways of seeing)*, in which the image of the seagull flying across the sky metonymically appears as one of the many diverse ways with which the reader interprets the scene:

Fixa	Point to
a essência vital do objeto	the object's vital essence
a textura de um velho tronco de árvore	a tree's old trunk
a folha amarela a cair	the yellow leaf falling
uma rosa a abrir	a rose opening itself
um pio de ave no ar	a bird's peep in the air
a nuvem a passar	a cloud crossing

(Riachos, *Instantes* 68)

One might here question the autonomy of the intersemiotic translation from image to word and word to image, thus consolidating the value of visuality as a tool that re-presents private matters publicly, which seems to occur in a slightly different manner with(in) *A Silhueta Branda Das Veias* (2005):

Na curva do vento

quando a manhã persistente enche sem tréguas
ancoramos o limite do corpo

Within the wind's curve

when the persistent morning trucelessly fulfills
we anchor the body's limit

(Riachos, *A Silhueta Branda das Veias* 34)

Here the poet reaches a deeper sense of the magical world of language and linguistic experimentalism and lets flow all its silence onto the page's blank spaces, as well as through the visuality created in the strange effect of awkward words gathered in verses such as the above d. The "body's limit", a performance-metonym of visuality's effect of words on the page is reached in the 2010 *Fios na roda dos passos*, Riachos's latest volume of poems, the reading possibilities of which are even broader:

XXXV

When language is a petal
in the vertical breathing of breeze wires
in trembling hands
the sentenced light night after night
moving itself like sand.

Establishing itself as transgression, by means of several figures of speech, such as sound repetitions, personifications and metaphors, it proves that the breaking of discourse's linearity definitely inserts her poetics in the universe of experimentalism. Here, the woman's womb goes public, outside the operating room where most women give birth:

XXXIII

	No	
ventre pirotécnico	do	discurso
	onde	
palavras caem	sem	eco
fluindo	a	origem obscura
		em
fantasia	sem	rasto
	a	
grafia converge	o	granito
transparente		
	do	percurso

XXXIII

In the

pyrotechnic womb
 where
words fall echo less
flowing the obscure origin
 in
fantasy trace less
the
graphics converge the root's
 transparent
 granite

If, on the one hand, Ana Hatherly has gained critical approval for her public participation in Portuguese experimentalism, yet leaving much room to be inhabited by other women poets in visuality and visual experimentalism, Conceição Riachos has clearly transformed the space of visibility by extending the relevance of marginal poetry; and this coincides with the process of voicing women through art by deconstructing the values of centre and margin, in a display of sociopolitical and subjective identity.

To conclude, in spite of the diverging social spaces of visibility provided to the poets by criticism and the media, in both Ana Hatherly and Conceição Riachos audience and readers converge in the multiplicity of meanings that are left for construction, as in *works in (perpetual) progress* that deconstruct possible linearities regarding notions of the public and the private spheres of life. In both cases, through the confluence of disrupted verse forms and spatial and graphic effects applied to words on the page and outside it, intermedial and international dialogues weaved along the poems abound; and these become formal elements deployed in an effort to endow women with a growing voice and visibility, an attempt to rethink language and communication in the constant

reconfiguration of the dynamics between centre and margin in the periphery of Portuguese poetic discourses.

Notes

¹ Both appeared in Lisbon and were edited by José Alberto Marques, Eugenio M.de Melo e Castro, Fernando Aguiar and Silvestre Pestana.

² In the original, “A Poesia Concreta e o Experimentalismo, que se lhe seguiu, entre outros aspectos, contribuíram para expandir o conceito de poema como objeto escrito, acentuando a representação visual como uma possibilidade simultaneamente sintética e polissêmica...” (Hatherly, *Poesia do Mundo 2* 197).

³ This Project is available at: <www.po-ex.net/> (accessed on the 20th /02/2011).

⁴ <www.consispro.com/relipes/Pdf/AC_Texto35.pdf>.

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