

THE COLLECTORS OF MEANINGS.
Theoretical Considerations on text and image conjunctions

But is not every corner of our cities a scene of action? Is not each passerby an actor? (...) The illiterate of the future ', it has been said, ' will not be the man who cannot read the alphabet, but the one who cannot take a photograph. But must we not also count as illiterate the photographer who cannot read his own pictures? Will not the caption become the most important component of the shot?
(Benjamin 1931, 25)

INTRODUCTION

When trying to permeate the dense fabric of any text and image association, W.G. Sebald comes to mind. In his sophisticated writing, woven from one image to another, photography is the medium of *melancholia*, the trace of pain left in bodies and places. Talking about holocaust and the perpetual peregrinations it generated as a condition of existence, his books turns image into a media to internalise time. The heavy, blurry, dark, badly reproduced, hardly intelligible images avoid the painful reality of the image as evidence. The past is substantiated precisely through this specific quality of the images.

"It seems to me then as if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last, just as when we have accepted an invitation we duly arrive in a certain house at a given time." (Sebald 2002, 367).

The writings of **W.G. Sebald** (1944-2001), emerging from the German 'post-holocaust generation', played an essential role in what has been defined as an inter-medial writing: waving of document, author text, found photography, reproduction (of works of art), personal shots. In the German literary context inter-medial writing was seen as a creative homage to the essentially incommunicable traumatic experience of the Wars. The augmented text emerged as a document of an inward history, a memoir of loss and exile.

A predecessor of Sebald, Rolf Dieter Brinkmann's also works with rough and saturated reproductions in self-made photographic collages (*Westwärts 1 & 2*, 1969 – 1974) introduced in his texts and poems, whose specific visual quality describes the post-war German deserted and immobile cities carrying the scars of the World War II bombing and West Germany's dusky industrial landscape. His images emerged from the students movements during and after 1968 (Patt 2007, 36).

Ursula Renner (Renner 2007, 113) talks about the phenomena of embedding images into text, as a need of a sensorial approach to history, of giving a material form to the experience of living and overpassing the consequences of the Holocaust. She talks about the fact that the virulence of the question of the impossibility of documenting history rose during the 20th century the question of the function and means of remembering. For her, almost all 20th century authors working with a fusion between literary and visual sources are connected to the question of *remembering*.

Nevertheless, we can think also of the contrary: art absorbing text in its matter as an external stance to situate or – on the contrary – to decontextualize the visual field. This phenomena is so tightly connected to various epochs in art history, that text (or sign) introduced into the image and vice-versa can be considered intrinsic to art's language.

Von Steinaecker (2007, 9) identifies the first use of the word *illustration* in the German literary realm around 1840, emerging as a consequence of the Gutenberg era. Both terms *illustration* and *illumination* (the manually drawn images on manuscripts that preceded illustration), etymologically are meant to lighten up text, as a device to enhance reading. Von Steinaecker (2007, 10) mentions the existence of much earlier genres, where text and image had a similar weight, as for example the medieval illustrated calendars, the allegorical genre of the late medieval *Danse Macabre*, and later on the baroque *Vanitas* and *Memento Mori* themes, whose power of persuasion came precisely from the fusion between text and image.

With the emergence of photography, the 19th century establishes a biased relation between art and photography, where tradition transported by painting and sculpture, literature stand for creation and depth, while photography for materiality and contingency. The 20th century turned these ideas into arguments for progress. Walter Benjamin (1931) is deducing in the *Short History of Photography* the pictures' quality of being reproducible from the need *to bring things closer to oneself*. (Benjamin 1931, 20). Modern photography is for him a process of liberating the object from its *aura*. 'What is aura? A peculiar web of space and time: The unique manifestation of a distance, however near it might be.' (Benjamin 1931, 20).

In the first text-collages of cubism and dadaism, around 1912, in the illustrated poems of Tristan Tzara, typography and word gain material consistency. André Breton published in 1928 »Nadja«, a statement-book of surrealism. Similarly to Sebald's writing, the novel is punctuated by images – drawings by Nadja herself and photographs taken by the author. The frontier between visual and textual evidence collapses in the field of surrealistic imaginary. The idea of the *bricolage* gains also prominence in this period, as an intellectual play, a potentially creative assemblage of disparate sources.

The history of this perpetual conversation between image and text and even the plurality of virtual or material forms it found in time, make itself felt in the work developed by the Os Espacialistas and Gonçalo M. Tavares.

GONÇALO M. TAVARES DESCRIBES THE DUO's WORK AS FOLLOWS¹:

This is our first exhibition together in the sense of a duo. The captions that I wrote for the images are changing the image, they are not neutral captions, they are telling a story of the image. The moment in which the captions are assuming the role of entering into the image, while image and text become an ensemble, the text becomes image, but it also alters the image. Letters that can be also read as images (for example letters of an unknown alphabet). While we read the text, the image changes. That is why many times I have different texts written for the same image. In our work, the text is interfering in the image without interfering physically (it is not placed on top of the image for example), but alters the perception of the viewed image. This is a double game, in which image and text interfere not in a material form, but in an imaginary one. Text and image do not dilute themselves but have a tangential encounter.

I have been working with the Espacialistas and especially with Luis Batista since we were in our 20's, talking about Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, among many other books, during an inter-rail travel. There is a common imaginary between us, with common cultural references that are the basis of this collaboration, but also a ludic tone, of not taking

1 Conversation with Gonçalo M. Tavares recorded on 19. 07. 2020

ourselves so seriously, of avoiding a progressive professionalization or specialization. For example the way in which Os Espacialistas take their photographs seems to me quite interesting because a photography as a technical achievement with the right light etc. is not of their interest, but what interests them is the photography as idea. The ideas are at the center of our duo. Many of their photographs were born from ideas that I proposed, from books and texts that I had written. It happened that I wrote a text that inspired them for making an image, for example the image with the house map on the sole of a feet, which than inspired me again to write a new text and that process can continue. It is an infinite dialogue and circuit. This has a lot to do with the way in which we communicate. I have sometimes hundreds of images of Os Espacialistas in front of me and suddenly one of these images is attracting me – as describes Roland Barthes with the idea of *punctum*. I make a construction of narratives around this image and than they make new images, constructing a visual narrative – a symbiotic relationship.

This happens also during performative conferences, for example that on *Animals and Money*, at which we collaborated and that became the origin of new images that emerge on stage. The photographic camera is portable and this idea that everything can be recorded, seems relevant.

Os Espacialistas lead a collector's work, there is a very beautiful accumulation of images in their work, accompanied by their generosity of *showing*. They do not have the strategy of withholding images, of closing images, but on the contrary, they offer their images, as the stimulus of certain images can be absorbed by certain people and other images can be destined for others.

Imagination has to do with the jump from one image to another, from one phrase to another. I like a lot the idea of association, but for that we need the interval. Between image and text there is this empty space. As the text does not illustrate text and vice-versa, they both keep their empty space around, which permits interpretation. Generosity has to do also with the fact of permitting to the viewer to interpret the image in his way, of leaving the space of the image open. There is no definition, there is no conclusion, there is no message. What we want to generate is thoughts, reflection. Every work is an attempt to think, visually and in terms of text, determining us to think: what is this?

To be contemporary is maybe to facilitate the thinking process of the other - this is generous act. Today when there are so many conclusions drawn, so many absolute definitions, when the 'other' is not permitted speech, it is important that art lets the other think. What we do is opening the possibility for the other to continue thinking.

The word *definition* in Portuguese is very interesting. I do not like this word too much because of its etymology. To de-fine (port. *de-finir*) states a finish (port. *finir*). The definition of the word definition means: *the last word on something*. On the contrary in our work, we do not have definitions, we defend that art is a word in the middle, it is a speech that is in the middle. It is not the ultimate speech, it is not a definition about an image. That image is itself not the last speech about a text. It is a speech in the middle. There are many others after and many others before.

There are two types of arrogance that we try to avoid: to imagine that we are the first word , as if there was not a before. This does not exist. There are so many references coming from before, we are not the firsts to talk, we are in the middle. Equally we are not the lasts to talk, this is also important. This placement of the art in the middle space seem pertinent.

PHOTOGRAPHY, DOCUMENT AND CONCEPTUALISM

Gonalo M. Tavares' thoughts regarding the empty space around the image, strikingly recall the words of W.G. Sebald in an interview with Christian Scholz. When asked about what is an image for him and how he approaches them, Sebald details: 'You have a very real nucleus and around this nucleus a large empty space. You yourself do not know the context for the depicted person and which landscape it is.' (Scholz 2007: 105)

The type of *melancholia* present in the work of Sebald or Brinkmann is not perceptible in the images of Espacialistas, or maybe a very fine trace of it, whereas a more conceptual approach to the image is predominant. Talking about 'photography as idea' surfaces an entire field of thought and practice, expanding since modernism. While conceptual art is a current in the history of art, *conceptualism* is a cross-temporal critical attitude towards the object (Newman, Bird 1999: 5). One of the most prominent theoreticians of conceptual art, Peter Osborne (1999), classifies historic conceptualism into: light, radical (that aimed to dissolve the artwork's viscosity) and 'generic'. The latter is for him the generator of today's conceptualism and incorporated other domains, like space, identity and social presence, becoming a tool of interdisciplinary agency in the cultural field (Osborne 1999, 64–65). 'Generic conceptualism' might be an appropriate tool to approach the specificity of Os Espacialistas' conceptual photography, which searches for aesthetic canons and visual accomplishment. Tony Godfrey (2006) also talks about 'contextual art': conceptual art since the '90s incorporates its social and political context and represents a reaction to it. This reactivity to a given context and to the relations it is based upon is specific to the text-image constructions proposed by Os Espacialistas and Gonalo M. Tavares.

The conceptualism of the neo-avantgardes established *performativity* as an important attribute of the artworks to manifest themselves, to articulate in an expressive way what they represent. Performativity, a term that emerges often in the discussions with Os Espacialistas, is not only a quality of the conceptual object but represents its main function: its power to create a reality in a certain context, simply by being there, independently from its narrative or aesthetic content. The *agency* of this work is released by its dialogic text-image structure, as explains Gonalo M. Tavares. Relevant in this context is also Os Espacialistas' recurrent use of documentation as another strategy to create meaning, through drawing a palimpsest of information: photography documenting its own screening on stage together with the performance of Gonalo M. Tavares's text that itself refers the images – in an infinite circuit. These inter-medial explorations and especially documentation as an autonomous work are specific to neo-conceptualist 'turns' in recent artforms.

ANOTHER MUSEUM

In the *Atlas of the Body and the Imagination*, considering the flux of the written fabric, the images arrest the flow of text by the multiplicity of connections they open, interrupting and even getting counter the text, while time and meaning gain a rhizomatic dimension. A frenzied need to infinitely accumulate meanings often propel the reader so distantly, that it can seem that the image negates itself. Overwriting can seem in itself a negative act and the image-text composite can be seen as embodying a sort of broken archive of history, whose meaning lasts precisely in what the image hides, in what it deletes and overwrites and in the information that gets forever lost along history. In this aspect, not necessarily the works themselves, but the process of work developed by Os Espacialistas and Gonalo M. Tavares remind again of Sebald's accumulation of semi-effaced and de-contextualised document-images. In both these works we can talk about a *slow watching* that goes

counter the image-consume, counter our expectations. The *Atlas*' image-captions stay hermetically closed until a process of visualising an interior image is triggered and poly-valent images emerges. We can even think of a disconnection between image and meaning/symbol, between image and text, which becomes the binding factor between them.

The idea of 'atlas' itself carries with it not only the drive for encyclopedic collecting, but also a multi-medial specificity. The first atlases were themselves 'illuminated' with drawings of imaginary content, where maps were augmented with depictions of animals, plants and fishes, with all their invisible connections to legends, fears and beliefs. In the Renaissance *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (1572-1618) or *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570) – the first modern atlases – the illuminated images represent an extension of the factual territory with its *interpretation*.²

Collecting as a form of working, collecting meanings, collecting postures, collecting objects (the Espacialistas Kit) bring the thought of an alternative museum. A sort of dispersion is also present in these processes of collecting meanings in the quotidian reality. The minimal and universal set of Kit-tools recall collectively remembered connotations, art historical references, like a museum in movement, collecting meaning from one station to another. We can think of different museologic paradigms, emerging during the early avant-gardes, tightly connected to the idea of *bricolage*: the *cabinet of curiosities* or the *personal and portable museum* for example. From 'La Boîte-en-valise' of Marcel Duchamp (1936), a mobile, heteroclit and transportable museum, to 'Scatoli Personali' (1952) of Robert Rauschenberg and the 'Sentimental Museums' (1979) of Daniel Spoerri, witnessing Parisian life histories, these miniature museums are all inter-medial and inter-spatial.

CREATING LOCALITY

An anthropocentric position is prevalent in Os Espacialistas' work, again recalling a contemporary condition. In his *Short History of Photography* (1931) Walter Benjamin quotes Alfred Lichtwark, who as early as 1907, wrote that: 'In our age there is no work of art which is regarded with as much attention as a photograph of oneself, one's relatives and friends, one's sweetheart.' (Benjamin 1931, 22) – which represents in Benjamin's view one of the earliest shifts from an aesthetic view upon photography to a sociological one. While the 'snapshot' (in Benjamin's words) is a prevalent photographic expression of his contemporaneity and in a situation in which 'the reproduction of reality' does not say anything about the reality itself, Benjamin claims that 'something has to be actually constructed, something artificial, something set up' (Benjamin 1931, 24). He identifies this new approach in the work of the Surrealists and of the Russian Constructivists. These thoughts reverberate in the work of Os Espacialistas where the snapshot, placing the human at the center of the visual world, even conferring to the body an absolute relevance, formulate artificially constructed rituals.

In this context, we can also think about these works in terms of *creating locality* – to use the term established by Arjun Appadurai in his volume *Modernity at Large*, where he talks about the specificity of the emerging contemporary locality. Although the work of Os Espacialistas is so tightly connected to space, the de-localisation of space which is present in their work is striking. We can think of a conceptual, geometrical space, but also of a specific condition of our contemporary spatiality.

2 The two atlases can be consulted online:

Civitates Orbis Terrarum: http://historic-cities.huji.ac.il/mapmakers/braun_hogenberg.html and

Theatrum Orbis Terrarum: <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/8978/view/1/41/>

In *The Production of Locality*, one of the chapters included in Appadurai's book, he talks about locality as a fragile and forever shifting 'social achievement' (Appadurai 1996: 170). He describes the importance of rituals for marking the belonging to locality, but also for creating and maintaining this locality. Ceremonies and social actions are 'complex social techniques for the inscription of locality onto bodies' (Appadurai 1996: 171). In the work of Os Espacialistas techniques to produce locality are being tested out precisely by performing locality into the body. The spatial symbolism emerging out of their ritualistic actions is connected to universal processes (organizing, building, traversing, relating), which as Appadurai explains, are in contemporary societies (characterized by disjuncture between social formation and a specific place) not only social rites, but also rites of production of locality, considering 'the many displaced, deterritorialized and transient populations that constitute today's ethnoscares ' (Appadurai 1996: 174).

CONVERSATION WITH OS ESPACIALISTAS³

Our collaboration with Gonalo M. Tavares started in 2008 with an invitation from his part to illustrate his monthly contributions for the Portuguese magazine 'Viso'. The group started at that time and our main preoccupation was the idea of 'photography after nature', paraphrasing the action of 'drawing after nature', which had for us an architectonic quality. Soon we introduced the body as a form of 'performative drawing in real time' with an encountered spatial situation, found objects and bodily gestures. The images are staged in situ, we never use any software to edit them. What we do could be called a 'conceptual editing', adjusting the image to different meanings. We are narrating spatial narratives with the situations we encounter, with the movements we perform.

The relations with literature, poetry and philosophy were emerging progressively, mostly through play, which is an important component of our work. We also reflected on what we called the 'artistic quotidian' – believing that the space is charged with ideas.

Our work results from a mix between art, architecture, education in which we reinvent already realized works, contextualising them in new situations, with new relevance. An essential component of our work is the 'Espacialistas Kit' – series of objects that we find (a mirror, a meter etc.) and to which we give new meanings. More than to be used to be shown or exhibited, our bodies can be used 'to think'. In that sense the gestures are the thoughts of the body. Our body has to be educated in the sense of gaining more consciousness about itself and about the body of the other.

Therefor what we do is project our own culture, memories and references into the quotidian space, doing therefor what a writer is doing: transposing his thoughts and memories to the space of the book. In the course of these exercises a physical and a conceptual grammar emerge. When we take a brick to the beach to play with instead of a ball, we develop a both playful and philosophical activity, the brick being a symbol of architectural activity. In a ruined house we can find Lucio Fontana or Yves Klein, conceptualizing the public space and giving it a charge that comes from contemporary culture, recognizing the aesthetic expression of spaces - what we call: 'letting the artistic vocation of space emerge'.

This exhibition in Carlos Carvalho gallery represents a voyage through various past projects that we did with Gonalo M. Tavares and that converge in his PhD work published in 2013, *The 'Atlas of the Body and the Imagination'*. We were also collaborating at that time for some of his conferences, for example a conference on his collection of books 'O

3 Conversation with Os Espacialistas recorded 17.07.2020

Bairro'. He invited us to construct a photographic narrative for one of his characters, *senhor Duchamp*. Following some traces he gave us, we started to develop images that were connected to these themes, for example building an absurd chess game for *senhor Duchamp* that liked to play chess, similar to an urban structure.

The images are not text illustrations. Many times the images existed before the text. Gonalo was suggesting a theme and we were working on it, while a visual story emerged that many times was very different than his literary story, generating a montage of two narratives that converge. The body, the disease, the space and architectures are themes that both Gonalo and us are working upon. This collaboration is a conjunction of different types of situations: the meaning is developed independently in text and image and their association generates a new meaning, but also the text evolves in relation to the images, and the images in relation to certain themes. We are talking with Gonalo about the narratives we are creating and he is adding his own references in the writing of the image legends. The same image can serve as a support for different texts.

In *Diario das Noticias* Magazine he published the *Illustrated Dictionary* (2014-2015), a series of small articles each accompanied by 2-3 images. For the *Electra* Magazine (Issues 9-11, 2020-2021), we developed a series about machines, a theme that he proposed. We send sometimes hundreds of images, giving the opportunity to an open choice, to an encounter. Posing the text near the image and watching the possible road this generates, develops a certain cinematographic dimension. For us this dimension of the dialogue is a fundamental methodology of our work, not only with text, but also with other artistic works or with the space itself. We were developing together also theater pieces in the Academic Theatre Gil Vicente of Coimbra (2020), performing situations on the background of image projection, movements with objects, jointly with the text read by Gonalo live on stage.

The 'Atlas' is a work in three formats – book, performance and exhibition – and it had been gaining body in time. We still feel it is not consumed yet, we use it in new projects with schools and universities, in workshops and conferences. The archive is always alive and always involved in a working process. What we try to obtain through our work is to transmit that taking pictures is a way to think, to create ideas. Gonalo M. Tavares' text is fulfilling this same function: with it we measure the relation between our bodies and space, it is a sort of *objet trouv *, as are others artists' works, to which we enter into a dialogue and give new meanings, while mediation is central to this process.

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