

COIMBRA AS AN AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE: THE CITY AS AN ABSTRACTION

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ABSTRACT: The experience of a city can be quite a complex thing, which art can help us to understand. Through the eyes of artists, through relations between the visual and the conceptual, artists can reveal some of the complexities of the aesthetical experience of a city like Coimbra.

RESUMO: A experiência de uma cidade pode ser uma coisa muito complexa, que a arte nos pode ajudar a compreender. Através dos olhos dos artistas, através das relações entre o visual e o conceptual, os artistas podem revelar algumas das complexidades da experiência estética de uma cidade como Coimbra.

Welcome to Coimbra

Here, in these reflections, I am more concerned with the influence of cities in art than with the influence of art in cities. Coimbra is quite a stimulating city for making art – the conceptual density of Coimbra, with its history, places, and characters. With both symbolic and abstraction strategies, an artist can find ways of going from what's specific to a town to universal concepts.

Welcome to Coimbra could be the title of this essay, as I will start by showing you Coimbra through the eyes and minds of artists, like a kind of alternative tourist guide.

There are at least two Coimbras: The Coimbra we live in and the idea of Coimbra. Actually, we live in both.

In 2003, we gathered a few artists and organized an exhibition at Circulo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra (CAPC). The name of the exhibition was “Coimbra C.” Inspired by characters, stories, and places of Coimbra, the artists were invited to have a conceptual approach, to create new realities.

Coimbra “C”

Inspired by the ruin of Convent of Santa Clara-a-Velha, António Melo imagined a city where ruin was like a virus that spread everywhere. Not really a bad thing, something that appealed to our romantic, melancholy pleasure (Figure 1).

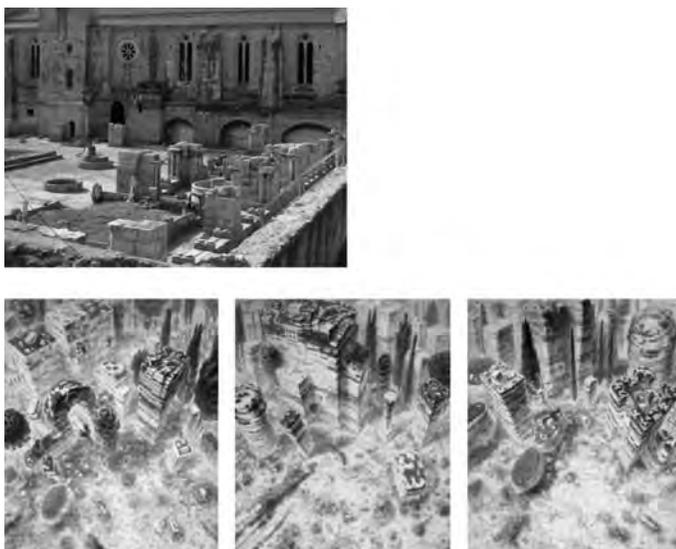


Figure 1. The ruin of Convent of Santa Clara-a-Velha and António Melo's artistic work in "Coimbra C" exhibition, Circulo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra, 2003. Photo by A. Olaio. Artwork reproduced with permission of artist.



Figure 2. Mondego River, and Armando Azevedo's artworks, "mondEGO," in "Coimbra C" exhibition, Circulo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra, 2003. Photo by A. Olaio. Artwork reproduced with permission of artist.

Inspired by the Mondego River, Armando Azevedo realized that the word *Mondego* was the contraction between Monde, Le Monde, and Ego. MondEgo (Figure 2).



Figure 3. Choupal National Forest, and Baltazar Torres' artworks, "Looking for the perfect city" and "Urban trees," in "Coimbra C" exhibition, Circulo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra, 2003. Photo by A. Olaio. Artwork reproduced with permission of artist.

Inspired by the woods of Choupal, Baltazar Torres made a kind of ecological statement by imagining what would happen if buildings took the place of trees (Figure 3).

Inspired by the Joanine Library at the University of Coimbra, a monument to the idea of a library itself, José Maçãs de Carvalho made a very small film, with a very long list of credits (Figure 4).

Inspired by Quinta das Lágrimas and the story of Pedro and Inês, the most horrendous love story in the world, Paulo Mendes turned it into a kind of carnival attraction (Figure 5).

Inspired by Coimbra's Holy Queen Isabel and the miracle of roses, Pedro Tudela, instead of turning bread into roses, made a subtle transformation of one of the walls: crumpled white paper with mysterious sounds coming from behind it, like a blank surface waiting to be transformed (Figure 6).



Figure 4. The Joanine Library at the University of Coimbra, and excerpts from José Maçãs de Carvalho's film, *Aujourd'hui maman est morte*, in "Coimbra C" exhibition, Circulo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra, 2003. Artwork reproduced with permission of artist.



Figure 5. Quinta das Lágrimas, and Paulo Mendes' artwork in "Coimbra C" exhibition, Circulo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra, 2003. Photo by A. Olaio. Artwork reproduced with permission of artist.



Figure 6. Statue of Rainha Santa Isabel (Saint Queen Isabel), and Pedro Tudela's artwork, "P_APEL_ido_T", in "Coimbra C" exhibition, Circulo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra, 2003. Photo by A. Olaio. Artwork reproduced with permission of artist.

Inspired by Jardim da Sereia and its ‘Mermaid Garden’, in which the fountain is actually a triton, a merman, Sebastião Resende made a sculpture, a hybrid form, something between a fish tail and a table, celebrating the complexity, the dissolution of boundaries in art (Figure 7).

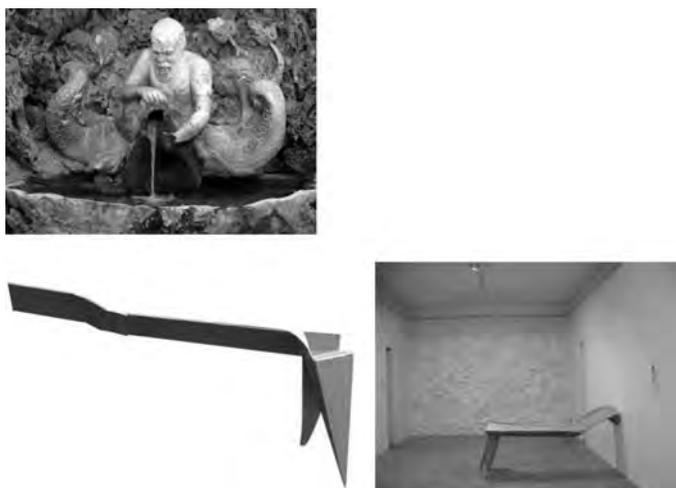


Figure 7. Jardim da Sereia’s ‘Mermaid Garden’ fountain triton, and Sebastião Resende’s “Sereia seria” sculpture (foreground), in “Coimbra C” exhibition, Circulo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra, 2003. Photos by A. Olaio. Artwork reproduced with permission of artist.

Vasco Araújo was inspired by the idea that Coimbra is the place Portuguese is spoken ‘more correctly’, turning the idea of correct pronunciation into images (Figure 8).

Inspired by the tomb of the first King of Portugal, I made a painting. And there I asked: “When did the founder of Portugal begin to feel Portuguese?” Before Portugal was founded, afterwards, never? (Figure 9).

Inspired by Portugal dos Pequeninos (‘Portugal for the Little Ones’), Pedro Pousada showed us quite a different reality, criticizing or celebrating urban chaos and complexity (Figure 10).

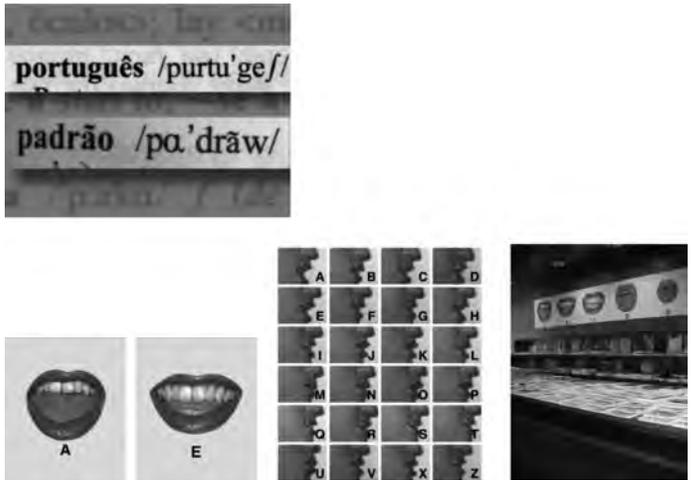


Figure 8. Dictionary entries, and Vasco Araújo’ artworks, “Phonology, according to João de Deus,” in “Coimbra C” exhibition, Circulo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra, 2003. Photo by A. Olaio. Artwork reproduced with permission of artist.



Figure 9. Tomb of the first King of Portugal, Alfonso Henriques, and António Olaio’s artwork, “When did the founder of Portugal begin to feel Portuguese?” in “Coimbra C” exhibition, Circulo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra, 2003.



Figure 10. A view of Portugal dos Pequeninos, and Pedro Pousada's artwork in "Coimbra C" exhibition, Circulo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra, 2003. Photo by P. Pousada. Artwork reproduced with permission of artist.

Dancing in the city

We can imagine a city like a musical note we can sustain, eventually forever.

Like the city, the note is always the same but always different. It can't be the same because everything around it is changing. But it is the same because it is the same note, it is the same city.

A city is always new and old at the same time.

Living in a city is a process of constant discoveries, not only of its changes, but mostly of what a city has that is permanent. The novelty of its oldness. A permanent discovery of its oldness (Figures 11 and 12).

Today I discovered stereo sound
My girl wouldn't believe it
but I told her to glue a canary to each shoulder

www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhLe2SVud_w

But the liveliness of what's old in a city resides in its own death.
The old buildings, and what remains of them reveal themselves
in the mystery of what they have been,
a strange way of the past of a city presenting itself as contemporary.

In a delightful, romantic sensation of constant resurrection
 the old stones only resurrect to show us how dead they are.
 Their heart is made of stone and their stones are made of bone.



Figure 11. *Today I Discovered Stereo Sound* (video). Music: António Olaio and João Taborda, 1999.



Figure 12. *Deadly Resurrection* (video). Music: António Olaio and João Taborda, 2005.

You only resurrected
to show us how dead you are
Deadly resurrection

Your heart is made of bone
Your bones are made of stone

www.youtube.com/watch?v=HTkRaNHfdWg

The identity of a city also resides in the awareness that in every city there's the general idea of what a city is, the universal idea of a city. Even an old city like Coimbra, whose identity consists mostly in its oldness, being unique, also has a lot in common with every city, because it is a city (Figure 13).

Foggy days in old Manhattan,
for those who seek perfection,
it's good for their complexion.

A man is not a bat
you'd better watch your step
This weather makes you blind
your friends you'll never find

You will never find me
if not even your body you can see
And it is very sad
when you're left alone with your head

www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJj6yL5gpDE

To live in a city is to live its public space. The cities are their public space. And each home a kind of negative space of a city, as though houses were meant mostly to contour streets and squares, helping us draw the public space, the real heart of a city.

As citizens it's the others that make us what we are. I am what my eyes can reach. If we really live a city, a strong ethical bond links us to the others. The others are what we can see. In my city, for me, I'm invisible but I can see, I can see everything but me (Figure 14).



Figure 13. *Foggy Days in Old Manhattan* (vídeo). Music: António Olaio and João Taborda, 1999.



Figure 14. *Invisible* (vídeo). Music: António Olaio and João Taborda, 2005.

I'm invisible but I can see
I can see everything but me

Two girls in a bus,
a guy in a train.
A yellow umbrella
under heavy rain.

A shooting star,
A growing tree.
A wooden guitar.
A fish in the sea.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=6laQIAosQsU