



Portugal's Art and Portuguese Cool

Now that the country is being marketed as Europe's new hotspot, is the country's art scene benefiting from the boom?

by Justin Jaeckle

In 1755 a dramatic earthquake destroyed 85 percent of Lisbon's structures and forced the city, at the time one of the largest in Europe, to redraw its maps. A downtown fire in 1988 saw the city centre made over again. Today, however, it's economic and cultural forces, rather than natural ones, that are driving change in Lisbon, and in Portugal as a whole. Among thousands of recent hype pieces, *The Guardian* proclaimed Lisbon the 'New Capital of Cool', while CNN anointed the Portuguese capital 'The New Berlin' in one article and gave us '7 reasons Lisbon could be coolest capital in Europe' in another (while listing, in a concurrently published piece, nine reasons Porto might be cooler still). It's tempting, if ill-advised, to join in the hyperbole, but it remains that tremors of speculation, mass tourism and investment are presently rippling through Portugal's capital and second city.

In just six years following the 2011 depths of Portugal's financial crisis and €78 billion IMF-EU bailout (when then-prime minister Pedro Passos Coelho even felt it apposite to encourage Portugal's youth to leave the country in search of work), Portugal has staged a dramatic recovery – at times resembling a gold rush in its two major cities, where tourism and foreign investment have grown exponentially, annually, since the country's darkest fiscal hour. The 11 million tourists who visited in 2016 outnumbered Portugal's population of 10.3 million for the first time. Yet while real-estate prices have increased, incomes haven't. Portugal's minimum wage (€677/month) remains the lowest in Western Europe, trailing even Greece. It's a factor contributing to the maintenance of historic trends of emigration from the country. Around 22 percent of Portuguese citizens – some 2.3 million people – currently live abroad.

The status of Lisbon and Porto as international art hubs is directly linked to Portugal's complex nodal position within the global, and globalised, sphere. The expansion to Lisbon by the Madrid art fair Arco seems based more on Portugal's significant web of international relations than the country's modest local collector base, although tax incentives are enticing more international collectors to the country. Strong historic ties to the markets – and former colonies – of several African nations and Brazil are of key importance. Political instability in Brazil continues to motivate the migration of that country's wealth, and artists, to Portugal, while the influence of capital from Portugal's oil-rich ex-colony Angola is so great that Celso Filipe of business daily *Jornal de Negócios* has declared, 'Portugal, which was the colonising country, has become colonised by Angolan investment'.

Who runs the institutions?

Penelope Curtis

Curtis has been director of Museu Calouste Gulbenkian since 2015, arriving from Tate Britain, London. Calouste Gulbenkian was an Armenian-born British businessman who died in Lisbon in 1955, having amassed a fortune in the oil industry. He was also a great art collector, accumulating over 6,400 pieces of art in his lifetime. Some of these works are on show at the institution, founded in Gulbenkian's will and housed in two brutalist buildings constructed in the lush surrounding of the city's Parque de Santa Gertrudes. The museum opened to the public in 1968. Curtis oversees temporary shows as well as the hanging of the collection. She seeks, she says, to widen the scope of the latter, 'approaching colonialism in a smart way, taking into account Angola and Mozambique, not to mention Brazil... to make it more representative and encompassing'. *ar*

João Ribas

The newly appointed director (formerly the deputy director and senior curator) steers a museum that can trace its history to the years immediately after the Carnation Revolution, when several new art movements began to gain traction in Portugal's second city. Recognising the need for a new museum to represent these movements, the state took ownership of the art deco Villa Serralves and its gardens in 1986. Architect Álvaro Siza Vieira was commissioned five years later to design a new purpose-built exhibition space on the grounds. The 13,000sqm building opened its doors, after some delay, in 1999. *ar*

As contemporary art works through a decolonisation of cultural production – attempting to reinterpret art's artefacts through a framework that does not prioritise Western narratives – Portugal, which relinquished its colonial empire after the overthrow of its dictatorship in 1974, finds itself in a unique position to participate in the conversation. The country's bridge to other continents is not just economic, but intellectual, and cultural. "We're connected to a part of the world that Europe isn't or has stopped being," notes Eduardo Guerra, one half of artist-duo Musa paradisiaca. "It's a good moment here, intellectually, to think a lot of discussions that are popping up in Europe – and this idea of the globalised world. There is this really complex national identity which has to be understood in our practices. This is a difference. We're also kind of discovering our own culture, possibly because the dictatorship produced such a well-articulated overview of it in the past."

While any alleged 'explosion' of contemporary art in Portugal is more aptly placed within a steady continuum of change, a remarkable number of galleries have opened in Lisbon in the last couple of years. These include commercial spaces launched by Portuguese dealers (such as Galeria Francisco Fino, whose artists range from the local, including Mariana Silva, to the likes of British artist Tris Vonna-Michell) and newly arrived international galleries (Madragoa, which represents younger artists such as Mexican Rodrigo Hernández and Portuguese Luís Lázaro Matos, both Lisbon-based). In May 2017 Rome outfit Monitor opened a space in the Rato district, the same month Madrid's Maisterravalbuena set up in the Alvalade area. In October 2016 Lisbon's newest museum, the privately funded MAAT, opened its glossy, Amanda Levete-designed building to a great many column inches.

"We've always felt that Lisbon, in terms of contemporary art, was very parochial, very self-centred, very self-absorbed," states curator Luís Silva, cofounder, alongside João Mourão, of Kunsthalle Lissabon. Speaking of the situation the pair sought to address, he describes the rigidity and finite scale of existing hierarchies during the mid-2000s as "a system basically committed to reproducing itself, without any external input. We felt we were that external input, even though we were local."

In 2009 Silva and Mourão founded their para-institution at 211 Avenida da Liberdade (one of the country's most expensive addresses). "We thought our generation was slightly different. Because all the jobs were taken, all the positions were filled, there was nothing for us to fight or compete for. So there was a sense of, 'Let's work together'. We'll never get to Serralves, we'll never get to Gulbenkian, so let's do our own thing, combine our resources and make something on the side." In 2006 six floors of the previously empty building, which belonged to the Espírito Santo bank, were turned over, for free, to artists and curators to use as studios and exhibition space. Tenants joining Kunsthalle included the artist-run galleries Parkour and Sala Bébé, and curator Margarida Mendes's discursive platform The Barber Shop, which offered everything from shows by recent graduates and exhibitions by international artists to an evening with philosopher Timothy Morton or a phantasmagorical seance with curator Raimundas Malašauskas.

If the building on Avenida da Liberdade incubated a younger generation of artists and curators than those who dominated Lisbon's museums, or brought them from elsewhere (The Barber Shop ran a residency programme that invited artists from across Europe), new institutions have been opening up Portugal's

art scene since the millennium. The 2007 opening of Museu Coleção Berardo prompted *The New York Times* to proclaim, 'Lisbon's Art Scene Comes Alive'. Containing a long-term loan of works from the collection of Joe Berardo dating from 1900 to the present to the state, the Museu Coleção Berardo occupies two storeys of the exhibition hall at the municipal Centro Cultural de Belém, tracing pretty much every Western art movement imaginable in chronological order. In 2016 it attracted over a million visitors. The inauguration of local commercial galleries Pedro Cera (1998), Filomena Soares (1999) and Cristina Guerra (2001) helped increase the visibility of Portuguese art through their presence at international fairs, as well as by bringing international artists to Lisbon (representing between them the likes of Tobias Rehberger, Shirin Neshat and Matt Mullican). Galeria Zé Dos Bois, the nonprofit cultural centre based in a 2,500sqm eighteenth-century palace in central Lisbon, has helped incubate many of the city's creative practices outside the market; its curator, Natxo Checa, exhibited artists Gusmão and Paiva from the 2001 dawn of their collaboration, and has produced five films by Portuguese-American director Gabriel Abrantes. During curator Miguel Wandschneider's notable term at Culturgest (2005–16), the exhibition space of bank Caixa Geral de Depósitos operated as the dynamic contemporary art institution Lisbon had lacked prior to 2000.

But for a truly civic embrace of culture, one should look north to smaller Porto. The galleries may be opening in Lisbon, due to the capital's concentration of wealth and work, but Porto's bourgeois mercantile past, alongside the resonance (in both buildings and fame) of its remarkable two Pritzker Architecture Prize winners – Álvaro Siza and Eduardo Souto de Moura – grants the cosy northern city a certain finesse, a very different physical and psychological topography. Since Rui Moreira's appointment as Porto's mayor in 2013, and alongside his cultural adjunct Paulo Cunha e Silva (who died in 2015), the place of the arts here has been further consolidated via the development of residencies and grants, an annual Forum of the Future, the reinvigoration of the city's municipal gallery.

Porto also hosts the Serralves Museum (designed by Siza and inaugurated in 1999), Portugal's most significant and influential contemporary art institution, which laid the foundations for a growing internationalism in the country's art scene through Vicente Todoli and João Fernandes's successive directorships. Porto's commercial old-school galleries include Galeria Pedro Oliveira, which following its 1990 inauguration mixed local artists with international figures (such as John Baldessari and Rita McBride) long before Portugal was *en vogue*. The space that's perhaps brought the most energetic recent programming to the city is the dishevelled Uma Certa Falta de Coerência (A Certain Lack of Coherence). Since 2008, a dilapidated, mildew-scented ground-floor shopfront has provided a venue for a rigorous sequence of low-fi exhibitions and projects put on by artists Mauro Cerqueira and André Sousa. These include showcasing artists across generations, from Ana Manso (b. 1984) to Silvestre Pestana (b. 1949); giving German artist Stephan Dilleuth his first retrospective; and inviting 'El Pirata', a street-drinking gallery neighbour with serious drug (and drawing) habits, to mount a solo show. Lowkey and oblique, Coerência is emblematic of the possibilities emboldened by life outside the spotlight. For Cerqueira, it's the ability to create a nonplace out of a specific place that has been key: "People always used to ask this question, 'Why are you in Porto? Why not London, Berlin or New York?' Now people have stopped asking the question,

Joe Berardo

Having left school at thirteen to work in a winery, the enterprising Berardo went on to become one of the wealthiest people in Portugal. He started collecting art and antiques during the 1980s (having collected stamps, postcards and matchboxes as a boy), and now boasts 40,000 objects in his inventory, of which over 1,800 are works of modern and contemporary art, the area in which his collecting is now exclusively focused. These works are shown, in chronological order, at Lisbon's Museu Coleção Berardo, as well as having been loaned to over 900 museums internationally. He says he collects not only because it is his passion but also because it is 'a human duty to preserve and maintain our cultural history'. *ar*

which is funny, you know... But for this project to exist for ten years, for it to still make sense, is because it is open, it has no frontiers. It's not Porto, it's not Portugal."

It's a sentiment that begins to unpack some of the complexities that accompany Portugal's current hype, asking how increased visibility – imbued by PR and encouraged by Antonio Costa's pro-enterprise socialist government – impacts upon art's production and display, and the place of local and national identities within this. Echoing Cerqueira, German-born curator Jürgen Bock, a Lisbon resident since the 1990s, describes the influential Maumaus independent study programme he runs as "a de-territorialised area". In 2009 Maumaus inaugurated its small Lumiar Cité exhibition space in a remote residential zone, choosing withdrawn independence over the noise of visibility. For Bock, being peripheral to the centre and establishment is a productive place of freedom. Noting mounting temptations, in a denser and louder art scene, for art workers to homogenise in order to ally themselves with international tendencies and markets, Bock advises retreat: "We stepped back under the radar. Today there is so much art going on in Lisbon that we need to protect the art from the art."

Lisbon gallerist Pedro Alfacinha balances optimism with similar worries at spectres of standardisation: "Now Portugal is in the club, there's a temptation for artists to normalise, instead of drifting – like Alexandre Estrela and Ana Jotta had been able to do," he states, speculating upon how a very lack of international attention might have helped forge the singularity of two of Portugal's most significant artist practices. "But the context is more exciting than it was. Before everyone wanted to get in bed with the Brazilians, now it's us. You go to Artissima and you've got five Portuguese galleries. That never happened before." But attention bites both ways; Alfacinha recently saw his three-year-old space threatened with closure as a result of Lisbon real-estate speculation. The deal faltered, but Alfacinha remains stoic: "If we can't afford to have a physical, stable place, we'll do things differently. We will be nomadic to play with the current situation, not against it. It's not even a compromise. Things are different. So we'll do things differently."

Property prices in the central Lisbon locale of Alfacinha's gallery went up 13 percent from 2016 to 2017. In the neighbouring borough of Santo António, Portugal's National Institute of Statistics observed a 46 percent increase in property prices in the same single year. With its original home on Avenida da Liberdade transformed into apartments, Kunsthalle Lissabon continues its activities in the basement of a housing block on the city's edge.

People are increasingly keen to inscribe upon Portugal's perceived blank page, to subtitle a country whose language is notoriously hard to translate. "Either you're able to instrumentalise it in your favour or you get instrumentalised by it," says Luís Silva of the country's present allure. "It's just a matter of knowing how to navigate. I think that's what we're trying to do. Being mildly sceptical about what's going on, but being very excited about the possibilities it opens." As Lisbon and Porto steer their course through their current limelight, it's comforting to remember Portugal's history of navigation. One hopes this might prepare the country for its ongoing journey, while the world discovers Portugal, and as Portugal continues to map its own future. **ar**

Pedro Gadanho

The electricity company EDP has long been a supporter of the arts, and in 2010 it decided to create MAAT – Museu de Arte, Arquitetura e Tecnologia – on the riverfront next to one of its former power stations (which has hosted the company's Museu da Electricidade since 1990). Gadanho, the former curator of architecture and design at MOMA, New York, was brought in as director in 2015 to oversee the 7,000sqm of new exhibition space, the Amanda Leveté-designed institution opening to the public a year later. 'This development coincides with the understanding of Lisbon as a safe haven,' Gadanho has said. 'It was this way in the Second World War, and again it happens. With terrorism and feelings of insecurity in other places, good food and a pleasant climate make Lisbon.' **ar**

Carlos Urroz

The director of Arco Madrid bills the art fair's two-year-old offshoot in Lisbon as 'boutique': in 2016 it featured 45 galleries from eight countries. The fair had been looking to expand into Portugal as early as 2012, but economic conditions both there and in Spain stalled the plan. As the Portuguese economy improved, however, Arco revisited the idea: 'Lisbon was our best option to expand', Urroz said last year. 'A lot of people are buying second houses there and the city receives wealthy visitors.' With Portugal's economy continuing to expand, this emblem of art market growth is likely to follow suit. **ar**