

Mónica de Miranda *Atlantica. Contemporary Art from Angola and its Diaspora*

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How to represent contemporary art from Angola today? *Atlantica. Contemporary Art from Angola and its Diaspora*, edited by the Angolan-Portuguese artist and researcher Mónica de Miranda, aims to answer this question by presenting the artistic practice of artists through visual essays where works come before words – a fitting choice for criticism on visual art. So, in a larger section of the book, images from a selection of artworks by fourteen artists, all born after Independence and active in this instant of the new millennium, are supported by a theoretical comment that is the result of a collaboration between each artist and theorist. This in-tandem work clearly stands out as the main methodological approach throughout the whole volume. These visual essays are followed by one interview and four more conventional academic essays, which trace comprehensive hermeneutic lines on contemporary art from Angola and discuss issues such as aesthetics and ethics, curatorship, historical and political context, diaspora, migration and gender.

The title *Atlantica*, whose specific meaning is explained in the editor's introduction, fixes the keystone of the volume around a notion of place that is not just a fixed point on a map, as it is also highlighted in the titles of the two forewords: "Global Nomads" by Denise Ferreira da Silva and "In the Flow. Towards a Critical Trans-National



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Perspective on Contemporary Angolan Art” by Paul Goodwin. In her introduction, Mónica de Miranda explains the various, sometimes controversial implications of such a notion of place, being an umbrella term under which so many and so different artistic experiences are brought together:

[t]he category of *Contemporary art from Angola* is a highly contested territory in and of itself - a question of Western reception rather than artistic intention, and one that has been thoroughly discussed in the making of this book.

Such a classification is open-ended, given the impossibility of encountering a singular definition for the much-varied artistic production at stake, the multiple stances and the distinct experiences of global circulation, migration or diaspora, as well as the mixed cultural upbringing of the many artists represented in this book. (13-14)

It is in the name of the archive - an ‘impulse’ identified by Hal Foster as being crucial in contemporary art - that the series of visual essays begins, with “Journal of Uncollectable Journeys. Edson Chagas’ *Found Not Taken* Series and Other Works” by Ana Balona de Oliveira. Her text focuses on the abstract and minimalist concept of space at the core of Chagas’s photographic work, which invites the observer to re-signify the urban chaos of the cities where he has lived or worked: Newport, London, Luanda, but also Venice, where the Angolan pavilion that exposed his *Found Not Taken* series won the Golden Lion in 2013. The archive is also the impulse that inspires the work of Délio Jasse and Januário Jano, as explored by Nancy Dantas in her essay “A Sliver, of a Sliver, of a Sliver” and by Maria-Gracia Latedjou in “*Ambundulando*. Weaving Biographies Over a Map of Memories”. Though these artists’ attention is more literally concentrated on time, Jasse’s practice, in particular, recalls Chagas’s as he, too, moves and relocates ‘discarded debris’ - in his case not “abandoned banal objects [...] against the backdrop of urban façades” (25), but “leftovers of history [...] that survive to delight us at flea markets” (94) in the form of album photographs, postcards, old identity documents, which the artist, through a process of superimposition, turns into not-as-innocent signs of the colonial past. In their turn, Jano’s photos, videos, and installations reflect upon the intersections between tradition and modernity (at the collective, community level) and memory and identity (at the individual level).

Back to the notion of place (but also of space) that innervates the whole volume, the practice of three other artists is particularly striking. In “Printing Images and Imprinting Cities. Space and Subjectivity in Ihosvanny’s work”, Afonso Dias Ramos deeply dives into this self-taught artist’s “investigation into lived experience and built en-

vironment in Luanda" (66), which he transforms into mixed media, non-figurative projects between whose lines the contradictions of the contemporary capital of Angola can be read. For their possible and desirable developments, it is worth mentioning the inter-artistic suggestions made by Ramos in comparing Ondjaki's novel *Os transparentes* (Transparent City) with Ihosvanny's exhibition *Desafectados* (2016). Their same setting, the Maianga neighbourhood, is also shared by *Workshop Maianga Mutamba* (2015), one of Francisco Vidal's works, which are the subject of the essay "Container Contained" by Marta Jecu. In her analysis, she highlights the painting-architecture feature of Vidal's installations, based on a technique that combines oil painting with different supports, such as joint machetes or manually made boxes. Finally, "Panoramic in Moving Fragments, or Mónica De Miranda's Twin Visions of (Un)Belonging", by Ana Balona de Oliveira, explores the theme of diaspora and diasporic identity construction throughout Miranda's non-narrative photographic works, particularly those that reverberate Angola's colonial and socialist past, such as *Hotel Globo* (2014-15), *Hotel Panorama* (2017), *Cinema Karl Marx* (2017) and *When Words Escape, Flowers Speak* (2017).

The most renowned and recognised artists of Angolan scene are a well-identifiable presence among the visual essays (even if it is impossible not to notice at least one absence, Nástio Mosquito): it is the case of Kiluanji Kia Henda, defined as a "taxidermist of human nature" in the text of the same title by Bruno Leitão, and Yonamine, whose work and the significance of ruins in it are explored by Paula Nascimento in "Between Destruction and the Creation of New Worlds". Leitão immediately links Henda's composite, complex, metaphorical, and intertextual works to the artist's life, which is in turn directly connected to the history of his home country. This characteristic can be seen since his very first photographs, aimed at documenting "the harsh reality of the aftermath of civil war" (40), and in the successive directions taken by his artistic practice, for example in the installation *Icarus 13* (2007-08), in the *tableau vivant* series of *Redefining the power* (2012) and in the video *Havemos de voltar* (2017). There is a generational bond shared by Kiluanji Kia Henda and Yonamine: at the turn of the twenty-first century, they were both part of *Movimento Os Nacionalistas*,

a group of young artists who worked collectively in downtown Luanda, occupying at times the UNAP [União Nacional dos Artistas Plásticos, the Angolan National Union of Artists] building and the Elinga Theatre, both important cultural symbols of the artistic scene in Angola. (194)

Being, at the time, at the margins of the national cultural scene but having soon become the most exuberant and prominent representa-

tives of their generation, the two artists also share a distinctive, ironic trait in their works. The disruptive, even destructive character of Yonamine's practice stretches this irony to the limits of sarcasm, particularly evident in his works' titles - among them *Tuga suave* (2008), the astonishing *Pão nosso de cada dia* (2016), *Roupa suja lava-se em casa* (2018) -, which often play with the ambiguities and polysemy of language that result further amplified by the evocative power of images, thus creating a highly personal "visual lexicon" (194).

On a completely different tone we should read the works of Keyezua, Alice Marcelino and Alida Rodrigues. In "Palimpsestic Images in the Work of Keyezua", Raquel Schefer points out the intense dialogue with and the profound review of European artistic forms and canon that the artist undertakes, through photographic series in which the (often female) body is at the core and in relation with the other (at once material, visual and symbolic) elements of the composition such as the landscape, masks, ink. The body and identity politics thus enacted in Keyezua's practice is even more evident in Marcelino's *Kindumba* series (2015), upon which Ashleigh M. Barice reflects in her "Political Matter". More precisely, it is the politics of black hair that is at stake here, in its multiple implications and "transition from the biological into the political" (115) as they have been traced by a substantial genealogy of theoretical and fictional contributions, which count among them bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Cheryl Thompson, Chris Rock, Kathleen Cleaver and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie - even if a mention to Grada Kilomba and Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida is missing. "*Les Fleurs Sauvages*. Alida Rodrigues: Portraying the Absent" by Pontus Kyander allows us to connect Rodrigues's practice both to Jasse's reinterpretation of the colonial photographic archive and to Keyezua's challenge to Western art techniques, in her recovery and remaking of vintage photographs and colonial-era postcards.

The visual essays devoted to the works of Binelde Hyrcan, Ana Silva and Grada Kilomba (virtually) close this section of the volume. In "The Return is Certain", Ana Cristina Cachola describes the various material forms and not explicitly political and social subjects in which the transmedia methods used by Hyrcan materialise. The vivid performativity and imagetic optimism of his approach are exemplified by the installation *The King is Dead, Vive le Roi* (2017), with its mockery of power. Negarra A. Kudumu focuses on 'feeling', not so much as a concept, but rather a force to read Silva's delicate works, in which the artist's diasporic experience is revealed:

Silva's art works constitute a Third Space. Rather than asserting that an Angolan/African, or Portuguese/European identity is superior, these identities interact and create new opportunities for understanding the entanglement of time and geography, for achieving new meaning. [...]

The Third Space comes to life in Silva's artworks via the use of materials, namely the delicate Portuguese lace. The lace in and of itself is a multi-layered narrative that tells the storied history of Portugal's colonization in the world. (143)

Finally, "We Need New Tongues" by Gabi Ngcobo briefly presents Grada Kilomba's practice as transmedial, aimed to "open up yet unknown avenues for the process of decolonisation" (169) and always having as its starting point words as constituents of languages and, in their collective manifestation, as texts. One such example of the derivative character of Kilomba's visual work is the installation *Plantation Memories* at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg (2018), a new form that her acclaimed book *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism* took, ten years after its first publication.

After the discussion of Paul Goodwin with Paula Nascimento and André Cunha about "Curating in Angola at Home and Abroad", in which challenges and opportunities of curatorship in the African country are debated (emergence of the 'scene', art infrastructure, artist-led initiatives, publishing), the last thirty pages of the volume somewhat wrap up all the hints and tracks dropped and unravelled in the previous two hundred. In "Medium and Media in Angola. Expressive Practices in Context", Delinda Collier and Marissa J. Moorman trace back some features of the Angolan artistic environment, starting from the anti-colonial struggle of the 1960s, through the socialist narratives developed during the first decades after independence, and up to the newest directions – and one often referred to also in other essays is *Fuckin' Globo* – taken not only by visual artists but also writers, musicians and filmmakers after the end of the civil war in 2002. Nadine Siegert, in "Utopia, Dystopia, Neo-Utopia. Three Generations of Contemporary Artists in Angola", articulates the same time span around the critical lenses of the opposition between (anti-colonial and socialist) utopia and dystopia (materialised in the twenty-seven-year long civil war), synthesised by a renovated utopian stance aimed at building the post-war future by revisiting the revolutionary past. To these historical overviews, Adriano Mingue, in his "*A luta continua*. The Struggle Continues – Current Creative Flows, and Aesthetic and Political Tensions in Angola", adds a further point of view on the diasporic perspective, relating it to the international character of art circuits, and reaffirms the interest and necessity of the current creative flows "because they help redefine other forms of historical and social awareness" (221). The final essay, "Contemporary Artistic Practices from Angola. The Ethics, Politics and Aesthetics of Diaspora, Migration and Gender" by Ana Balona de Oliveira, sums up the common threads that bond the different artists and artistic practices discussed in the volume.

Atlantica. Contemporary Art from Angola and its Diaspora, consistent with editorial choices and approaches, undoubtedly answers the opening question and fulfils the aim of comprehensively representing contemporary art from Angola today. The variety of the theorists' contributions selected to construct such a multifaceted yet (almost) complete picture, besides giving an account of the ever-expanding, geographically diverse community of specialists interested "in what is happening in Angola" (219), as the native specialist Adriano Mingue says, is another credit of the volume, as it opens up the possibilities for future research and in-depth analysis in several different directions. Last but not least, the excellence of the editorial product, with the high quality of the artworks reproduced in it, which Lisbon-based Hangar - Centro de Investigação Artística (Centre for Artistic Research) was responsible for, turns the book into an invaluable reference for the studies of art in and from Angola.