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**The Conservator as a Performer**

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
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## **The Conservator as a Performer**

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### **Abstract**

It is impossible to fully understand the conservation of contemporary art without considering the subjectivity on the conservator's actions. This paper acknowledges the conservator as a performer. To explore this concept, several case-studies of the Portuguese artist Francisco Tropa are presented.

Francisco Tropa has been gaining recognition, especially with his nomination as the Portuguese ambassador to the 2011 Venice Biennale. The case-studies included in this paper are installations with strong performative features. This artist's oeuvre brings together time, space and various media, defining four main authorities as performers: the artist, the actor, the spectator and the conservator. While the artist plays himself a performance, the actor ends up by following the artist's guidelines. Spectators are invited to an active participation, thus becoming co-creators of meaning. Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, the conservator, while re-installing the works, becomes a creator, a performer. In this perspective, unlike the traditional view of conservation, that freezes artworks in a single state, a dynamic view is suggested, one that considers an artwork's trajectory, where change is desired and expected as part of the work itself.

The conservator has a pivotal role on those changes.

Subjectivity is inherent to the process and contributes to the precarious nature intrinsic to any performative action. Such observations impose the need to submit the conservator's role to critical review.

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## Introduction

Despite the dematerialisation of the art object in the 1960's, the doctrines that guide the practice of conservation are still not fully adapted to the contemporary art reality (Laurenson, 2006). This is especially critical when it applies to complex artworks, such as performance art, which challenge the perennial character of traditional objects.

Similar problems are raised by installation artworks, as they share with performance art the intention 'to be a process or action' (Jadzinska, 2011: 21).

The material-based conservation practice (i.e. classical conservation) was theorized by the conservator Cesare Brandi in the 1960's, around the concepts of originality and authenticity, arguing that the conservation's primary scope should be the physical, aesthetic and historical integrity of a given object. Salvador Muñoz Viñas (2005) expressed reservations to this theory by stating that despite the fact that scientific conservation may allow a higher objectivity, one cannot rely only on the materiality of the works to properly conserve them (Muñoz Viñas, 2005).

Classical conservations theories cannot be applied to performance art due to the immaterial nature of the artwork itself. Moreover, the application of such theories to performance or installation art would actually go against very core purpose of the artwork and its creative process which is, by nature and intention of the artist, precarious, ephemeral and dynamic - purposely designed to be reinterpreted with each presentation or even with each individual spectator. Performance is intrinsically adverse to material maintenance and to commodity. Clearly, given the performance's character of uniqueness and transience, freezing it in a given timeframe would go against everything it stands for. Eleonora Fabião has stated this clearly in *Precarious, Precarious, Precarious*: 'How can we think about performance in historical terms, when the archive cannot capture and store the live event?' (Fabião, 2008: 23).

The answer to this question certainly requires a broad and deep interdisciplinary approach to contemporary theories of conservation. This new interdisciplinary view was consolidated by the the milestone thesis of the *communicative turn*, theorized by Salvador Muñoz Viñas in his *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* (Muñoz Viñas, 2005). In this approach, he suggests a shift from the traditional theory of conservation, based on the material properties of an object, to a contemporary theory of conservation that acknowledges and incorporates perspectives (Muñoz Viñas, 2005).

Previously, in 1999, Renée van de Vall had already suggested an Aristotelian approach when dealing with contemporary artworks, based on jurisprudence, where intelligibility is established on a casuistic perspective. This concept opposes the Platonic paradigm, based on general, 'universal and unshakable principles' as those adopted by classical theories of conservation (van de Vall, 2005: 197). Indeed, this author already claims that the conservator to be a manager of change, whose main responsible lies in deciding the amount and quality of change that is acceptable.

Vivian van Saaze argues that installation art stretches the limits of the 'long-accepted certainties' in conservation theory, imposing to the contemporary art conservator the need to let such certainties to fall apart, thus giving birth to a creative way to preserve that kind of artworks. Structuring the basis of this complex conservation demands the reexamination of several common procedures. One of the highlights of this re-examination is the urge to accommodate the transient and the ephemeral nature of installations, understanding and accepting that such artworks do not exist in a single state, but rather undertake a trajectory. That trajectory is not a straight line, but a route

full of variations and options (van de Vall *et al*, 2011; van Saaze, 2009). In fact, a work does not necessarily stop changing when it enters a museum collection. When installations are in storage, they remain fragmented, only turning into artworks when re-installed or displayed. This means that their preservation depends on re-installation, *performed* by the conservator according to a set of instructions given by the artist (van de Vall *et al*, 2011). Therefore, preservation of installations “may allow for the idea that each rendition or “performance” of a piece may be different.’ (Real, 2001: 215). In this perspective, it is the conservators' role to embrace the transitory, and make the conservation action a dynamic one, shaping itself to the particularities that the artwork offers and demands. Thus, the conservator is defined by van Saaze (2009) as an *actant*: a word meant to reflect the conservator as someone/something that may change an artworks' trajectory, even if within limits (van Saaze, 2009). This new perspective is full of challenges. In this paper we especially address the question: how does the conservator preserve artworks that are performance dependent, and therefore, cannot be capture or stored? How does he manage the inherent change? In the pursuit of an answer, Francisco Tropa's artworks are used as case-studies as we depart from the following statement by Fabião in searching for a new approach:

*'As performance and body both keep recalling, there is no stable ground, no static archive, no frozen document, no full and homogeneous subject – one cannot repeat a move but only make it over, make it other while being permanently remade by it. In the same way, performances and bodies cannot be historically reproduced but only historiographically presented in and as language.'* (Fabião, 2008: 48)

### **Francisco Tropa and his art**

Francisco Tropa (b.1968, Lisbon) is currently considered one of the most important Portuguese artists of his generation. Although he has been exhibiting since the late 80's, it was in the 90's that he gained recognition for his work, mainly through his participation with Lourdes Castro in the 24<sup>th</sup> Biennial of São Paulo (1998) (Melo, 2007). He also participated in the 2003 Venice Biennial and was the official Portuguese ambassador to the 2011 Venice Biennial, where he presented *Scenario*.

Since the beginning of his career, Francisco Tropa has consistently dedicated himself to a reflection about the role of the artist and the nature of the creative process (Mah, 2011). In this process, he deliberately avoids the use of a single medium or technique, and uses a variety of materials and techniques. His materials include sand, water, sound, wood, stone, metal, dust, flies, snails, light, shadow, etc., and the techniques vary from drawing, sculpture, photography, film, slide projection, engraving, installations, to performance, and so on (Melo, 2007). All these elements are articulated in a specific time and space, exploring 'the enigmatic phenomenological field of sensitive experiences, while turning themselves into an observatory of artistic creation' in its connections to nature and to life (Marques, 2002:122).

Notably, his artworks evoke moments, stories, situations or references that frequently imply the construction of complex visual devices, strongly allegorical, which require, from the spectator, an endless web of interpretations (Marques, 2002). The artist stated that he only creates 'empty containers' designed to be filled by the spectator's own experiences. Tropa describes his works as indecipherable enigmas, whose interpretation drives the viewers through an immensity of different and unpredictable perspectives.

Melo (2007: 210) stated that Tropa's, 'works, are, before all, *situations in process* which achieve their own sense through perception and experience.'. Plus, his artworks exist



somewhere between performance and installation, in which the artist invites the spectator to interact and thus become part of artwork (Melo, 2007).

### ***Fake Mount (1997/2001)***

Francisco Tropa's *Fake Mount* has been in permanent exhibition at Serralves Foundation Park since 2001 (*vide* Figure 1). This artwork corresponds to the re-materialization of the *Fake Mount* previously presented in the *Casalinho* project<sup>1</sup>. In this latter project Francisco Tropa presented sequentially, but without a strict timetable, three models based on the same construction in pine wood, accompanied by the permanent exhibition of another one – *Fake Mount* – representing a false land elevation south-west of the others.

Climbing to the small elevation, visitors can observe the landscape through a window on the top of it, although landscape actually lies on their back. This experience is produced by means of a mirror effect similar to that of reflex camera mechanism, based on the concept of Claude Lorraine's mirror (Sardo, 2008). In other words, this artwork presents a framework of the landscape chosen by the artist and perceived by the spectator through a window (Silvério, 2008).

This installation provides spectators with the opportunity to go through a myriad of different experiences. Francisco Tropa deliberately uses an analogy to photography as an enigmatic metaphor of the creative process in its relation to nature and to life. One may try to experience the framed image chosen by the artist, but it doesn't exist. Depending on the height of the viewer the landscape perceived is always different. On the other hand, the landscape is always changing too. In a word, as nature and life, the artwork also lives. In addition, as shown by Figure 1, this installation is made not only of an iron trapezoidal prism and a mirror but also by sand. So, it requires some maintenance. When the trapezoidal prism starts to be revealed under the sand, the conservator has to have it covered again to maintain the false land elevation. Moreover, the mirror has also to be cleaned often.

All those actions and the spectator's role are vibrant manifestations of this mount's life, which is always changing due to its performative features. Therefore, this installation is acquiring new meanings and becoming an even more indecipherable enigma through the years.

### ***Une table qui aiguisera votre appétit - le poids poli (2003)***

With the conclusion of the *Casalinho* project, Francisco Tropa started working on another major project: *L'Orage*<sup>2</sup>, exhibited at Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's Centro de Arte Moderna (CAM, 2003)

The spectator was invited to construct a narrative through four spaces built in the museum. Each space represented different rooms on different floors of an imaginary building, titled: *r/c, je connais tous les fromages; 1<sup>st</sup> pelicano; 2<sup>nd</sup> FC; and 3<sup>rd</sup> tea box* (CAM, 2003). In the ground floor it was possible to observe *Une table qui aiguisera votre appétit – le poids poli*, a table and a hanging stool connected to it by a metal profile supported on a bronze spike.

*Une table qui aiguisera votre appétit – le poids poli* (*vide* Figure 2), became an autonomous artwork after its exhibition in *L'Orage*. The case study presented is a table with a tablecloth, a bottle and a glass with wine, plates, a bowl, a knife, cheeses, several garlic heads, bay leaves a napkin, apples, grapes and pepper corns. Connected to the table is the hanging stool, on which a set of weights are displayed. Thus, spectators are invited to reflect on their perception of themselves, through a dead nature. In fact, the current case study, already represents a version different from the one presented on that event. Such differences are, themselves, part of the artwork as evidences of the “alive” character of Francisco Tropa's *oeuvre*. However, they retain enough similarity to allow both to represent an observatory of human daily life,

1 For more information regarding *Casalinho* project, please consult Tropa, F. (1998). [*Francisco Tropa*]. Porto: Serralves Foundation, Teatro Nacional de S. João.

2 For more information regarding *L'Orage*, please consult Molder, J. & da Fonseca, C. S. (2003). *L'Orage*. Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

portrayed here by a scenario of balance and unbalance. This installation has been exhibited several times, since being purchased by Caixa Geral de Depósitos Foundation – Culturgest in 2005. For each re-installation, organic materials have to be replaced. Also, during the exhibition, wine, apples, cheeses, grapes and pepper have to be renewed by the conservator when they present signs of deterioration.

Therefore, due to its performative features, resembling *Fake Mount*, this is a living work, that ages, changes and evolves. In such cases, the role of conservation also changes, its focus shifting from materiality to immateriality, allowing the original material to perish in order to preserve the intangible features of the artwork.

### **The artist, the actors and the spectators as performers**

Francisco Tropa's works present in museum collections are part of his major projects: *Casalinho*, *L'Orage* and *The Assembly of Euclid* projects, incorporating performances conducted by the artist, actors and, finally, spectators.

As usual in performance art, the artist takes on the role of performer. In one of such cases, he became a performer by shooting three arrows in *Casalinho* project.

In *L'Orage*, the performance is played by actors in the second space of the installation. Within a built scenario, a performance between a solicitor and a lurking machinist starts. The female solicitor is seated on a chair and bent over a writing desk on a slant, signing with a pantograph. The machinist is intercepting her action with a set of spotlights. These actors are absolutely essential for the meaning of this space, implying a message of balance and unbalance: while the solicitor does a repetitive and rehearsed action and stands on a *plateau* (inviting the spectator to assume its role in the audience), the machinist tries to disrupt her action while standing on another plan. Although their performance is defined by the artist's guidelines, where he explains the movements and positions intended, subjectivity and nuance is present in every action, every movement or every expression, and therefore, every performance is unique.

The spectators' role has been considered indispensable for the construction and understanding of contemporary art. Following Yves Michaud's perspective, artworks and particularly installations and performances, remain in evanescence, 'gaseous state' until they are experienced by the spectator (Michaud, 2011). This fact becomes especially tangible in installation art where the subject needs to enter the artwork to make it exist.

In his works, Francisco Tropa actually considers the spectators reception as part of the construction of the artwork's meaning. In Abulad's perspective, interpretation means a collision between the author and the Other (Abulad, 2007). In this particular case, horizons collide when spectators enter Francisco Tropa's works and change them with their experience. Thus, regarding the presented case-studies, it is possible to consider that the spectator assumes the role of performer when he accepts the invitation to climb the *Fake Mount*, or to experiment any of the actions described above.

### **The conservator as a performer**

Following this line of thought, the fourth entity intervening in artwork's trajectory is the conservator. This authority has already been considered as an 'interpreter and executer' in contemporary art conservation, (Jadzinska, 2011: 28). Departing from Fabião's perspective of historiographic presentation, to argue that the conservator may be understood as a performer (Fabião, 2008).

Performance art 'has been considered as a way of bringing to life the many formal and conceptual ideas on which the making of art is based' and at the same time, 'has become a catch-all for live presentations of all kinds' (Goldberg, 2001: 7, 226) In this light, the conservator can be understood as a performer as he/she reinstalls and documents the works as

a method for its preservation. Indeed, when presenting the artworks historiographically, the conservator has to accept, explore and gauge his/her subjectiveness as an *actant subject*.

Opposed to historical reproductions, which rely primarily on memory, historiographical presentations imply a critical perspective, a predominant focus on meaning and interpretation rather than on materiality, while retaining methodological support. In fact, these characteristics and competencies are similar to those used by conservators when producing documentation about contemporary artworks. In this process they are historiographers in as much as they exert critical judgment to select among the available sources of information and also to validate them.

Similarly, it may be argued that while *presenting* or *exhibiting* the works, conservators engage in the reinterpretation of the historiography about the artworks. In other words, the reinstallation of artworks according to produced documentation will, undoubtedly and intrinsically, be bound to the conservator's subjectivity. Consequently, the works will be presented *as language* (by documentation) and *in language* (with their presentation). This conceptual framework, where the conservator has to assume the subjectivity of his/her performance, challenges or even opposes the assumption of the conservator as neutral.

The concept of historical reproduction, as applied to other conservation fields, could never find appropriate expression in the conservation of performance or installations artworks. *Reproducibility* is basically dependent on the ability to copy something or, at least, preserving it without change (*vide* Fabião, 2008). Evidently, in performance, no gesture, no shape, no relative position or circumstances are exactly reproducible. This is also true for installation art. This ultimately means that they can only be presented as a different version of the original action.

This *presentation-in-and-as-language paradigm* is observed in conservation practice in various ways (*vide* Fabião, 2008). Someone that reinstalls an artwork based on someone else's produced documentation will, most certainly, perform an action with a different outcome than the one imagined by the former conservator. Obviously, each nuance that is introduced to the action will cause a different result and, consequently, a different version of the installation. In every (subjective even if informed) choice that the conservator makes, a different detail will appear and, obviously, a different result is to be expected. In other words, accepting that a conservation action is subjective and contextual, implies acknowledging that it will always result in variable impacts upon the action, event, process or performance, it is meant to conserve.

Cristina Oliveira<sup>1</sup> describes such an experience with *O Canavial: memória metamorfose de um corpo ausente* (1968), by the portuguese artist Alberto Carneiro, an installation composed of several canes, producing a cane field where the spectator should stroll. She stated that the outcome was different each time the artwork was installed by her, despite strictly following the same documentation.

Regarding Francisco Tropa's works, it is interesting to note the remarkable changes they went through over the years. In *Une table qui aiguisera votre appétit - le poids poli* (*vide* Figure 2), for example, freedom is clearly given by the artist to the conservator to choose the number of apples, cheese pieces and garlic heads or, even, to withdraw the napkin. Although those shifts change the materiality of the work, one cannot suggest that there is a significant impact upon the artist's intention of representing everyday life or the dichotomy between balance and unbalance.

This understanding of the conservator as a performer is clear in the reinstallation of Tropa's artworks in temporary exhibitions, but it is not absent when considering his works in permanent exhibition. Taking into account *Fake Mount's* case (*vide* Figure 1), it is obvious that the spectator's perception of the work is inevitably related to the environment. In this case, while maintaining the work, it is up to the conservator to decide the amount of soil that stands onto the fake mount. This performance will influence the spectator's experience while climbing the mount and looking into the framework.

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1 Marçal & Nogueira (2012). *Interview with Cristina Oliveira at March 15<sup>th</sup>*, FCT-UNL.

In conclusion, by presenting the works historiographically, the conservator is a historiographer while producing documentation and a performer while presenting and reinstalling the works. This acknowledgement transforms the practice of conservation by endowing it with the liberty to perform unique and unrepeatable acts which may have a significant impact upon the artworks' outcome.

### Further Remarks

This analysis, by underlining the performative nature of the conservator's actions, stressed the need for a study looking at the spectator's role and perception in artworks with performative features. In fact, there are few studies dedicated to this essential element – the one that ultimately performs and gives meaning to the artwork by experimenting it. In further research, it would be of value to understand the perception of the spectator and explore how and to what extent it is changed by different conservation decisions.

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**Illustration credits**

Figure 1: © Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto

Figure 1.2: *Fake Mount* (detail)



Figure 2: © Caixa Geral de Depósitos Foundation's – Culturgest, Lisbon.

Figure 2.1: *Une table qui aiguisera votre appétit – le poids poli*



Figure 2.2: *Une table qui aiguisera votre appétit – le poids poli* (detail)



Figure 2.3: *Une table qui aiguisera votre appétit – le poids poli* (detail)

