

Organization, Engagement, Coloniality. *Hangar: Centro de Investigações Artísticas* in Lisbon.

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the work of *Hangar. Centro de Investigação Artística*, the first artist-managed space in Portugal dealing with postcolonial issues and African art. Through a revision of *Hangar's* activities, I aim to develop a critical background to examine how African art has been displayed and consumed in Portugal, in relation with the process of production of the country's contradictory postcolonial image. The emergence of *Hangar* and the development of long-term relations both with emergent artists born in Africa and with the local community of Afro-descendants implies, I suggest, a new and more fructiferous approach to that matter. It also brings new tools for artists and cultural agents to strengthen their agency against the forces of touristification and commoditization that Lisbon and contemporary art from the African countries of Portuguese Language are respectively experiencing. The text is followed by a short interview with *Hangar's* founders and directors Bruno Leitão and Mónica de Miranda.

Portugal became a common venue for African artists within the last decades of the 20th Century, especially for those coming from the PALOPS (Países Africanos de Língua Portuguesa). Echoing the interest of biennials and major art centers, the national art institutions, especially those located in Lisbon, organized or hosted several large-scale exhibitions, including major curatorial projects and solo exhibitions of a wide variety of well-known and up-to-coming artists from the continent¹. A special—and widely problematic—

¹ Among those we can mention *Um oceano inteiro para nadar* (2000) *Looking both Ways: Das esquinas do olhar* (2005); *Réplica e Rebeldia* (2006); *De Malangatana a Pedro Cabrita Reis* (2009); *Fronteiras* (2010) ou *Artistas Comprometidos? Talvez* (2014). For a critique of this process, see Fernandes Dias (2006); Costa Dias (2009). Concerning individual exhibitions, we can mention

focus on the former colonial territories of Angola, Cape Verde, Mozambique and São Tomé presided that process. The presence of African art within Portuguese cultural and exhibitional landscape is connected with the process of redefinition of Portuguese postcolonial identity. In some way, then, the increasing numbers of cultural and artistic events related to Africa arises as a response of the present predicament of the Portuguese present, marked by the integration to the European Union, the country's modernization and the configuration of a multicultural and multiracial citizenry. Those projects, of course, are not exempt of contradictions: on the one hand, there is a growing interest in approaching critically the cultural predicament engaging with Portugal's postcolonial geopolitics (see Castelo 1998; Bastos et al. 2002; Vale de Almeida 2000, 2006, Ribeiro Sanches 2006 Ribeiro Sanches et al. 2011, Sousa Santos 1993, 2002); on the other, at the same time, the cultural manifestations produced within the African continent and those linked to African migration in Portugal have been commoditized and spectacularized, transforming Lisbon into a major cultural center of the "Lusophone" Atlantic.

When confronting the project that I briefly summarized above, some considerations need to be made on what art is concerned. First, there has been a disparity between the display and the criticism of artistic manifestations, a phenomenon that is increasingly changing, particularly due to the labor of young researchers. The number of resources dealing with "Lusophone" African art is, then, growing at the same time that some artists and locations receive more and more critical attention². Secondly, the exhibitional dynamics focusing on African art have largely misrepresented and ignored Afro-descendant populations, creating a gap between "modern" artworks and visual discourses oriented to an international and artistic consumption and dissemination, and the local reality and cultural manifestations of migrant populations. Related to that, the *loci* of African cultural and curatorial practices arise as a central point of intersection and contrast between national expectations, postcolonial anxieties and transnational fluxes, in which audiences and territorial demarcations are very much crisscrossing class and cultural difference.

the names of Pieter Hugo, Ângela Ferreira, António Ole, Kiluanji Kia Henda or Renée Green. See Rosengarten 1998, Balona de Oliveira 2016.

² The *ArtAfrica* project (<http://artafrika.lettras.ulisboa.pt/pt/>) developed in the early 2000s can be mentioned as a precursor of the initiatives arising in the last years. It systematically covers the entire scope of the African countries of Portuguese language. Alda Costa (2013) is author of the most exhaustive monograph on the matter, lacking similar essays for the other countries. The bibliography on visual arts is, in any case, substantially smaller than the existent on music or literature.

Created in 2015, *Hangar. Centro de Investigação Artística* arose partially as a response to that predicament. *Hangar* is presented as a space of interaction, especially interested in “Encourag[ing] artistic interaction and exploration of the urban environment especially in the contexts of memory, space and people.”³ It is the result of the collaboration between the Luso-Angolan artist Mónica de Miranda, the Portuguese curator Bruno Leitão and the cultural managers Andreia Páscoa and Ana de Almeida. A program for local exchanges supported by the Lisbon City Council provided the initial input for the creation of the project, which later on consolidated a network of local and international artistic and non-artistic supporters and partnerships, including the University of Lisbon, Gaswork, the Triangle Network and local cultural associations⁴. The project is located in the vibrant neighborhood of Graça⁵, a traditional quarter that is now experiencing a rapid process of gentrification and becoming a touristic and cultural destination that several artistic and cultural initiatives are trying to contest and subvert. The functioning of *Hangar* is directly connected to that process: the center strives for developing a strong connection with local audiences, to encourage artistic exchanges with non-European artists and curators, and to develop an ongoing cultural and research program engaging multiple agents. A blackboard located at the entrance of the three-floors building announces the quase-dialy programming of the space. That includes theory and practice-base workshops, performances, video screenings, funaná or batouk concerts, potlucks or studio visits. The audiences gathered in those events vary, ranging from young local and international creatives to Graça residents. Some of those activities also contribute to the project funding; for instance, some of the studios are rent to guests and visiting artists. Those dynamics of the studio reveal well some of the trickier issues *Hangar* and other similar Portuguese process-oriented creative associations have to deal with.

Hangar focuses on postcolonial and diasporic issues concerning several geographies. However, the center has had a special attention for African artists. The engagement of *Hangar* with Africa is framed through two main levels: the center’s programming, and the establishment of partnerships with and the

³ <http://www.hangar.com.pt/en/about/>

⁴ Among them we can mention the University of Lisbon, the publishing house Orfeu Negro or Artería: Arquitectura e Reabilitação Urbana.

⁵ Located on top of Mouraria and the Lisbon castle, Graça is actually part of the *Freguesia* (territorial demarcation) *de São Vicente*. The quarter is known for keeping a big number of local dwellers, and for being close to the areas of Martim Moniz and Intendente, two major areas inhabited by migrants.

counseling of already existing or emerging independent, artist-managed spaces in the continent. Concerning the first level, *Hangar* has pioneered a comprehensive, non-exhibition-based approach to African creativity, encouraging long-term collaborations and in-depth research. Many of the activities involving African artists possess a lower profile than that of large-scale, collective shows that can be found in museums and biennials. For example, long-term research residencies, interaction with several “local” communities or critical conversations and exchanges with curators, fellow-artists and thinkers can be mentioned in this regard. Irineu Destourelles from Cape Verde, René Tavares from São Tomé, Edson Chagas from Angola or Eurídice Kala and Mário Macilau from Mozambique are among the “Lusophone” artists who developed residencies in *Hangar*, employing that time not only for the preparation of exhibitions and the production of work, but also for engaging with Lisbon’s history and present and interacting with the dwellers and visitors of *Graça*. This does not always happen, being that link dependent of the artist’s interest and the kind of research activity she intends to develop.

In any case, the dynamics included in the *Hangar* programming represent a shift concerning the ways Portuguese creative projects and cultural institutions engage with contemporary African artistic practices. Those are integrated, without being “ghettoized”, into a broader program, escaping curatorial classification and thematization. Furthermore, if we look at the artist choice, we will see how young and relatively unknown names abound over artists with an already successful international career. Third, the diversification of practices beyond exhibitional and commercial interests make possible the interaction with non-artistic local audiences. Having said that, it is also necessary to mention that those interactions are also embedded within the spatial logic of accessibility and visibility fragmenting and organizing Lisbon’s cultural landscape. Those points by no means imply, then, that *Hangar*’s interest in African art is disconnected to the general predicament I outlined at the beginning of this text; nevertheless, they have originated an unprecedented phenomenon, transforming Portugal’s curatorial and cultural arenas.

In the following conversation I intended to discuss with the founders of *Hangar* some of the issues outlined in the previous text, paying special attention at the center’s interest in “Lusophone” African art. The reason for juxtaposing the previous insights with this group conversation has to do with my own relation with *Hangar*. Since its creation I have collaborated regularly with

Hangar, both giving talks and participating in seminars and roundtables, and also attending performances and concerts. Through this group interview, my interest is to analyze how *Hangar's* founders see their position regarding the context of Lisbon and regarding a broader transnational "Lusophone" framework.

Carlos Garrido What are the reasons behind the creation of Hangar? Which needs do you intend to fulfill?

Bruno Leitão The Hangar arose in response to different wills, but above all because of the need of sitting on the same table artists, curators and researchers. This is our base, running through all Hangar's activities. Researchers work in a particular way, curators too, they have another criterion in many issues such as the selection of artists, and those have their own interest in play. We wanted to put those three spheres together. Furthermore, we had an interest in transcending the North-South divide, in establishing South-South links. The territorial scope of Hangar is far-reaching, but we put a big emphasis on Latin America and Africa, focusing mostly, but not exclusively, on visual arts. This is our primary area of interest. As a response to that, we configure a schedule having to do with American and African artists, but also with their diasporas, without forgetting a strong part linked to recent Portuguese art. We have a program called Portuguese art since 1974, we want to map our contemporary history, to approach people who are still there to be contacted, alive and active, including curators, critics and gallerists.

Mónica de Miranda The Hangar was created from a cultural association, Xerem, which was founded in 2010. Xerem started developing artistic residencies and cultural exchanges within the Triangle Network. Those exchanges were sporadic, although they grew in the last years, when we started establishing partnerships with Africa and Brazil, which created a more intense and active panorama, thereof the need of finding a space for the schedule to be permanent. Then we applied to a call for local development in the areas of art and culture, we got it, and from there we created Hangar. It became a structure larger than the association behind it, it acquired its own shape, with a new team integrated by people focusing on specific tasks. We have a horizontal structure where each of us coordinates a part and is responsible for each of the activities, but then we share our point of view with the rest about all the initiatives we develop. Our project inherits the tradition and experience of artist-run spaces, although we are not only artists managing the center, since we try to foster a more horizontal and less hierarchic dialogue with curators, with theory. We

believe that artists can widely contribute to a more attentive and deeper thought and critique, we encourage collaboration, we four partake Hangar's four main areas, which are research, exhibitions, residencies and participation. Those four areas are interrelated in many ways, for instance a workshop can turn into an exhibition, an exhibition can end up being a conference series or a research process, this could develop an exhibition, and so on.

C Why Lisbon, and more specifically, why the quarter of Graça? What does the context bring to Hangar?

B As you know, I have a connection with Madrid, but for me the good thing of Hangar being here in Lisbon is that here there is a natural link with Africa, one that you won't find in Madrid, for example. In turn, Madrid is strongly connected with Latin America, something that doesn't happen in Lisbon. For me it is like having the best of both worlds. Mónica has more contacts with and knowledge in relation to Africa, I am more oriented to Latin America and North Europe, but above all Spain and Latin America. This is one of our biggest advantages.

The fact of being in Graça...It's a quarter that was not trendy when we arrive, at first the location was a bit indifferent, although Graça is interesting because we are close to Martim Moniz, to Intendente, we have several communities around here coming from countries we seek to engage with. We develop a work that seeks to give a feedback to our community, to create a kind of interface with the people living around us. The results of our action for the Bangladeshi, Indian or African diasporic communities inhabiting those areas of Lisbon...I'm not a sociologist, you see, so I cannot talk much about that, only when we had several years of activity we would see if the balance is positive or what kind of impact are we having, but I know there is for sure an impact in our practice. We tried to encourage the encounter, for example, when we organize potlucks with the Angolan community we intend to attract persons that have nothing to do with the art world. We try to call the neighbors to the Hangar to create that interface.

M: Graça was a happy accident. The place found us. We were searching for a place and the building we found with the characteristics we wanted was in that neighborhood. Soon the location became important for the project as is an area with a large number of migrant communities but also of a very settled Portuguese population interacting in the same place. We are in a hill so we can overlook Lisbon, but are still away from the touristification that is taking place downtown. The neighborhood is still very traditional, but also has a cosmopolitan feel starting to occur with many associations and artists moving

into this part of town. In our project we intended to work with different audiences and open the experience of contemporary art not only to the usual suspects, but to a more diversified public. We wanted art to interact with everyday life, so that is why we also have a public program including music events that aim to reach out into the community. I lived in London for fifteen years, and this dynamic of artist-run spaces interacting with their geographical locations is natural for me. In some sense, it was in a way my London background teaching me that way, I was involved in London in many art projects that occurred in inner city neighborhoods like Brixton and Peckham. In some kind of way, I had exported this experience with me to this project.

C How do you value the interactions that the Hangar has brought on that concern?

B It's curious, we do not work uniquely with postcolonial issues, although this is one of our main lines. I think you are talking about an issue that here in Portugal is still to be addressed. There is no much criticism about the matter, I think that it is just recently that many stuff is being developed, even [the newspaper] *O Público* did a special series on Portugal's former colonies and so on. I think this is an issue that interests people, but about which you could not talk easily, either for shame or for family bonds, something that most of the times provoked situations of shame or hidden pride in many people. When we started organizing activities around those issues, we found a huge audience without making any significant effort. Every time we organize activities not exclusively addressing artistic communities, we find a lot of participation, and I think this is also because of what I said, because those questions were to discuss here in Lisbon. People are willing to talk about those matters, and the good thing of being in Graça is that we do not need to look for the communities of migrants or for the postcolonial reality of the country, they were already here waiting for us. It happens to me something that I never experienced in Portugal or in Lisbon, being in an opening and not knowing many of the persons that are there. In Lisbon the art world is quite small, when I worked in MauMaus or in the Museu Berardo I knew everybody hanging out in the openings, now here there are many people that are new for me. I think we arrived in the right moment to deal with those issues.

M. Our aim is to open the experience of contemporary art to people in general and not only to the art crowd. Postcolonial issues in Portugal are still being dealt through a modernistic approach, very few artists are actually from a real postcolonial background. This sometimes is an issue that ghettoizes artists according to the language they speak. However, there is currently a great

production of African diasporic artists dealing with issues that are of their own. That is why when you go to a biennale such as Dakar or to events such as the Bamako encounters, Lusophone artists are still a minority. There are only few Portuguese artists from an African background practicing nowadays in Portugal. Nevertheless, there is a great tendency of Portuguese artists to deal with postcolonial issues. *Hangar* wants to interact with this predicament, for that we created programs such as *180º*, to aim and encourage young artists from lusophone contexts, especially African women artists, to develop their projects with curatorial and production support. We count with the support of the Fundação Callouste Gulbenkian to develop this program. We also have worked with local potential artist from the community.

C Concerning artists from Africa and the African diaspora, what of different has the Hangar brought in relation to more official art institutions?

B We have a continuous link with Africa, one not limited to organizing exhibitions. Moreover, we are making a great effort not to focus exclusively on the Lusophone Africa. The exhibition we have now[Kin] was curated by Eva Langret, a Franco-Argeline curator living in Loondon, and there are no Lusophone artists in the show. We are trying to open the scope to the whole Africa, not to “Portuguese Africa”. That happened as well with a previous exhibition curated by Paul Goodwin, in which artists such as the Otolith Group, John Akonfrah or Alia Syed participated. This is something new here in Portugal, normally you will have either very well-known names or artists chosen for being native of the former colonies. We tried to diversify the debate about Africa.

M In my case, there is a personal, a biographical interest in Africa, one that I also develop in my artistic work. To this I usually add my long experience with the African diaspora in London, creating links that are now being developed in Hangar through partnerships. The collaboration with Paul Goodwin and Eva Langret, with whom I worked in London, came that way. They are managing two projects that are relevant for the international panorama of postcolonial art such as the Tiwani gallery and Train research center at Chelsea College of Arts. This partnership gave rise to main exhibitions at *Hangar (Ghosts and Kin)*, which brought many other geographies from Africa and their diasporas to Lisbon. There were artists from South Africa, Nigeria or Kenia participating, but also names such as John Akrofrah or the Otolith Group, which are central in the postcolonial and the African diaspora art scenes. Some of these artists, especially those taking part in the *Kin* exhibition, were showing in Portugal for the first time. Some of them are not so known here although their international

recognition is huge. So we are contributing to open new bridges of a discourse that is located in Lisbon but communicates with the outside.

C What kind of approaches on the art of the PALOP countries have been developed in Portugal? What are the predominant discourses on that matter?

B There is a high degree of paternalism still in play. There is a high degree of incapacity when coming to try to perceive the specificities of each context, what each culture has of its own. There were not so many exhibitions about Africa, nor involving African artists or artists from the African diaspora, although it is a growing phenomenon. That has to do, of course, with the marketability of the issue, but I think all this process is somehow starting now, it is not that there were no precedents but... There are also cases in which entire exhibitions prepared for other countries were imported without any critical concern on this fact. We are creating exhibitions specifically created for the Hangar, either by people from other countries or for ourselves, but always keeping in mind what the Hangar is.

M: There is still a lot to be done. The real input needs to come from the artists themselves and a market and context that knows and understands what does it mean "Lusophone African art". It is not only an exotic product to be consumed in art fairs, or the political agenda of councils to study migration through the arts; it is a cultural manifestation with its own discourses. But for that to happen, the artists are responsible to lead the movement, refusing being puppets in the hands of institutions or outmoded modernistic colonial approaches from art critics, curators or museums.

C To what extent is the growing attention on contemporary art from the PALOPS is connected to the reality of the afro-descendants living in Portugal?

M From the beginning we tried to integrate the African communities living in Lisbon in our schedule. The question of the afro-descendants in Portugal is a tricky one. First, there are few artists of African origin born here, very few, you can count us with the fingers of one hand. Then you have Portuguese artists dealing with postcolonial issues. There is also a community of artists who are already Portuguese, they live here, but they were born in Africa, therefore they will not fit the category of afro-descendants although they have Portuguese passport. They are Africans, I would not call them afro-descendants. Moreover, most of the afro-descendants do not call themselves that. They just call themselves artists. Finally, here in Portugal there lacks a critical background like the one you will find in France or England, with centers, long-lasting platforms and so on. Here we lack theoreticians, artists, critics for writing the

history of Lusophone contexts in the arts, the theory is still arising. However, in our programming we work with young researchers and with the Centro de Estudos Comparatistas of the University of Lisbon to open a critical dialogue around those issues. In any case, the community surrounding us is our main goal, although that is not an easy task. We want to have a voice in the process of rethinking the cultural background of Lisbon and Portugal. We seek to open new paths for different people have access to art, for that it is necessary to develop first an educational work. I guess things could start from there.

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