



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

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Kanimambo | 1998 | [Ângela Ferreira](#) (courtesy of the artist)

WAITING FOR THE *NEXT FUTURE*

Margarida Calafate Ribeiro

An inaptly christened “return of the colonial past” has emerged in the last few years in Europe and in Portugal. In Portugal this is a past that has been more or less silenced since decolonization and the revolutionary period of 1974-75 with its movements of people, including the so-called ‘return’ of settlers, officials and military personnel from the former African colonies. That was the end of an era for Portugal and the beginning of another. Afterwards, apart from novels that narrated the realities of the Colonial War, silence was the watchword of the 1980s and 1990s regarding this recent Portuguese past.



What we are seeing now is, though, not really the return of the colonial past, but the beginning of a debate between the time of colonial domination and contemporary social relations in societies that have inherited these colonial pasts in Europe. Whether these debates are about a continued European colonial outlook, about public recognition of the memory of slavery and colonialism, about ethnic and racial discrimination, about the place of religion, about Islam in Europe or the contours of secularism, or about the drama of refugees in the Mediterranean, it is always the freight of Portuguese and European colonial history that is measured, probed, and assessed. These debates are instigated by generations who are the heirs of Europe's colonial past. They may not have their own memory of the colonial period that they did not live through, but today it is their voices who are prominent.

In Portugal these heirs are the children of the 1990s and of Expo 1998, which took place in Lisbon from 22 May to 30 September of that year. Expo 1998 spoke both to Portugal and to the wider world. It was responsible for the redevelopment of a large part of eastern Lisbon, today a middle-class, service and entertainment district whose urban landscape is full of references to the great navigators and to overseas territories. With its universalist mythology based on the wealth of the oceans and anchored in Portuguese maritime adventurism, the Expo had a huge impact due to its sheer scale. In Lisbon its curation and its cosmopolitanism inaugurated a new era of projects led by the National Commission for the Commemorations of the Portuguese Discoveries captured by the motto that bedecked Expo 98: "the oceans, a heritage for the future". It is obvious today that these were the early moments of Portuguese postcolonialism. We were confronted with an inability to transform the narrative with which we ourselves had marked the history of the world. We were surprised that the former Portuguese colonies Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Sao Tomé and Príncipe, Cape Verde and Goa did not enthusiastically join in with proposals to commemorate the "Discoveries". These began in 1998 with the celebration of the discovery of the maritime route to India by the same National Commission. At precisely the moment when Portugal and the West wanted to commemorate the Portuguese arrival in India celebrated by Luís de Camões in *Os Lusíadas*, Indians themselves intervened with historiographical sources such as Sanjay Subrahmanyam's *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama*, and other competing versions of this moment of arrival. Portugal also wanted to celebrate its appearance along the African coast, though there was not much to celebrate, and to commemorate Pedro Álvares Cabral as well as the fifth centenary of Columbus' discovery of America. As Eduardo Lourenço noted, though, the Americas wanted to "kill Colombo", not only on behalf of those exterminated after he arrived, but also for those forced by Columbus's adventure to move from Africa to America and from Europe to the New



World. Lourenço warned in “The Death of Columbus,” that this was not the end of history, but a change in the order of history. This was the end of the West as myth, that is, its end as the light of the world it thought it was when it arrived at Porto Seguro in Brazil (1). This moment marked the emergence of other narratives which centered upon and were articulated by other ethnic and cultural subjects who were keepers of other archives and memories of an apparently common history. This was the beginning of the “re-dis-covering” of what one-sided celebrations of the “Discoveries” had long left hidden.

In the heat of the revolutionary moment after April 25, 1974 Portugal renamed the “Bairro das Colónias” in Lisbon after the newly independent countries and their leaders. But that same country later fell into a cycle of bewilderment and historiographical and narrative shock. The conception of the Lisbon Expo was inspired by the Universal Exposition of Seville in 1992. In spite of the narrative that the Expo was a celebration of the transformation that the Portuguese travels wrought upon Europe and the world, and despite the scale of its innovation and impact, the Expo simultaneously laid bare the crisis of narrative intrinsic to our post-colonial era; a crisis which would become successively more and more visible in Portugal and Europe. Angela Ferreira, a Mozambican-born artist who pioneered the interrogation of colonialism and its inheritances, made a telling intervention. She inscribed on the Portuguese pavement of the Expo the title of her work “Kanimambo”, “thank you” in Changana, a language from the southern Mozambique. The siting of the work inscribes gratitude to those who built the Expo from below: the many African workers who with their bodies, their cultures and their music brought to the Expo and to Lisbon an unsettling and differentiated form of cosmopolitanism invisible to the official Commemorations of the Discoveries.

The central tenet of the National Commission’s work, with some notable exhibitions, continued to be the publication of extensive, foundational studies, but it also supported innovative research. The five volumes of the History of Portuguese Expansion organized by Francisco Bethencourt and Kirti Chaudhuri instigated a revolution in Portuguese historiography of expansion, colonization and decolonization, and fresh reflection on the memories of empire and their integration into European history. Some pioneering television broadcasts and publications also began to emerge addressing the Colonial War. The Assembly of the Republic approved the status of a former combatant with post-traumatic stress. At Portuguese universities there was a consolidation of studies of Lusophone African literatures, not only from the standpoint of their anti-colonial and militant aspects, but as autonomous literary systems existing in relation to Portuguese and Brazilian literatures as well as other literatures of the African continent.

However, Portugal was simultaneously developing the “Entre Culturas” curriculum and the Coordinating Secretariat for Multicultural Education Programmes, whose preface shockingly repurposed the rhetoric of ‘encounter’ that the Estado Novo and Lusotropicalism had developed (2).

In the 1990s, books were published which, through fiction, confronted the pains and ghosts of the African question beyond the memories of the Colonial War. Notable among these were Helder Macedo’s pioneering *Partes de África* (1991), and *O Esplendor de Portugal* (1997) by António Lobo Antunes. At the beginning of the millennium, academic studies also began to address the Portuguese postcolonial issue. Eduardo Lourenço’s reflections on Portugal and Europe and on Portugal and its empire were initially published in diverse places but have now been brought together in the collection *Do Colonialismo Como o Nosso Impensado* [Of Colonialism as Our Unthought] (2014). Based on his work on the semi-peripheral condition of Portugal after laid out in *Pela Mão de Alice*, Boaventura de Sousa Santos wrote, in dialogue with Lourenço, “As Onze Teses por ocasião de mais uma descoberta de Portugal” [Eleven Theses for another discovery of Portugal] (1990) and later, the important “Between Prospero and Caliban: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and Inter-identity” (2002). These helped trigger new insights in various parts of postcolonial studies. Around the same time Ana Paula Ferreira and I organized the volume of essays *Fantasmias e Fantasias Imperiais no Imaginário Português Contemporâneo* (2003) an inaugural interdisciplinary reflection on the ongoing presence of empire in contemporary Portugal. Beyond Portugal, under the remit of Portuguese Studies, many pioneering studies emerged, including those of Roberto Vecchi, Paulo de Medeiros, Ana Paula Ferreira, Ellen Sapega, Hilary Owen, AbdoolKarim Vakil, Phillip Rothwell, Patrick Chabal and others. In Portugal we should note the work of Innocência Mata, Maria Paula Meneses, Miguel Vale de Almeida, Cristiana Bastos and Manuela Ribeiro Sanches, as well as the pioneering research and pedagogy of the Center for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra and its PhD programme “Post-Colonialism and Global Citizenship” (2004) and CHAM (the Center of Humanities) and the Institute of Contemporary History, both at the New University of Lisbon.

In the music scene, centered on Lisbon, different voices and rhythms began to be heard. Rogério de Carvalho asserted his position as a black Portuguese director. The distribution of African films in Portuguese expanded in Portugal, for instance those of Ângela Ferreira and Ana Vidigal (3) whose pioneering works about the Portuguese colonial past left the critics more or less mute and were still seen as “unclassifiable”. It was a period oscillating between grief and trauma, silence and crisis, and like all beginnings, it was faltering. It vacillated between a mythology with deep lusotropical roots in Portuguese society on the one hand and, on the other, the opening up of a comparative and cosmopolitan critique of the Portuguese colonial past and the way it ended. This is the tension that still characterizes Portuguese language, politics and criticism today.

But above all a new critical and creative dimension was brought about by the Gulbenkian Foundation's *Next Future* program, curated by António Pinto Ribeiro. This programme changed the dominant tone and broadened the debate on the postcolonial to new audiences. The creative and intellectual emergence of the South gained entirely new visibility in Portugal. Some of the Gulbenkian's programming had paved the way in forcing new topics onto the Portuguese cultural and intellectual agenda. Books such as *O Estado do Mundo* [The State of the World] (2006), and *A Urgência da Teoria* [The Urgency of Theory] (2007), and *Distância e Proximidade* [Distance and Proximity] (2008) which emerged from a year of intercultural dialogue between young artists from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds. It was with *Next Future* (4) that the scale of contemporary artistic and cultural production of the formerly colonized Southern geographies came to be properly represented in Portugal. Beyond merely showing the work of formerly colonized peoples, this marked a shift towards engaging with it as the work of cultural subjects, and establishing a debate about the postcolonial based on understanding and exchange between young Portuguese and African artists moving together towards a cosmopolitan European future. It is precisely these artists that today make up the bulk of the international Portuguese artistic scene, and it is through them that we can refer in general, heterogenous terms to an Africa-oriented colonial post-memory. But their achievement goes far beyond just that.



Awnings made out of capulana fabric for *O Estado do Mundo* | 2007 | FCG (photo from personal archive)



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Next Future: a meeting of portugal with the world towards the 21st century

In June 2019 we commemorated 10 years since the beginning of the Gulbenkian Foundation's *Next Future* (2009-2015) programme and on the 15th September we celebrate the anniversary of its closure. Curated by António Pinto Ribeiro, it was a programme "of Contemporary Culture dedicated in particular, but not exclusively, to research and creation in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Africa" (5). The opening text by the President of the Foundation, Rui Vilar, laid out the fundamental objectives of the programme as internationalization and grasping the innovation of the political and cultural perspectives emerging in the contemporary world. It sought to do so by turning from the traditional Global North sites towards the Global South, where new futures were being laid out. In so doing, the programme positioned Portugal as a platform for discussion of these futures, no longer thanks to its mythologically elaborated history, but through "its history and the recent experience of welcoming migrants from multiple ethnic and cultural origins". This was, in the words of President Rui Vilar, "a special opportunity to develop a critical mass that favours the understanding of new phenomena, contributes to mutual understanding and benefits new dimensions of interculturality." (6) This was not only a new vocabulary, or a recombination of elements and phrases already existing elsewhere. It was a chance to locate Portugal in a new, emerging global world: the world exiting from the various phases of decolonization, but also emerging from contemporary dynamics of the technological revolution, new cities, and the emergence of new creative powers. The end of Apartheid and the election of Nelson Mandela in South Africa launched an emancipatory and creative dynamic without precedent on the African continent and, in 2008, Barack Obama was elected to the White House.

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These visible and invisible movements, transparent or subterranean, brought a new vision of black cultural presence to the world in places far beyond Africa. They brought, too, a new perspective on an African continent. Portugal, which had historically opened its doors to the first waves of globalization, was looking to the future with realism and with desire. *Next Future* began with a question. In the words of its chief curator:

Can we intervene in the future, in the coming future? We certainly can. Not in the sense of determining, shaping or prophesying it, or running aground in a utopia or dystopia. But we know that in our daily decisions, acts, episodes, in the fictions that we construct, in the updating of reality that we produce, each of us incidentally, or all of us together, are interfering in the future. And, in some cases, and for



the most immediate future, we are even qualified to make forecasts, or, in other words, to construct rationalised extensions of the present, representations of varying degrees of optimism depending on the assessment that we make of it and the wish that we have to intervene in order to take precautions against it. The future exists and, in spite of its unpredictable or accidental nature, we can intervene so that not everything will amount to information provided without any immediate recipient, an activity without any desire to realise it. (7)

António Pinto Ribeiro's curatorial priority is clear in the title: look to the future to construct the present and understand the past, not the other way around. This is, in my view, a clear departure from Portuguese curation up to this point that, in spite of political, social and economic changes brought about through democracy, had rarely been able to sublimate the past to both re-imagine its own reality and to project it onto European and global reality in a cosmopolitan and post-colonial manner. This departure is very clear in the global analysis that the curator offered in his first texts, which emphasised the polycentricity of the globalized world. Ribeiro read the South as an artistic, economic, political and intellectual agent and producer clustered around important cultural poles such as Dakar, Bamako, Ouazazate, Casablanca, Cairo, Addis Abeba, Maputo, Luanda, Kinshasa and, centrally, Cape Town, Johannesburg, São Paulo, Santiago de Chile, Buenos Aires and Bogota.

This initial text lays out a geopolitics that accounts for other geographies of knowledge and of artistic production, in which not only were North-South relations altered, but in which South-South relations were made visible and renewed. At the time these relations were read as profoundly connected to globalization, whose historical density is intrinsically tied to the early migrations prompted by decolonization that would, in due course, provincialize Europe and "re-dis-cover" the creative power of the South. From the 1980s Latin America underwent manifold processes of re-democratization. In the same decade Africa experienced significant conflict but also processes of emancipation which transformed the continent. The liberation of Nelson Mandela in 1994 was the shining example of the latter, and Rwanda, in the same year, the nadir of the former. These complex movements, of varying duration and intensity, underpin Ribeiro's foundational analytical text on artistic production in Africa and Latin America. The text identified the emergence of new centres founded from the 1960s onwards. Out of the extended moment of independence came the establishment of national institutions: universities, schools of art, dance and literature, and institutes of cinema and television were all endowed with the creativity of the new. Nevertheless, thanks to agreements between newly

independent African countries and their backers, but also because of the civil wars that have long bedevilled many of these countries since independence many young Africans, particularly but not exclusively of the new elites, have been educated abroad, often in socialist countries, and, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, in the West. This mobility fed an intense cosmopolitanism and made new cultural mixtures possible. At about the same time international television arrived in many African and Latin American homes, beamed through the satellite dishes that fill African and Latin American landscapes. With them the image of the West was consumed by new generations who were already distant from colonialism. These new generations were seduced by the arrival of democracy. Amid hard fought elections and the beginning of multi-party politics a confidence in peace and in the potential of democracy as an instrument of development hung in the air. In 2009, the new generations and their productions became something else again. The cultural protagonists were the same age as Latin American democracies or as independent post-colonial states. Their work made *Next Future* a space for creation, debate, production and fulfilment. This was the moment when Portugal made its critical and creative mark on Europe and the world and faced those other continents where it has always also been and which it has to re-dis-cover.

(1) Eduardo Lourenço, *A Morte de Colombo: metamorfose e fim do Ocidente como mito*. Lisboa: Gradiva, 2005, p. 16. It is important to note that in the 1992 Universal Exhibition of Seville the fifth centenary of Columbus was commemorated under the general theme of “Discoveries”.

(2) Ministério da Educação, Despacho Normativo, *Diário da República*, n.º 60/1991, Série I-B de 1991-03-13.

(3) Ângela Ferreira, *Casa Maputo: Um Retrato Íntimo*, Museu de Serralves, Porto (1999); Ana Vidigal, *Penélope, Menina limpa menina suja* (1980-2010), Centro de Arte Moderna / Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa, 23.07.2010 a 26.09.2010 Curadoria: Isabel Carlos.

(4) See the [program's website](#) and the general intention's note by curator António Pinto Ribeiro, that I will use throughout this article.

(5) “Próximo Futuro”, *Jornal Próximo Futuro*, n. 1, Abril, 2009.

(6) Rui Vilar, “Programa Gulbenkian – Próximo Futuro”, *Jornal Próximo Futuro*, n. 1, Abril, 2009, p. 3.

(7) António Pinto Ribeiro, “Próximo Futuro”, *Jornal Próximo Futuro*, n. 1, Abril, 2009, p. 4.



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