

## THE FORMS AND PLACES OF THE CONTEMPORARY AZULEJO

A sculpture with an equivalent dimension of a three-story building, fully covered by 17 000 *azulejos* [glazed tiles] of different colours that result in a variety of compositions, illuminated by 15 000 LEDs. This is a possible and formal description; however, it does not reflect the multiplicity of understandings present in *Pop Galo*, the work by Joana Vasconcelos that proposes a critical and contemporary view of a piece that is part of the national imaginary – Galo de Barcelos [Rooster of Barcelos]<sup>1</sup> –, and is covered by *azulejos*, another Portuguese symbol.

The legend of Galo de Barcelos, with its origins in medieval times and believed to have arrived in Portugal *via* the Routes of Santiago de Compostela [Caminhos de Santiago], might help explaining the *fortune* of this figuration within the potter tradition of Barcelos. This symbol was later '(re)constructed' by the Estado Novo [Portuguese authoritarian regime] as a symbol of Portuguese identity and presented in several national and international exhibitions, becoming a national icon after the Portuguese World Exhibition of 1940. Since then it has been frequently recreated by different generations of artists (Fernandes 2014, 45; Fernandes 2016). Among the known traditions, the Rooster of Barcelos has also been associated with peasants' wedding ceremonies and with matrimonial rites (Alves 2007, 118).

Vasconcelos's *Galo*, in its *Pop* version, engages in a critical appropriation of a past and of an idea of nation that are in this work upgraded and reinvented. The artist uses traditional materials such as the *azulejo*, which also experiences a metamorphosis in terms of its shape and in relation with the artificial lighting from the LEDs that trace the traditional punctiform design of Barcelos's Rooster, simultaneously emphasizing its technological aspect.

This essay presents *Pop Galo* as a sculpture that opens new perspectives for the use and exploration of one of the types of art that most characterizes the collective imaginary and the Portuguese patrimonial heritage – the *azulejo*.

## QUOTES AND APPROPRIATIONS WITH AZULEJO

For the last decades, many visual artists introduced in their works identity elements of popular culture, linked to the idea of nation. Among those, Joana Vasconcelos's work naturally outstands as she has been manipulating Portuguese popular traditions and

---

<sup>1</sup> Barcelos is a town in the north of Portugal, known for the pottery tradition and the famous national symbol "The Rooster of Barcelos".

objects, such as embroidery and crochet, filigree, the wrought iron or even the *azulejo* [glazed tile], showing a perspective of the heritage simultaneously ironic and dazzled (Amado 2010, 44).

With an extensive work that reflects '(...) upon the idea of nation, grounding her work in stereotypes and regional and national symbols' (Almeida 2013, 20) and '(...) mobilizing the popular culture as a platform for identity negotiation and reflection about the Portuguese society" (Almeida 2012, 43), Joana Vasconcelos includes, in many of her works, the *azulejo*, which is perceived as a cultural symbol of shared imaginary and as a cognitive material.

Existing within a context of critical reinterpretation of this type of art, the *azulejo* covers various volumes that function as sculptures – *Caixas*, *Paredes* and *Tetris* series (2002, 2003 and 2012, respectively) and the work *Volupta* (2014). Moreover, these tiles were also applied to other elements, such as the case of *Barco da Mariquinhas* [Mariquinhas's Boat] (2002) or the logo for a sports brand (*Luso Nike*, 2006).

The idea of quoting and evoking a type of art perceived as being related to identity finds its largest expression in the project *Trafaria Praia* (2013). This work - conceived as a 'complete work of art' that included the restoration of a ferryboat, an artistic intervention on the inside and outside of the boat, and the events developed inside the space - was presented at the Pavilion of Portugal at the 55th International Art Exhibition - *la Biennale di Venezia*. The outside of the boat was covered with a panel of blue and white tiles, presenting a contemporary view of the famous *Great Panorama of Lisbon*, one of the most emblematic panels that reproduces Lisbon riverfront at the turn of the 18th century. *The Great Panorama of Lisbon (21st century)*, as it was officially called, was an innovation also due to the place where the panel was applied – an iconic Lisbon ferryboat, a *cacilheiro*.

In this sense, the work *Pop Galo* consolidated one of the many ways to explore the Portuguese tile tradition that marked Joana Vasconcelos's work for the last few years. It offers a new direction on how *azulejos* can be used as a sculptural material and on how new shapes of this ceramic material can be explored, which is nowadays already a tendency in contemporary tilemaking. In fact, the shape of the tile and the surfaces where it is applied are in this project subverted by the artist, who makes a rupture not only with secular

models and practices, but also with the way she used to apply this material in her own works.

### **THE AZULEJO IS NOT ALWAYS SQUARE**

An overview of the history of *azulejo* and its international context (going from Egypt to China) shows the variety of shapes and techniques that result in an immense richness of materials and decorative methods. Therefore, it is not odd that Joana Vasconcelos decided to design *her own azulejo*. However, when referring to Portuguese tile tradition, it is evident that the most used tile, since the beginning of the 16th century until our days, is the one with a squared shape, mostly with a parietal application, in the inside or outside.

In any case, and despite the apparent hegemony of the squared tile, one should recall the parallelogram and square shaped tiles (later explored by Querubim Lapa (1925-2016)) at the Arab Room in National Palace of Sintra, as well as the schemes known as *enxaquetados* - typical from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and beginnings of the following century - formed by squares and rectangles of different dimensions and applied in diagonal. Although the tiles have a square base, there were already some samples with intended finishing, like the ones that can be found in D. Sebastião room or at the Arab Room in Sintra. Later, this same cut would be found on the superior finishing of the white and blue tiles, present in the cycle known as the *Grande Produção Joanina* [Great Joanine Production ] (1725-1750). The ones with a rectangular format are half-*azulejo* frames (in Portuguese *friso*), delimiting the figurative or patterned compositions throughout different periods of time, and the so called *biselados*, very common in façades. Álvaro Siza Vieira (1933-) used these last ones in the Metropolitan Station of Baixa-Chiado in Lisbon (1992-1998), although he used specific formats adapted to the surface.

It is interesting to realize that the *azulejo* has always been a versatile material, easily adaptable to different usages, revealing as well the mastery of so many anonymous masters that throughout the centuries were responsible for their production and application. An example of this versatility is for instances the rhombus tiles found in staircases from the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The regularization of shapes can be related to economy of means, yet the fact is that the shape and the cut were an important counterpoint and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century different shapes and applications became more visible. The artistic freedom and search for new means of expression allied to the versatility of the *azulejo* and its specificities – colour, reflective capacity (brightness) and durability – are attractive characteristics to artists but also to architects. In this sense, the diversity of forms is an aspect that has been explored since the post war. This is evident, for instances in Eduardo Nery's ceramic plaques, on a wall in Avenida Infante Santo (1993-1994) in Lisbon; at the Barcelos Pottery Museum and in ETA Asseiceira (2010); in the tiles applied as fish scales on Edifício do Mar (2011), at Lisbon Oceanarium, by Toni Cumella Vendrell (1951-); in the hexagonal tiles on the new Cruise Terminal in Leixões Port (2015) designed by the architect Luís Pedro Silva (1971-); or the trapezium tiles in MAAT – Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (2016), by the architect Amanda Leveté (1955-).

By deconstructing the classic square tile, Joana Vasconcelos designed a four side *azulejo*, that when combined with each other form a hexagon. Except for some units with square, rectangle or circular shapes (beak and eyes), these pieces are always disposed in hexagon and covering all surfaces. The dimensions of each tile vary, depending on the volume they are meant to cover, and adapting to curves and counter curves.

The regular repetition of the quadrilaterals organized in hexagons creates a geometric pattern with large and colourful joints (the same tone as the tile), which remind the schemes of *azulejos mudejar*. The web of lines, that goes along the rooster surface, differs also from the traditional grid present in a tile coating, creating various visual rhythms (diagonal and elliptic, for instances). The observer can find here other shapes (triangles and rhombus), depending on his/her position.

Nevertheless, and beyond of what would be expected in a repetition scheme, each tile is a personalized piece that becomes a global project. There are tiles with just one plain colour, but there are many others with more than one tone, different motifs and figurative areas that result in a composition inspired by the traditional drawings of the Rooster of Barcelos.

Resulting from a close observation of the classic and modern roosters from 1950 (Mimoso 2008), Joana Vasconcelos designed her own model and decorative scheme where she explored the aspect of light related to the tile. The artist used LEDs of the same colour to illuminate the ceramic pieces, adding a technological component to the rooster, and simultaneously highlighting one of its strongest characteristics – the punctiform drawing. These around 15 000 LEDs bring the work the duplicity present in the symbolism of the rooster itself and in the legend of Rooster of Barcelos, both associated with positive factors as this animal represents the victory of Good over Evil (Mimoso 2008), besides also evoking death and life. Therefore, during daytime it is possible to observe the work and all its details, such as the decorative motifs – red hearts inspired in jewels from Minho region (*corações de Viana*) and cornucopias. During nighttime, these elements are also highlighted (namely the heart with the key that beats at the pace of the LEDs), but the focus is on the rooster's silhouette.

#### **OTHER “PLACES” FOR THE AZULEJO**

The challenges of contemporaneity had a critical impact on the artistic dimension of the *azulejo* in some authors' work and its use in new public spaces (viaducts, public transportation stations, among others) gave origin to a much larger diversity of surfaces to apply it. However, and despite a 'new understanding' of the *azulejo*, it is still mainly seen as an architectonic coating material, capable of transforming spaces and creating scenarios of intense monumentality.

With her version of the Rooster of Barcelos, Joana Vasconcelos gave continuity to the evolution of traditional pottery pieces that since 1940 became bigger and bigger, reaching 50 cm height and acquiring then the basic characteristics that define a Rooster of Barcelos (Mimoso 2008). What was once a popular art clay piece, sometimes with a whistle attached and that could fit inside a hand, became gradually a big dimension object that had direct consequences in its production, morphology and decoration.

Following Joana Vasconcelos's work line, that uses stereotypes and 'changes their scales, reorganizes and gives them back to the world in a configuration that oscillates between the spectacular and the absurd' (Silva 2009, 270), *Pop Galo* also became a large scale sculpture,

in line with the tendency “of do it big” (Silva 2009, 270), perserving the sound element (as it ‘sings’ every hour a composition by the musician Jonas Runa), and with a monumentality that pushes it away from domestic interiors and brings it to the *urbe*, to the public space, where the perception is strongly changed by this new element.

In this context, what is truly new is the way the *azulejo* is used as it moves away from its traditional usage in architecture to assume other function – the sculpture covering – transforming not only how this material is applied, but also the places where it can be found (which will obviously change the way one receives it).

However, the dimension the *azulejo* acquires in the work *Pop Galo* as being part of a sculpture is not exactly a novelty. Throughout history, tileworking aimed to explore, on the one hand the flat or bidimensional space of paintings, and on the other an illusory spatiality, from which one cannot dissociate the attempt of reproducing sculptures or architectonic sculpture, especially in terms of frames. This dialogue with other type of arts, particularly sculpture, gains more expression when the *azulejo* starts covering sculptural structures, becoming a part of that sculpture.

This has been sporadically explored by artists such as Eduardo Nery, who in 1981 created *sculptural volumes* for the yard of the Health Center in Mértola; by Pedro Cabrita Reis (1956-), who with his intervention at Expo’98 roundabout in Parque das Nações, for the Worldwide Exhibition of Lisbon (1998), covered a tridimensional construction with tiles, or even more systematically by Joana Vasconcelos. As we saw previously, the artist uses, since 2002, squared tiles in various volumes that than combines with other materials (embroidery, crochet...), such as the sculptures called *Caixas*, *Paredes* and *Tetris*.

The examples given are mostly regular and tridimensional volumes and the novelty relied in making the observer go around it in 360° (in opposition to the bidimensionality of the parietal surfaces where the tile is normally used). However, the work *Pop Galo* results from a structure originally modelled, that imposes new challenges to the *azulejo*, but also to the way it is observed.

In fact the emergence of new architectonic structures, with diversified configurations, might imply the necessity of “releasing” the *azulejo* from the traditional square shape, adapting it with more efficiency to the surfaces it will cover. Throughout history, this was done for instance in vaults, domes or circular pillars. Nowadays, architects and artists also aim to design tiles with other shapes that respond to the specificities of each work. Both in architecture and sculptures, the tile might deny or be in perfect harmony with the structure where it will be applied. Ultimately, the tile is neutral and what it provokes depends on how it is used. In the case of the work considered, what one can observe is the search for a symbiotic relation between form and coating, which makes the tile a fundamental and inextricable part of the whole, participating actively and not merely as a complement, but rather as a “skin”.

*Pop Galo* reinforces this aspect as the tile wasn't originally conceived for being just the covering of a sculpture, but also an object one can transport. Although the dimension of *Pop Galo* might remind the immobility of big constructions, Joana Vasconcelos associates this work with a surprising mobility and creates not only a new 'place' for the tile, but above all expands the 'places for the tiles', which she already did in *Trafaria Praia*.

In summary, *Pop Galo* contributes to the recognition of the *azulejo* as a sculptural material, free from stereotyped shapes and brought to the public space, regardless of where that might be, where it dialogues with the surroundings and acquires new meanings and understandings depending on the contexts.

### **THE AZULEJO AS A PLACE OF MEANINGS**

The *Pop Galo* is an artistic reinterpretation of the Rooster of Barcelos that redefines tradition and modernity, being this aspect extensive to the *azulejo* that covers it. The work brings together the legend of the Rooster of Barcelos, but also other legacies from previous centuries from where this legend might have its origins. There was a story with the same characteristics in France and Spain, so it is possible that it travelled to Barcelos through the most prominent channel of medieval culture: the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. The modernity, besides technological, is conceptual as there is the appropriation and transformation of a Portuguese culture representation and, in this sense, of an hybrid

object. This hybridity is the founding characteristic of any discourse about the popular (Leal 2009).

Considering that the legend of the Rooster of Barcelos travelled via the Routes of Santiago de Compostela [Caminhos de Santiago], likewise *Pop Galo* will have a travel itinerary through different cities in different parts of the world. This interaction does more than to promote diversity, it aims to create meeting points and search for affinities and convergence points among places and cultures geographically distant. In a way, these are trips that the *azulejo* has also promoted for more than 5000 years, and still does, existing as a privileged space for culture encounters.

However, in the last decades our perception of cultural identity changed considerably. In a globalized era the understanding is not only perceiving different cultures as isolated unities but also as hybrid formations, that are connected by a multidirectional process of mutual changes and influences (Feuchter 2011, 15).

In this sense, the work *Pop Galo* promotes a dialogue that relies on the acknowledgement and empathy among the constitutive elements of the artistic object. On the one hand, through its materiality, the tridimensional ceramic that covers it are structural forms of artistic expression in the history of China with the porcelain and in Brazil with the *azulejos*. Therefore, once again, in *Pop Galo*, the *azulejo* assumes one of its fundamental characteristics, as a messenger or transmitter of the imaginary. On the other hand, the stylized, transformed and modernized representation of the rooster still allows the identification of the bird, known all over the world as an auspicious symbol, in China related to domestic protection or as an amulet against bad spirits. The rooster chant is associated to summer and sun and it breaks the dark of the night and announces the aurora of a new day. This symbolism is somehow evidenced by *Pop Galo* as it reflects the duality day/night, relying on the LEDs' shine.

Resulting from a representation of popular Portuguese culture, the work *Pop Galo* (with its inextricable ceramic coating) aims to be a platform to promote intercultural dialogue among the places to where it will travel and its passage through China will coincide with the year of



the Rooster (2017). Pop Galo aims to build new places and meanings as a symbol of a shared cultural imaginary, at a global scale.

Rosário Salema de Carvalho\*, Ana Almeida\*\*, Inês Leitão e Patrícia Nóbrega\*\*\*

Az – Rede de Investigação em Azulejo,

ARTIS – Instituto de História da Arte, Faculdade de Letras, Universidade de Lisboa

[\*post-doctoral scholarship (SFRH/BPD/84867/2012) e \*\*doctoral scholarship (SFRH/BD/76754/2011), awarded by the Foundation for Science and Technology, financed by the Portuguese Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education; and \*\*\* doctoral scholarship at Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa, awarded by the University of Lisbon Doctoral Scholarship Program]

## REFERENCES

Almeida, Sónia Vespeira de. 2012. 'Que nação é esta? Tramas identitárias nas artes visuais portuguesas.' *Visualidades* 10 (1): 39–61. doi:[10.5216/vis.v10i1.23084](https://doi.org/10.5216/vis.v10i1.23084).

———. 2013. 'Antropologia e práticas artísticas em Portugal.' *Cadernos de Arte e Antropologia* 2 (1): 73-83. doi:[10.4000/cadernosaa.493](https://doi.org/10.4000/cadernosaa.493).

Alves, Vera Marques. 2007. 'Camponeses estetas no Estado Novo: Arte Popular e Nação na política folclorista do Secretariado da Propaganda Nacional.' Doctoral thesis in Anthropology, Lisbon: ISCTE.

Amado, Miguel. 2010. 'Meeting Point or The Return of the Art of the Real.' In *Joana Vasconcelos. Sem Rede / Netless*, 15-51. Lisbon: Museu Coleção Berardo.

Fernandes, Paulo Almeida. 2016. 'Barcelos.' In *Visita Guiada*, presented by Paula Moura Pinheiro. <http://www.rtp.pt/play/p2366/e240471/visita-guiada>.

Fernandes, Paulo Almeida. 2014. *Caminhos de Santiago*. Lisbon: Secretariado Nacional para os Bens Culturais da Igreja / Turismo de Portugal.

Feuchter, Jörg. 2011. 'Cultural Transfers in Dispute: An Introduction.' In *Cultural Transfers in Dispute. Representations in Asia, Europe and the Arab World since the Middle Ages*, edited by Jörg Feuchter, Hoffmann Friedhelm, and Yun Bee, 14-37. Frankfurt a.M. und New York: Campus.

Henriques, Paulo. 2000. "1949-1974: A Construção das Modernidades." In *O Azulejo em Portugal no Século XX*, edited by Ana Maria Rodrigues, 69-155. Lisbon: Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses / Edições INAPA.

Leal, João. 2009. "Da arte popular às culturas populares híbridas." *Etnográfica [Online]* 13 (2). doi:[10.4000/etnografica.1318](https://doi.org/10.4000/etnografica.1318).

Meco, José. 1989. *O azulejo em Portugal*. Lisbon: Alfa.

Mimoso, João Manuel. 2008–2010. "Origem e evolução do Galo de Barcelos." *Olaria: Estudos Arqueológicos, Históricos e Etnológicos*, no. 4: 142-59.

Oliveira, Luísa Soares de. 2000. '1974-2000: Arte em cerâmica: a cerâmica de autor em Portugal.' In *O Azulejo em Portugal no Século XX*, edited by Ana Maria Rodrigues, 157-236. Lisboa: Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses/ Edições INAPA.

Silva, Paulo Cunha e. 2009. 'Tricotando a Pele ou a Arte da Deslocação.' In *Joana Vasconcelos*, 270-273. S. Mamede do Coronado: Bial.