

DIARY

# LISBON

# EARTHQUAKE

July 31, 2010 • Lisbon • Cathryn Drake at the  
first international Portugal Arte biennial  
Lisbon



Left: João Mourão and Luis Silva of Kunsthalle Lissabon. Right: Depart Foundation director Pierpaolo Barzan with Portugal Arte organizer Stefan Simchowitz and dealers Andreas Melas and Mathieu Paris. (All photos: Cathryn Drake)

THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL Portugal Arte biennial—touted as the country’s biggest exhibition of contemporary art ever—blew into town last week so fast that it surprised even the denizens of its intimate art scene. With a population slightly larger than that of New York City, Portugal is home to people who all seem to know one another, but nobody seemed to know exactly what was about to hit them. “Usually biennials are embedded in the

community,” Kunsthalle Lissabon director Luis Silva said. “We have no information whatsoever. It’s like a UFO that just landed and we don’t know what’s inside.” I flew into town Thursday evening on the fresh breeze that had cooled down Lisbon while the rest of Europe simmered, and headed straight to the Kunsthalle.

The storefront space (which Silvia codirects with João Mourão) inhabits the once elegant former offices of the BES bank. Empty but for the ghostly outlines and electrical nerves of office cubicles, the dirty white room was punctuated with the recitation of 1,200 possible Show Titles proposed by artist Stefan Brüggenmann. Silva explained, “Instead of looking at the institution from a critical outsider position, we want to inhabit and examine the practice from the inside.” Mourão added, “But how can we be intellectual? We have a lamp that doesn’t even work! On the plus side, we have lots of outlets.” Upstairs we clattered through the fusty rooms to reach Pedro Barateiro’s studio, where the artist showed us the plans for his impending exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel, which will be followed by one at the decidedly more provisional institution downstairs. He told us he was waiting for Portugal Arte to pick up his work to be installed for the opening the next day, to which the curators exclaimed, “We didn’t know you were in the biennial!” It was getting late, so we repaired to local restaurant Forninho Saloio and ate blood sausage, giant steaks, and salted cod washed down with vinho verde—while Barateiro ran back and forth to

meet the delivery truck just before midnight.



Left: Curator Johannes VanDerBeek, Lisbon mayor António Costa, and Portugal Arte organizer Miguel Carvalho. Right: Artist Pedro Barateiro.

The next day the Portugal Arte press luncheon was held at the Fundação EDP's Electricity Museum, in the sponsoring power company's former plant. We were in the Belém district, the place from which many Portuguese explorers, including Vasco da Gama, set off to discover the world. Portugal looks across the Atlantic toward the Americas, and that is where most of the exhibition's one hundred-plus artists hail from, including the biggest-ever showing of Cuban artists outside of Cuba. Organized by entrepreneur Miguel Carvalho and curator Stefan Simchowitz, Portugal Arte has taken over Lisbon's meandering Pavilion of Portugal, built for Expo '98, and inserted site-specific installations in the squares of Lisbon and other provincial towns. Outside on the waterfront, Carvalho explained, "It is very much a public-oriented initiative; the point is to open up the system and give opportunities to new people." Hence the need to operate outside the

local art scene to put up a big show at top speed. “You can be idealistic, but it has been tried here many times without success, so I decided to be practical and focus.”

I began my tour with the opening of the Brooklyn-based collective Faile’s crumbling Temple on the Praça dos Restauradores. Decorated with ceramic tiles after the local style and tongue-in-cheek cartoons of Luca Della Robbia’s Renaissance reliefs, it fits seamlessly with its surroundings. Farther down the hill, the square called Rossio hosted Sterling Ruby’s Grid Ripper, a riff on Minimalist sculpture whose projecting bronze bars provide shade and seating; the Lisbon natives seemed quite comfortable using the art for practical purposes. (By Sunday some enthusiastic visitors to the Faile temple had broken the horse god’s scuba snorkel and it had to be locked up. The same day I saw children, with assistance from their father, punching the rubber balls in Martha Friedman’s stacked-egg piece, Laid.)

Arriving in time for the Friday evening inauguration at the Pavilion of Portugal, we were confronted by Yoan Capote’s striking visual joke Stress, a column of cement blocks sandwiched with rows of bronze teeth that appeared to be supporting Alvaro Siza’s gracefully swooping canopy suspended over the plaza. The six exhibitions, nearly all curated by Americans—including Garth Weiser, Johannes VanDerBeek, Dan Nadel, Fred Hoffman, Paul Young, and the three curators of the Cuban “Serendipity”—meandered throughout the irregular

maze of rooms. About midway through, I was no longer sure which was which, and the art all melded together somehow into a cohesive whole, much of it with an exuberant Pop sensibility. Somewhere along the way I ran into Palais de Tokyo director Marc-Olivier Wahler. “It is very fresh, with lots of surprises,” he noted. “Unlike most biennials where you see all the same faces.”



Left: Palais de Tokyo director Marc-Olivier Wahler and Ellen LeBlond-Schrader. Right: Artist Reynier Leyva Novo, Anna Moreira, and artist Duvier del Dago.

When I reached the reception in the courtyard, Lisbon mayor António Costa was working the crowd, and some of the Cuban artists—Reynier Leyva Novo, Duvier del Dago, Rodolfo Peraza, José Emilio Fuentes Fonseca (JEFF)—were hanging out happily together in a corner. When I asked him what he thought of the show, Pierpaolo Barzan, director of Rome’s Depart Foundation, said, “I saw the ‘Greater New York’ exhibition last week, and this show is much better in terms of seeing good new artists and work.”

The dinner that night at the slammed Cervejaria

Ramiro was a madhouse. The friendly waiters were enthusiastic but overwhelmed, so Simchowitz joined them, serving us shrimp of every shape and size. Artist Devon Costello teetered perilously amid the tables, and dealer Andreas Melas demanded a bottle of vodka, which magically appeared after the waiter insisted that it was normally not served. Artist Michael Phelan kindly supplied me with a very effective painkiller for a throbbing tooth, and shortly everything became a giddy blur.

While your average tourist might have chosen a trip to Sintra or the Algarve, the next morning we barreled south to the plains town of Grandola, or the “Capital of Freedom,” where the successful 1974 revolt against the fascist dictatorship began. A small town in a small country, it resembles a dusty Western ranch outpost, except the men wear natty driving caps instead of cowboy hats. After lunch on the main street at Talha de Azeite, decorated with the head of a wild boar, we walked across a tranquil plaza to the public library for the inauguration of part two of the Cuban exhibition “Serendipity.” As mayor and revolutionary hero Carlos Beato gave an emotional address about the importance of freedom and personal expression, the gathering took on the tone of a political rally. “I can picture him on top of a tank,” Barzan commented.





Left: Dealers Mathieu Paris, Xavier Hufkens, and Pierre Marie Giraud with curator Simon Castets. Right: Art consultant Sarah Basile and Andreas Melas.

The desolate road to the port of Troia, through a landscape of brilliant green fields interspersed with young piney woods and scrubby dunes, was broken only by the signboards of the “Billboard Project,” curated by LAXART’s Lauri Firstenberg and Cesar Garcia. Carvalho reminded us that we were passing by the biggest beaches in the world, after those of South Africa and California, which planted the seed of dissent. After a tour of the installations—including del Dago’s blue light installation *Intelligence, Defense and Security*, juxtaposing the specters of a missile and a shark—at the fifteen-story Troia boutique hotel, we departed for a barbecue at Carvalho’s country estate, set amid the cork plantations of Melides. Along the way a rowdy democratic vote over whether to stop at the beach ended suddenly with the loud expulsion of a champagne cork, and all heads turned toward a wet Phelan taking cover behind publisher Robert Norton.

At the hacienda, Phelan jumped into the pool while

the rest of us drank local Setúbal moscato while being serenaded a cappella by a crusty male quintet. Grilled pork and watermelon was served on picnic tables, and the whole thing resembled a family reunion. Every so often the loud crack of falling benches breaking under the weight of too many people could be heard. The last one went down just as António Zambujo began to perform romantic and mournful fado songs, whose words few of us could understand. But it could have been an elegy to the new Portugal Arte, which, like the country's sailors who left their sea widows behind, is only sticking around for a month.

— Cathryn Drake