

PO.EX

***ESSAYS FROM PORTUGAL
ON CYBERLITERATURE &
INTERMEDIA***

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PREFACE⁹

ANA HATHERLY

What drove me from literary and artistic Experimentalism onto the historical investigation of “visual text” was my discovery of a surprising technical resemblance between some of my compositions from the 1960’s and some Medieval and Baroque creations.

Impressed by this similarity, I subsequently began studying the European visual poetry that spread throughout the entire Middle Ages since the Alexandrine Greek re-flourishing during the Renaissance. The same visual poetry exploded during the Baroque period, disappeared during the nineteenth century, and reemerged transfigured in the twentieth century.

Being a European phenomenon, ancient visual poetry was nevertheless basically unknown in our time, and therefore I also felt the need to find traces of that tradition in Portuguese culture. For the sake of method, I limited my research to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period during which visual poetry underwent a remarkable development and expansion throughout Europe, including Portugal. After decades of thorough research, I was able to find countless examples of such poetic and artistic practices and published samples in diverse articles, some of which are included in *The Experience of the Prodigy*.¹⁰ In that publication, I not only compiled some of the “visual texts” I had found; I also sought to place them in their particular theoretical framework, thus illuminating their formal genesis and intentionality.

My research was not fueled by a desire to justify twentieth century visual poetry, as some European and American anthologists did in the 1970’s, elaborating impersonal and international panoramas of “visual texts” across the centuries without any theoretical support. Instead, my desire involved finding the roots of the visual text and following its path along the ages but also understanding its foundations. In addition, I wanted to establish what had happened in Portugal.

9 Ana Hatherly, “Prólogo,” from *A Casa das Musas*, 1995, pp. 9-14. Translation by Isabel Basto.

10 Original title: *A Experiência do Prodígio—Bases Teóricas e Antologia de Textos-Visuais Portugueses dos Séculos XVII e XVIII*, by Ana Hatherly, published by INCM—Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda, Lisbon, 1983.

In fact, it was an archaeological work, for the texts I was looking for were buried in national libraries, and most of them were submerged in oblivion. Their recovery was very difficult and lengthy because there were no clues to their locations. Yet, their existence had at one time been signaled, namely by deprecatory references here and there, for instance by Verney,¹¹ but their locations were problematic.

My efforts were finally rewarded, and I unveiled a remarkable production of “visual texts” from diverse categories, belonging to diverse groups and families I systematized.

As my research progressed and consolidated, I managed not only to reach some conclusions concerning the set of main categories of visual text produced during the Portuguese Baroque period (coinciding with those made throughout Europe and the colonized Americas) but also to find common denominators for them. The most interesting one to me was the fact that the texts involved compositions in which a *program* was a determining factor. Another one was the fact that such a program, besides an aesthetic value, had an experiential value, both for the author and for the reader.

As commonly known, one of the basic principles of Experimentalism is the conception and execution of a program, which validates and justifies the whole creative process, from conception to execution. But that process also works inversely—from execution to conception—because experimental work is a particular sort of discovery that teaches its author.

The program may therefore exist from the beginning, but its execution may lead to changes which in turn may originate new programs. The value is the experience, which is only valid and confirmed if the author and the reader are conscious of the effects of a successful work.

In *Maps of Imagination and Memory*,¹² I illustrated the value of the creative gesture’s awareness regarding my studies in Chinese archaic writing.

11 T.N.: Luís António Verney (1713–1792), Portuguese theologian, educational reformer and writer, who spent many years in Rome and is generally considered a major representative of the Enlightenment.

12 Original title: *Mapas da Imaginação e da Memória*, by Ana Hatherly, published by Moraes Editores, Lisbon, 1973.

I declared that my hand had become intelligent because as I performed I was able to observe, experimentally, the act of knowing.¹³

Already in 1967, in an article published in “Diário Popular,”¹⁴ I paraphrased Pedro Barbosa’s expanded translation of Abraham Moles’ *Art et Ordinateur*,¹⁵ referring to Experimentalism’s emphasis on artistic creation as a process in which “experience is the most significant factor.”¹⁶

Because some of the basic rules of twentieth century Experimentalism were surprisingly applicable to Experimentalism of the past, my perspective on the Experimental principle allowed me to understand ancient visual poems. Once their theoretical bases were known—especially in the labyrinths, anagrams, and texts in which combinatory process is privileged—the reward of bringing a program to completion became obvious, in and of itself. Those texts resorted to combination and permutation, and this feature made them resemble present day Experimentalism.

Moles, who in the 1960’s defined Permutational Art as the passage from an analytical world to a synthetic world, considered permutation not only one of the possibilities available to the creator (through much help of the computer), but also a sort of “rational thought’s fundamental instinct that allows for variety within uniformity” (133).

On the other hand, as I discussed in *A Reinvenção da Leitura* and my essay “Concrete Poetry and Experimentalism,” my research on the Baroque visual text led me to develop a new way of reading texts, images, and everything that is historically regarded as reading.

As highlighted in the article “Texto e Visualidade” in 1977, “the difficulty of deciding where the visual poem historically starts or ends would be identical

13 “Maps of Imagination and Memory,” *Mapas da Imaginação e da Memória*, by Ana Hatherly published by Moraes Editores, Lisbon, 1973.

14 T.N.: Lisbon’s daily newspaper with large national circulation between 1942 and 1991.

15 Future quotes of Moles are from Pedro Barbosa’s translation, an expanded version of the original.

16 “PO.EX—Texts and Documents from Portuguese Experimental Poetry,” *PO.EX - Textos e Documentos da Poesia Experimental Portuguesa*, by E. M. de Melo e Castro & Ana Hatherly, published by Moraes Editores, Lisbon, 1981.

to the difficulty of deciding where the poetic text historically starts and ends.”¹⁷ Yet we could actually broaden this issue if we state instead that the difficulty is deciding what writing is or is not, what representation is or is not, and last but not least, what reading is or is not.

This was one more point in which Experimentalism in the twentieth century converged with the practice of the Baroque visual text. Such convergence did not lie in the textual intentionality but rather in the poetic intentionality, with both coinciding in merging or overlapping ikon and logos, despite ideological and even programmatic differences.

Therefore, what I verified was the existence of a continuum that established a connection between the ancient and the modern that did not constitute a quarrel, but rather a kind of recognition or identification of family bonds. The continuum I found was that of the creative act as a process, one that must be brought to consciousness in order to be efficiently carried out.

The verification of such a continuum, as far as I’m concerned, does not justify repetition even though many European and American Experimentalists in the 1960’s and 1970’s imitated Baroque, Medieval, or Alexandrine texts. I believe the value of knowing those ancient texts lies in the certainty that those forms existed, that they remain in the general constellation of the arts where everything coexists. In such a constellation, the arts are available and valid in their horizon of expectations, and we may enjoy and appreciate them with no need to copy, although nothing prevents us from glossing them, reinventing them, and reintegrating them in our intertextual camaraderie.

The coincidence of verified methods in some cases confirms the validity and ductility of the process, allowing for its survival down to our own time because the cultural heritage is something we carry within us, even if unconsciously. Verifying the convergence of several creative processes between Baroque poetic creations and present ones has led the most conscientious Experimentalists to promote the often forgotten and ridiculed Baroque poets (authors of visual texts or not) and to adopt the defense of the Baroque and Mannerist tradition as the singular sign of their experimentation. Alongside

17 Original Portuguese (O.P.): “a dificuldade que haveria em decidir onde começa ou acaba historicamente o poema visual seria idêntica à dificuldade de decidir onde começa e acaba historicamente o texto poético.” (In: *O Espaço Crítico*, by Ana Hatherly, published by Caminho, Lisbon, 1979).

some poets illustrating the most radical avant-garde, Felix Krull and Luís de Camões appeared in the first issue of the magazine *Poesia Experimental* in 1964. They would become among the most beloved masters, glossed regularly by Melo e Castro and myself.

Portuguese Experimentalism's disruption of twentieth century poetry was not a rupture like Futurism, for instance, which postulates a total disconnection from the past and overrates the future. Experimentalist poems, rather, assume the present intervenes in poems, challenge academic and conventional features of non-experimental poems, and reconnects with tradition through style, as I noted in the article "Perspectivas para a Poesia Visual: Reinventar o Futuro."

The Portuguese Experimentalists practiced advanced theories from Linguistics, Structuralism, Semiotics, and Information Theory and inserted them in the international movement of concrete poetry. Those who defended Baroque poetry did so for three reasons:

1. because it was condemned by official criticism and, therefore, was subversive;
2. because the once abandoned procedural, rhetorical, and ludic values dynamically and beautifully reemerged in Baroque poetry's creative processes, visual or not; and
3. because the works contained idiosyncratic parallels that help us understand our contemporary mental structures and artistic sensibilities, a different view from the Postmodern idea of Neo-Baroque that emerged much later.

Without being followers of Eugenio d'Ors, we recognized quite a few aspects of the historic Baroque in a significant body of Portuguese poetry from the second half of the present century. Melo e Castro was committed to demonstrating this in the several timely studies he published on that subject.

The exotic and strange characteristic that the exhumed Baroque texts brought to our poetry—predominantly close to Neorealism or Surrealism—is similar to the effect brought by Picasso at the beginning of the century when he introduced African Art influences in "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon." I later glossed this overlap in a visual text.

In summation: innovation is always contingent, and one can innovate with the new just as one can innovate with the ancient because invention is a form of reinvention. Every reading is a rereading, and every rereading is a transformation. This is an eternal truth that nowadays has become perfectly clear.