

Speaker's Corner

by Joana Bértholo, August 2009

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Concept and edition by

Nuno Coelho e Adam Kershaw

Introduction texts by

Alban Biaussat, Alexandra Lucas Coelho, David Tartakover, Ferran Izquierdo Brichs, Ingrid

Quiroga, Joana Bértholo, Mat Ward, Maya Pasternak, Ruba Shahrour e Tiny Domingos

Speaker's Corner

My story with “A Land Without People for a People Without Land” begins on a corner in Berlin with “Ein Land Ohne Volk für Ein Volk Ohne Land”.

On this corner is Rosalux, a gallery where the streams of portuguese artistic production mix, joining the many bars and vernissages of the city. As if Berlin was just a neighbourhood between Alfama and Campo de Ouriqueⁱ. That same picturesque neighbourhood where I moved to in 2007 in search of a attitude in design that I was convinced didn't exist back home. Back then, I suffered from an acute expression of a syndrome which affects so many of us in Portugal. That of believing that good things are always and necessarily abroad. I was convinced that no one in the world of design from Monção to Sagresⁱⁱ would be concerned with the things I was concerned about. And that arrogance - asking to be destroyed - was then the driving force of my flight abroad. Where safely and fortunately, it was destroyed.

It was from outside, looking in, that I discovered the more engaged practices in our national design, and those things that catch my eye, the designers who pay attention and who are never satisfied with the pre-cooked and ready-to-eat state of things. Nuno Coelho is one of these designers, one that sees his practice as questioning territory. His concerns are quite explicit in the discourse of his work, and furthermore, he leaves us a space for our own levels of questioning, a mirror to our own concerns.

I must confess that the sheer fact of hearing the story of a designer who leaves his composed everyday life, in his quiet town of Cimbalinos and Francesinhasⁱⁱⁱ, to temporarily place himself in a context such as Israel and Palestine - this sort of story really moves me. I believe in the transformative power that such action has at an individual level, when one allows oneself to be vulnerable and exposed. And I believe above all - because it does not seem feasible that we can all travel to the too-many places like this that exist around the world – I believe in the role of design and communication to then de-multiply these individual experiences. This will of course never replace a trip to the site, nor will it allow us to see for ourselves how the Wall tears someone's backyard apart, or walk by the children who despite everything insist on running around playing with each other, or simply sit down with people and share a meal - but it is something achievable each of us can do from our individual stands, a place of empathy, of resistance to the alienation that society today - especially the media – imposes on us. Or, rather – *proposes to us in a forceful way*. Because to say *impose* would be to deny our critical ability to distance ourselves and to try to be better informed. To reflect and engage. As Nuno did.

Such alienation is, as is known, the result of having our media constantly saturated with images of violence and atrocities that, despite happening everywhere, are presented to us as remote. Although they happen to people who are people like us, it is presented to us as the realities of Others. Thus it is that,

*"the more remote or exotic the place is,
the more likely we will be given front view images of dead or
dying"*

as Susan Sontag confronts us in her mortifying essay Regarding the Pain of Others^{iv}. Reminding us of how skewed this filtered trivialization of suffering by the media is. And begging us to reflect on what kind of ethics and humanity may arise from that.

What “**A Land Without People for a People Without Land**” is proposing to us is an alternative to such a homogeneously "pornoviolent" discourse (and homogeniser of the experience of feeling, more than anything). In this case, a playful language that appropriates child-like language codes, but that communicates both to adults and kids. A speech that also lives off the shock and off some sort of violence over our senses - after all, it is not a peaceful subject - but that doesn't exploit or market it. We are invited to come into contact with barbarism without having to revel in it.

And that is not only an intelligent strategy, but also one that could be further applied to different contexts and discourses. As is the case of another project I came to discover thanks to the curiosity Nuno's work aroused in me. I went looking for how graphic designers were connecting with the Israeli-Arab issue, and that search led me to the work of designer Annelys de Vet. This Dutch designer, along with Palestinian designers and artists, composed the Subjective Atlas of Palestine^v, a stunning document that opens the door for us to many facets of the conflict that would never reach us by other means. There are no pierced or tortured bodies, but instead paradisiacal landscapes and the urban daily life. A humanized vision of a war setting, pacified by images of gastronomy, music, poetry and all those small narratives that make up the days. All this led me to reflect on the privileged position that designers can occupy, which allows them to generate and offer alternatives to what is offered by conventional media. They can not only send messages that would not normally pass the filter of the usual numbing speech but also design objects that will illustrate and materialize other perceptions of reality. In particular, alternatives to current separatist thinking, or alternatives to the understanding of conflicts through the ruling white-black or victim-villain logics.

That said, I do not think this is achieved or is embodied in “**A Land Without People for a People Without Land**”. Neither does it seem that this was this project's intention. This is perhaps merely a concern that speaks to me, as one more element of the audience and as someone who likes to think about design and communication.

How to generate alternatives to a dual approach that ultimately perpetuates the conflict? How to stop the staging of villains and victims by media coverage? How is it that, more specifically, this would be materialized in a project such as Nuno and Adam's, that yes, gives us a valuable human testimony of what it is to be Palestinian today, and calls to our empathy and thus fights the disconnection and indifference, but that doesn't tell us anything about being Israeli, about dealing with power, about dealing with endless cycles of history and collective traumatic experiences^{vi} where - does time heal all wounds? - the Israelis were also victims and dominated.

How to break the cycle?

The aforementioned Susan Sontag has also said:

"To remember is, increasingly, not only to evoke a story but to be able to summon an image. (...) The problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only through photographs. (...) This recall overshadows other ways of understanding."^{vii}

What other ways of understanding could be evoked here? Or of what other forms of understanding can we refer to, beyond this essay? What other ways of perceiving the conflict are there, which do not perpetuate it? When is there an action that does not trigger a reaction, to the infinity of time and human capacity to fight, kill, and extinguish?

What does this have to do with design?

Is this critical ability, and this knowledge of global economics and politics, something that design has to encompass? What kind of megalomaniac task and super-social responsibility is being required here of individuals who, after all, are social actors like everyone else (marked only by this privileged access to the means of information)?

Needless to say, any author or creator (a designer, a film director, etc) who proposes himself to do something as Nuno has done, does not set himself an easy task. Much more than the specific question of a specific conflict, he must be aware of the interdependence of global events, and aware of their reflection at a local level. Aware that we live in an increasingly interconnected world. Aware of the danger of emphasizing the same victim-villain speech mentioned above.

Aware of, aware of, aware of... or, simply, *Aware*.

In my view, that which is increasingly being asked of designers who want to operate in real spaces of resistance and create alternatives to the hegemonic thinking is an expansion of consciousness. And this can only be done by each individual. So, yes: it has all the relevance of an individual who would leave the sphere of his predictable life to go to a place so dense and rich in paradoxes as this one. And who returns and multiplies the proposals and possibilities for a new perception. Now, of course, all of this implies a level of out of the ordinary individual commitment.

But this expectation exists today, I would say very much present and active, around designers and the discourse on design. The very context in which we move is provocative, and it doesn't allow us to maintain ourselves in a compassionate or negligent attitude. The tension is not any longer simply a matter of getting an object to communicate or not to communicate, it is much more what is communicated.

What kind of values are conveyed in each of the large format, white posters of “**A Land Without People for a People Without Land**”? What kind of ethical space is it that they open for us? What type of world view do they propose? Which alternative humanity do they call for? Is it one

more paraphrase of the separatist and dualistic way of thinking that has brought us to this state of global conflict? Do they represent more of the same?

It is possible to go on and on - and on - exploring these issues. At the heart there will always be ethical and relational issues that I do not know how to defend within the scope of a discourse about graphic design. And at the same time I cannot conceive that they are omitted.

I value “**A Land Without People for a People Without Land**” especially for being rich and complex enough to enable us to derive a questioning process. And the most ironic thing is how everything in it is given in an apparently childish language, visual education exercises seemingly harmless, a seemingly mild ludo-therapy.

All this takes me back to the corner of Strelitzerstraße with Elisabethkirschestraße (I say this again to give it that exotic touch and to make it clear that we were not actually in a neighbourhood between Alfama and Campo de Ourique, even though we could hear Portuguese being spoken and we were drinking red wine), to the Rosalux gallery, where I first met Nuno. It was October, maybe November, but it was as cold as January. The space was small but cosy, an almost circular setting, covered with white posters in large format all the way around. It was filled with beautiful people sipping wine in coffee cups, slowly relaxing while forgetting the cold outside. Berlin, after all.

As I have this bad habit of arriving too early for these kinds of things, I had the opportunity to watch the slow colouring of the posters from blank - or almost blank. With only very subtle proposals traced in black, those of Nuno. And how, when I left, they had their own colour and their very own narrative. Possible only in that space and with those people.

Is this what participatory design is? I like it.

Lots of relevant things stayed in the air that night. Other prolonged in my spirit well beyond that corner meeting. In the future, I would come to read and experience other things that would be linked with and re-designing my own perception of that work that I once saw in a small corner gallery, the one with the large posters that both kids as adults could colour, the one which showed that the Wall of Palestine is almost three times higher than that of Berlin.

And worse – it is still standing.

FOOTNOTES:

ⁱ Two very typical and picturesque neighbourhoods of Lisbon.

ⁱⁱ Southern and Northern extremes of Portugal.

ⁱⁱⁱ Typical from the city of Porto, where Nuno comes from: a coffee and a very unique meat dish.

^{iv} Sontag, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

^v "Subjective Atlas of Palestine", www.annelysdevet.nl

^{vi} The complex narrative of this region where three continents meet, the old relations between different neighbours in the region, make us remember what Winston Churchill said, referring to the Balkans: "The Balkans produce more history than they can consume".

^{vii} Sontag, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.