

**Giving the Voice as an Act of Radical Care:
The Case of Ângela Ferreira's Towers**

Amadea Kovič

Abstract

This paper takes as its starting point Portuguese multimedia artist Ângela Ferreira's series of towers, building on her initial three-part installation *For Mozambique (2008): Talk Tower for Ingrid Jonker (2012), Talk Tower for Diego Rivera (2017), and Talk Tower for Forough Farrokhzad (2020)*. The towers, employing Ferreira's continuous navigation between sculpture, installation, and architecture through a decolonial perspective, are highlighting the work of past activist artists working in diverse historical, social, and geographical circumstances, whose voices were suppressed and censored when appearing in their original contexts.

Building on Hobart and Kneese's definition of radical care as essential yet "underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds" (2020, 2), this paper aims to examine Ferreira's towers as acts of radical care, enabling the activist voices to bridge the temporal and spatial gaps by reaching contemporary audiences, as well as emphasizing the need for collective attention to dangers of various forms of oppression and censorship. The purpose of this critical analysis is to therefore investigate the ways in which Ferreira's caring for the voices once silenced balances between past and present, foregrounding the importance of activist artistic work and arguing for its necessary protection.

Bio note

Amadea Kovič is a third-year PhD student of the International Doctoral Program in Culture Studies of the Lisbon Consortium at the Faculty of Human Sciences – Universidade Católica Portuguesa with the support of the EDP Foundation. With her background in Art History and Slovene Studies, her research interests include contemporary and activist visual art. Her

ongoing PhD research focuses on investigating contemporary feminist visual art production in Portugal and Slovenia.

Introduction

In the key moment of March 2020, a special issue of *Social Text* was published, edited by Hi‘ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese. The topic of the issue was as timely as ever, as the editors decided to dedicate the issue to the topic of care, specifically types of strategies developed either collectively or individually in light of institutional and infrastructural inefficiency (Hobart, and Kneese 2020, 3), as well as examining »the meaning of care as a set of acts, ideologies, and strategies that offer possibilities for living through uncertain times« (2020, 13). The issue was focusing on examining care from the angle of radical care, emerging from the relationships between past and present. Thus, radical care naturally exists at the intersection between an individual and a community, particularly in relation to changing societal perspectives regarding categories such as citizenship, class, gender, race, and sexuality (Hobart, and Kneese 2020, 3).

Few months after the publication of the issue of *Social Text* dedicated to the topic of radical care, *Talk Tower for Forough Farrokhzad* (2020) was exhibited at the Appleton in Lisbon, the latest in the series of towers by Portuguese multimedia artist Ângela Ferreira. The raw industrial look of an emblematic construction of exposed metal was intersected by the stark contrast with bright yellow elements; drawings and photographs were attached to the grey wall in a narrow line, images of Forough Farrokhzad and Ferreira’s sketches for the production of the tower exhibited in front. Nonetheless, the core of the sculpture lied in its impalpable element: the soft-spoken voice embracing the visitor with a poetry reading coming from the speakers. The structure was completed by the sound, with its material sphere being incomplete without the non-material.

Building on Hobart and Kneese (2020)’s understanding of radical care, this contribution aims to examine Ferreira’s series of multisensorial installations, starting with a three-part installation *For Mozambique* (2008) and continuing with *Talk Tower for Ingrid Jonker* (2012), *Talk Tower for Diego Rivera* (2017), and *Talk Tower for Forough Farrokhzad* (2020). For the purpose of this critical analysis, Ferreira’s towers will be examined as acts of radical care, reproducing the activist voices questioning and influencing the normative expectations of their surroundings. The towers are built as multisensorial sculptures with a clear emphasis on the aspect of interdisciplinarity, constructed as convergences of four core material and non-

material elements: sound, sculpture, installation and architecture. Through interlocking of these key elements, Ferreira delves into issues of representation and memory by reproducing the activist voices of the past from various timeframes and geographical locations, highlighting how the complexities of multiple relations between past and present are being intertwined and reproduced through contemporary social structures of inequality. Building on the gap between voice and its reception, depending on the context within which the towers are being exhibited, Ferreira's installations become acts of radical care, accentuating the importance as well as plurality of obstacles for the reception of a critical activist artistic message within various contexts.

From sculpture to sound: the genealogy of (non-)materiality

The field of sound studies has been in recent years emancipating from an array of neighbouring fields focusing on various sonic aspects, such as music, film, and television studies, as well as cinema and media studies, naturally concerned with »the *convergence of sound and screen*« (Hilmes 2008, 115). Furthermore, the formation of the term Sound Art can be traced back into the sixties, when it was first introduced

»to describe sonic activities taking place outside the concert hall: interactive installations, listening walks, environmental recordings, open duration sound events—even “happenings” and performance art were occasionally lumped under this rubric. For many years Sound Art remained an interstitial activity, falling between music and visual art, embraced fully by neither« (Collins 2013, 1).

While ‘sound art’ naturally has its roots in the field of musicology, most of the discourse over the recent years has been developed within the fields of art history and philosophy (Schwartz 2014, 197). Furthermore, with the expressions of sound art becoming more versatile in recent years and sound artists coming from various fields, sound art is no longer considered to be a form of art produced only by composers but also by performers (Schwartz 2014, 199). Furthermore, with the evident emergence of installation and performance art, sound has become an increasingly essential element for distinct artistic practices within diverse disciplines of contemporary art – often operating in liminal spaces defined by disciplinary borders. With the increasing number of artists bridging the gaps between mediums, exploring new possibilities emerging from employing transdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to artistic practices, a new term rose out of the intersection

between sculpture and sound: 'sound sculpture', exploring the marginal spaces of postmodernist era (Phillips 1996, 29).

The term was coined out of necessity to describe the surge of artists working with the mix of sound and sculpture from the 1960s onward. At the time, Charles Mattox has been creating his 'audio-kinetic sculptures', producing sounds in order to engage with the technologization of contemporary society and its rising influence on the artistic practices as well (Mattox 1969, 355). Bill Fontana has been working on his sound sculptures since 1974 already, exploring how taking sound from one context and reinserting it in another one causes its redefinition (Fontana 1987, 143). In 1987, the Baschet brothers questioned whether their constructions fall within the category of instruments or sculptures; describing them as »a synthesis of shapes, sounds and public participation«, they had developed the following distinction:

»When we work for an art gallery, museum or community center, the shape comes first and we call the work a 'sculpture'. When we work for musicians, the sound comes first; the shape becomes the support or packaging of the sound. Then we call the work a 'structure'« (Baschet 1987, 108).

By the time of 1980s, many sculptors had already began incorporating sound within their sculptures in various forms, from including audio tapes within installations to portraying acoustics; despite this obvious increasing interest in the possibilities of sound expanding beyond its imminent horizon, these early attempts had little success when trying to justify their existence as artworks (Emery, and Morriss 1986, 207). In 2011, the first "Sound Art Theories" symposium was organised, hosted by the Sound Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, providing one of the first attempts to contextualise the increasingly growing presence of sound for various art practices, and by 2013, "Sound Art clearly has been accepted as an identifiable musical genre, an art world commodity, and a subject of critical study" (Collins 2013, 1).

Between architecture and installation: From *Maison Tropicale* (2007) to *For Mozambique* (2008)

For Mozambique (model n°1, n°2 and n°3), a three-part installation comprised of wood, steel cable, and two video projections, revolves around two key historical turns separated by approximately five decades. The first one marks the moments after the Russian revolution in

the 1920s, and the second one the initial era of newly independent Mozambique in the 1970s. The *For Mozambique* installation is one of the most recent examples of Ferreira's continuous exploration of the intersection between architecture and installation, enabling the artist to highlight evolving power relations and connections between various types of inequality and oppression present and reproduced within social structures.

The *For Mozambique* installation followed a year after one of Ferreira's most visible projects: *Maison Tropicale*, which attracted international attention as a Portuguese submission for the 2007 Venice Biennale. The project was developed as a reference to Jean Prouvé's *Maison Tropicale* (1949), which was designed as an easily portable house to be transported to and later assembled in French colonies in Africa at the time. With only three prototypes being produced and sent to Africa, the project never reached its potential of a large-scale production, but today serves as a testimony of its original historical context. Exhibited as a passage, referencing Prouvé's *Maison Tropicale* with materials and shapes used, Ferreira's *Maison Tropicale* serves as a reminder of the recency of colonial past, foreshadowing the path Ferreira's work took in the next year, highlighting the ways past injustices are still reflected today through a mixture of architecture and installation.

A year after *Maison Tropicale* took part in the Venice Biennale, Ferreira further explored the possibilities for activist element of the artwork stemming from the connection between installation and architecture within the three-part installation *For Mozambique* (2008). The core of the structure carrying the *For Mozambique* installation was inspired by kiosks developed in another key historical moment after the civil war in Russia. Introduced in 1922 when the newly born Soviet Union was shaping itself, they were developed by the constructivist Russian artist Gustav Klutss, who was born in Latvia and later on moved to Moscow. Adapting formal characteristics of a kiosk that initially served as a means of propaganda in the immediate post-war context, Ferreira repurposed the visual structure as a means of depicting the hope for a better future surrounding the initial era of the post-colonial Mozambique.

In various ways, the three-part installation presents the origin of the three subsequent towers Ferreira made in the following decade, with the first tower, *Talk Tower for Ingrid Jonker*, following in 2012 and the last one, *Talk Tower for Forough Farrokhzad*, in 2020. Nonetheless, while the *For Mozambique* installation was built most strongly on the visual effect of the presented videos, a clear shift was made within the three subsequent towers, focusing on supporting the material aspect with the non-material aspect of acoustics.

Reproducing the voice: *Talk Tower for Ingrid Jonker* (2012)

Four years after the *For Mozambique (model n°1, n°2 and n°3)* installation, Ferreira further developed the idea of using the structure initially used for propaganda purposes as a means of highlighting activist artistic voices. Reaching almost three meters in height, the core of the *Talk Tower for Ingrid Jonker* (2012) was embodied in speakers amplifying the voice of a South African poet and activist Ingrid Jonker (1933–1965). Jonker, a daughter of Abraham Jonker, a visible political figure at the time who was responsible for enforcing strict censorship laws, grew up to be a public opponent and critic of those same laws. Her inability to conform her personal and public life to the strict rules of society culminated in a suicide before the age of thirty-two, but the collection of her work left behind offers a clear narrative about her fight with oppressive systems in place at the time, trying to suppress her critical voice.

Expanding from Klutsis' kiosk already used as a starting point for the *For Mozambique* installation, Ferreira referenced another key architectural work that originated in a similar time and place. In a similar manner as Klutsis' kiosks, Shukhov's radio tower (Shabolovka Tower) was built in the post war context of early 1920s near Moscow. Ferreira used these two influences with a link to the post-colonial context in Mozambique. The tower is used to reproduce the voice reading Jonker's famous poem *Die Kind (The Child)*. Jonker wrote the poem in response to the shooting of a child at the protest in Sharpeville in 1960, and it was most famously reproduced when it was recited decades later in the context of Nelson Mandela's inauguration speech in 1994.

Relation as a process: *Talk Tower for Diego Rivera* (2017)

The third in the series of Ferreira's towers was made out of a variety of materials, offering a visually more intricate composition than the previous tower; from iron and wood to aluminium and PVC, combined with a megaphone at the top, amplifying the sound. Offering a bit smaller yet wider dimensions than the *Talk Tower for Ingrid Jonker*, it expanded close to two meters in height. While the tower dedicated to Jonker reproduced the once silenced voice of the poet, the *Talk Tower for Diego Rivera* was built with a focus on the symbiotic yet troubled relationship between Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, whose intense relationship can be traced to deep marks in both of their very diverse artistic productions. With visual references to the preparatory work done for Rivera's magnum opus, the *Pan American Unity* (1940) mural, such as a sketch done of a at the construction site in California, in comparison to the previous one

this tower focuses less on the final result of the artist's work – as embodied in Jonker's poetry – but rather on a process of creation and the influence both artists had on each other's work during their creative processes.

As a counterpart to the visual references to Rivera's work on the *Pan American Unity* (1940) mural, Kahlo's influence is embodied through the amplified voice reading out her correspondence to him. If Rivera is within the context of the tower symbolically referenced through its visual aspect, Kahlo is presented through the means of her voice, embodying the productive nature of both artists' relationship in question, melding personal and work-related aspects; the combination of both sound and visual elements allows for a complete installation that functions both in visual as well as the acoustic realm. Furthermore, it is important to note that a year after presenting the *Talk Tower for Diego Rivera* (2017), Ferreira again referenced Rivera's *Pan American Unity* mural when creating the *Pan African Unity Mural* (2018), a large-scale multi-disciplinary work combining paintings, drawings and sculptures referencing and intertwining work and life of the South African activist singer and songwriter Miriam Makeba, American fugitive George Wright/Jorge dos Santos, and Ferreira herself. Ferreira centered the work around a tower, similar to the towers previously dedicated to Jonker and Rivera.

Within the context of Ferreira's work, it is crucial to consider the role of recording within the artistic process, acting both as an element of disjunction as well as convergence; recording has enabled both temporal as well as spatial separation of the sonic and visual element of the same event, opening up new possibilities for performance (Rose 2013, 65). Traditionally, a gallery space demands silence (Cluett 2013, 92), and an artistic intervention has the potential to break down this convention.

Memory and poetry: *Talk Tower for Forough Farrokhzad* (2020)

The most recent of Ferreira's towers was dedicated to the Iranian poet and filmmaker Forough Farrokhzad (1934–67). Similarly as Jonker, Farrokhzad lived a turbulent and unconventional life which led to temporary public prohibition of her poetry. A continuous advocate of women's rights, her poems were at the same time political as well as intimate. Formally, the *Talk Tower for Forough Farrokhzad* (2020) combines the visual characteristics of Klutis's kiosk and the Shabolovka Tower, already found in the previous towers, and the Milad Tower located in Tehran. With just five centimetres short of three meters, the solid structure composed mainly with iron and aluminium is the highest among the three towers in question. Accompanied by

twelve small graphite drawings, as well as an amplifier and megaphones reproducing a more than four minutes long loop of Farrokhzad reading her famous poem *Tavalodi Digar*. Written in 1964, *Tavalodi Digar (Another Birth)* reflects on the meaning of life and the value of memory.

There is a particular dedication to highlighting voice within Ferreira's towers as a source of information that can be either understood or not; while a poem read in its original language will most likely not be understood by many visitors of the exhibition space, the message expressed by the poet is universal. The artwork is built on the evident paradox of reproducing the artist's message in a form and context that does not enable its reception in terms of immediate understanding, but rather highlights the multiplicity of obstacles for its reception, thus acting as a commentary on the suppression of the activist voice within its original context.

Entering the sound sphere as an act of radical care

Ferreira's series of towers exhibits a curious development of the symbiotic relationship between sound and visual effect in order to highlight the correlation between a silenced voice and its oppressive context. In comparison to the *For Mozambique* installation, in which the disturbance in question is expressed through the video, the first of the towers, dedicated to Jonker, focuses more visibly on the sound, Jonker's most prominent tool of defying the oppressive society. Furthermore, the second tower made less of an emphasis on the product of Rivera's work – the *Pan American Unity* (1940) mural – as much as serving as a testimony to the creative processes that led to its creation, embodied within a life-lasting multi-layered relationship he shared with Kahlo. As such, the second tower is most strongly dedicated to the cooperation between two different sensorial experiences – sonic and visual – symbolically representing Rivera and Kahlo and unifying in a joint and stronger multisensorial experience, making a reference to their creative connection. In case of the third tower, Ferreira kept the focus most strictly on sound reproducing Farrokhzad's poetry, with visual elements in the form of drawings and photographs providing supporting meaning enabling for a deeper understanding of the art work.

Examining the three towers as a series rather than individual occurrences, they become acts of radical care as they focus on the broader context of particular activist messages, embodied within systems that either enable or suppress the activist artistic voices, and are still being reproduced in various forms within the diverse spatial, geographical, and historical

contexts. They serve as a commentary on an array of social inequalities and injustices, spanning from past to present, and the role of institutions in this discourse on power. Rather than on a particular message itself, the towers, as examined together, highlight the necessity for the existence of activist artistic voices in general.

Conclusion

Ângela Ferreira's towers, following the *For Mozambique* (2008) installation, – *Talk Tower for Ingrid Jonker* (2012), *Talk Tower for Diego Rivera* (2017), and *Talk Tower for Forough Farrokhzad* (2020) – are built on the convergence of material and non-material building elements, together serving as a careful consideration of the journey from a production of an audible sound carrying an activist message to its reception. For an activist message to create an impact, an array of circumstances needs to be aligned and considered; from the context within which the message is presented to the reach of the intended audience. As such, Jonker, Rivera, Kahlo and Farrokhzad present examples of activist artistic voices that were facing considerable obstacles within their immediate environments, obstructing the reception of their critical messages. Reproducing the artists' voices through an audible channel incorporated within installations inspired by structures which were in their original contexts used for propaganda purposes, the towers together serve as acts of radical care, highlighting the multiplicity of obstacles that activist artists have been facing across space and time in various circumstances, societies and regimes rather than focusing only on the content of singular and fragmented messages.

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