

# Contemporary art in Historical Monuments

## The Case of Joana Vasconcelos in Versailles



2012

### Results

The exhibition of Joana Vasconcelos at Versailles aimed to estimate and question the scope that such an event had in the design of the diffusion of contemporary art, through a historical monument. All this while ensuring and seeing the proper resurrection of the castle, thanks to the harmonious fantasies of the Portuguese artist, following in the footsteps of many artists who had the same intentions.

The artist's entire exhibition is conceived as an invasion of space through color, shape and material. Joana Vasconcelos galvanized Versailles by means of its works. Her meticulous visit, the analysis of the colors and techniques used, the consideration of the light, the volumes allowed to not just propose a dialogue but create a real microcosm in this universe, where gold predominates. Indeed, colors and materials were adopted according to the story told in the room concerned but more broadly, according to the luxurious and rich character of the castle. The instrumentalization of Versailles allowed in this way to account for multiple realities, using history for didactic purposes.

Thereby, leaving the museum become a real ambition for contemporary artists, in order to renew the traditional means of exhibition. Artists who have had the opportunity to undertake or share contemporary art exhibitions in historic monuments or unusual places, link this experience to an unprecedented and singular stimulation. Furthermore, the place concerned is put in front of its own contradictions and allowed by definition, to reconsider the rooted model from the creation of museum. To occupy, invade, parasitize the spaces of an ancient heritage is more captivating or even enriching because we are immersed, submerged in an environment, an atmosphere, a daring atmosphere, which disturbs.

This fusion of the architectural framework and the work is achieved through an approach of global appropriation on the part of the artist. After having grasped the aura of the ancient heritage and taken into consideration the latter, the artist forges his work, which by its addition to the collections, objects, to the pre-existing architecture gives rise to a complete work of art, something astonishing, fabulous, whimsical, fantastic, impressive, unexpected, unusual, magical... It is not a question of understanding this plan as a past/present confrontation but rather of seeing it more as an exchange, an interdependence, a renewal, a testing, a unique interactivity close to symbiosis, an evolution of the vision we can have of the place, unlike the museum (which presents the works as the finality of an epoch and/or a history). Any works put in relation give rise to a disruption, a progression, a metamorphosis of what was present before, as an extension of the site in time.

In this case, to exhibit in the Palace of Versailles for the artist was to show an extension of his studio, as witness to his eccentricity. The artist took advantage of the place as much as the monument takes advantage of it. Recognized as « a visual punch in this attack of space by color », Joana Vasconcelos stood out with derisions, while being the spokesperson of the Portuguese culture. In this way, she maintained the ceramics, textiles and popular traditions, which are important in Portugal, mainly carried out by women. This event contributed to reawaken these spaces. To reveal Versailles was to awaken the past strata that make up this domain and thus to show it in a new light. This is also qualified as risk-taking because intervening in such a place provides an opportunity to review the limits of this field, to see what is feasible and acceptable. As a living entity, Versailles never ceases to be reinvented, changing, evolving over time, societies, styles, etc. as a factory in constant search.



Vasconcelos Joana, Gardes, 2012, installation, part Laurent marble (Pakistan) lions and bases, Azores crocheted lace, (2x) 200 x 65 x 110 cm, Collection de l'artiste, Courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels and Haunch of Venison, London, la Salle des Gardes, Château de Versailles, Versailles, in CHOUGNET Jean-François, etc. Joana Vasconcelos, Catalogue d'exposition, 2012, p. 58-59.



Vasconcelos Joana, Blue Champagne, 2012, installation, Pommeury PDP Champagne bottles, metallized and thermo lacquered iron, ultra bright LEDs, electric system, (2x) 940 x 8 496 cm, Collection of the artist, Courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels, Haunch of Venison, London (Work produced with the support of Frank Pommeury), le Parterre d'Eau, Parc du domaine du Château de Versailles, Versailles, in CHOUGNET Jean-François, etc. Joana Vasconcelos, Catalogue d'exposition, 2012, p. 90.



Vasconcelos Joana, Marilyn, 2011, installation, stainless steel pans and lids, concrete, (2x) 290 x 157 x 410 cm, Collection of the artist, Courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels and Haunch of Venison, London (Work produced with the support of Silampos), la Galerie des Glaces, Château de Versailles, Versailles, in CHOUGNET Jean-François, etc. Joana Vasconcelos, Catalogue d'exposition, 2012, p. 35.

### Abstract

This research develops the issue of contemporary art exhibitions in Historical Monuments, more specifically the case of Joana Vasconcelos in the castle of Versailles, which took place in 2012.

Contemporary art exhibitions in ancient places have been in effect since Antiquity. Writings concerning this phenomenon began to expand after World War II, during the period of Reconstruction, in the 1970s. From the early contemporary inclusions in church, the purpose of this study is to see why contemporary art into public space and in Monuments, amplified at the end of the 20th century and has continued to grow into the 21st century in unusual places. Thereby, understanding the importance but also the phenomenal success of this type of presentation of current works in an old place, with historical significance has become necessary. Moreover, this is an opportunity to get a glimpse as to why many historical monuments lend themselves to this daring game, linking the past to present and vice versa, with a concern for modernization, and updating, which can be a source of debate. Then, thanks to luxurious pieces of art by Joana Vasconcelos, it is interesting to ask ourselves about the need for a historical environment so that this type of art can exist. It also comes down to putting the chosen place in front of its own contradictions, and therefore to reconsidering the rooted model which is the museum now, for generations.

Exhibiting in these new places allows us to come out of the traditional museum. This is an invitation to understand the process of appropriation of the artist, who merges his work with the architectural framework, while creating renewal, testings, an evolution of the vision we can have, but above all, an unprecedented dialogue between the old and the new.



contemporary art exhibition  
in situ installation scenography  
public interaction scandal  
artist-curator historical heritage  
immersion



Vasconcelos Joana, Coração Independente Vermelho or Red Independent Heart, 2005, suspended installation, translucent red plastic cutlery, painted iron, metal chain, motor, sound installation : songs performed by Amália Rodrigues: Estranha Forma de Vida (Strange Way of Life) (Alfredo Rodrigues Duarte/José Rodrigues), Maldição (Curse) (Joaquim Campos da Silva), 371 x 220 x 75 cm, Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon, Salon de la Paix, Château de Versailles, Versailles in CHOUGNET Jean-François, etc. Joana Vasconcelos, Catalogue d'exposition, 2012, p. 31 et 137.

### Discussion

Despite clear analysis and rich content, this dissertation nevertheless contains the appearance of several negative points. Various questions remain outstanding such as : Is it a clash of cultures ? What does it bring to the opposition between French identity and Portuguese identity ? Can we consider these exhibitions as « exploitation of artists » by Versailles ? Could the exhibition of Joana Vasconcelos have helped to restore the image of Versailles in society ? To what extent is the implementation of this cultural policy possible ? When is patronage a part of exhibitions at Versailles ? For which real audiences ?

To go further, two points would be interesting to develop :

We might even wonder whether this exhibition can claim itself as political art, or political artistic commitment. Because the artist defends values, works and speaks about gender and women, denounces past inequalities related to the status and role of women, eminently current notions. Her work contributes to the emancipation of women because she is concerned with what has happened in her country and also touched by the woman-artist who must self-proclaim and defend her ideals in the world of contemporary art still monopolized by men. Is it a feminist approach to art ? What does it mean to be feminist ?

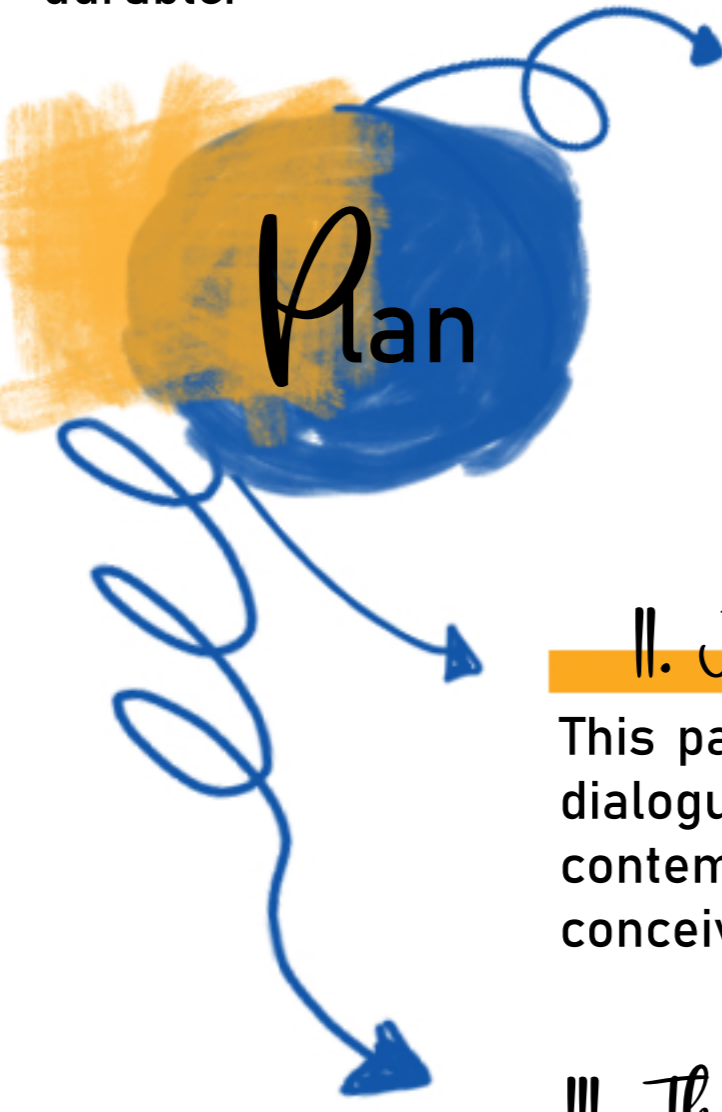
Then, the question of the reuse of Historical Monuments in the service of contemporary art arose. The reuse of the classified and protected monumental heritage is now systematic since the creation of the Service of Historical Monuments in the 19th century. What is the future of these monuments and how to preserve them ? How to avoid the abandonment of those monuments and give them a second chance ? What types of reuse are possible ? Therefore it is this second point that will be developed in a second dissertation, with the help of another French case study : the castle of Saint-Pierre-de-Vangeville (Normandie) which became the centre of contemporary art of the MATMUT.

### Introduction

Taking care of the ancient historical heritage is a heavy burden, which has been complicated over the centuries and which continues to grow. From that moment on, professionals are certainly faced with a dilemma. Should we keep our historical monuments in their current situations, which means at this time ?

To consider the exhibition of contemporary art in the Historical Monuments, is to show this dialogue which is mutating more and more today, to renew itself and to make an impression thanks to the surprising artistic processes, in these ancient places that have change just as much. Accordingly, exposing implies the discovery or rediscovery of ancient heritage, from a new angle. This necessarily raises questions of valorization, protection, conservation (and the resulting constraints), or even denaturation of the monument and of the current works. It is a question of being able to see how and why these contemporary art exhibitions in these monuments are multiplying but also experiencing a high level of success. Giving free rein to artists to adapt the collections with their works is a phenomenal achievement. Modernising historical heritage necessarily leads then to a dialogue between ancient works and contemporary creations. Why do we call artists to revitalize these ensembles when there are art professionals (curators, independent curators, scenographers, museographers, etc.) who are qualified for such projects ?

In this way, the example of the exhibition of the Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos at the Versailles palace and estate (2012) will be our common guiding principle, in order to understand this invitation and proposal of unprecedented and unique experience.



### I. Situational analysis

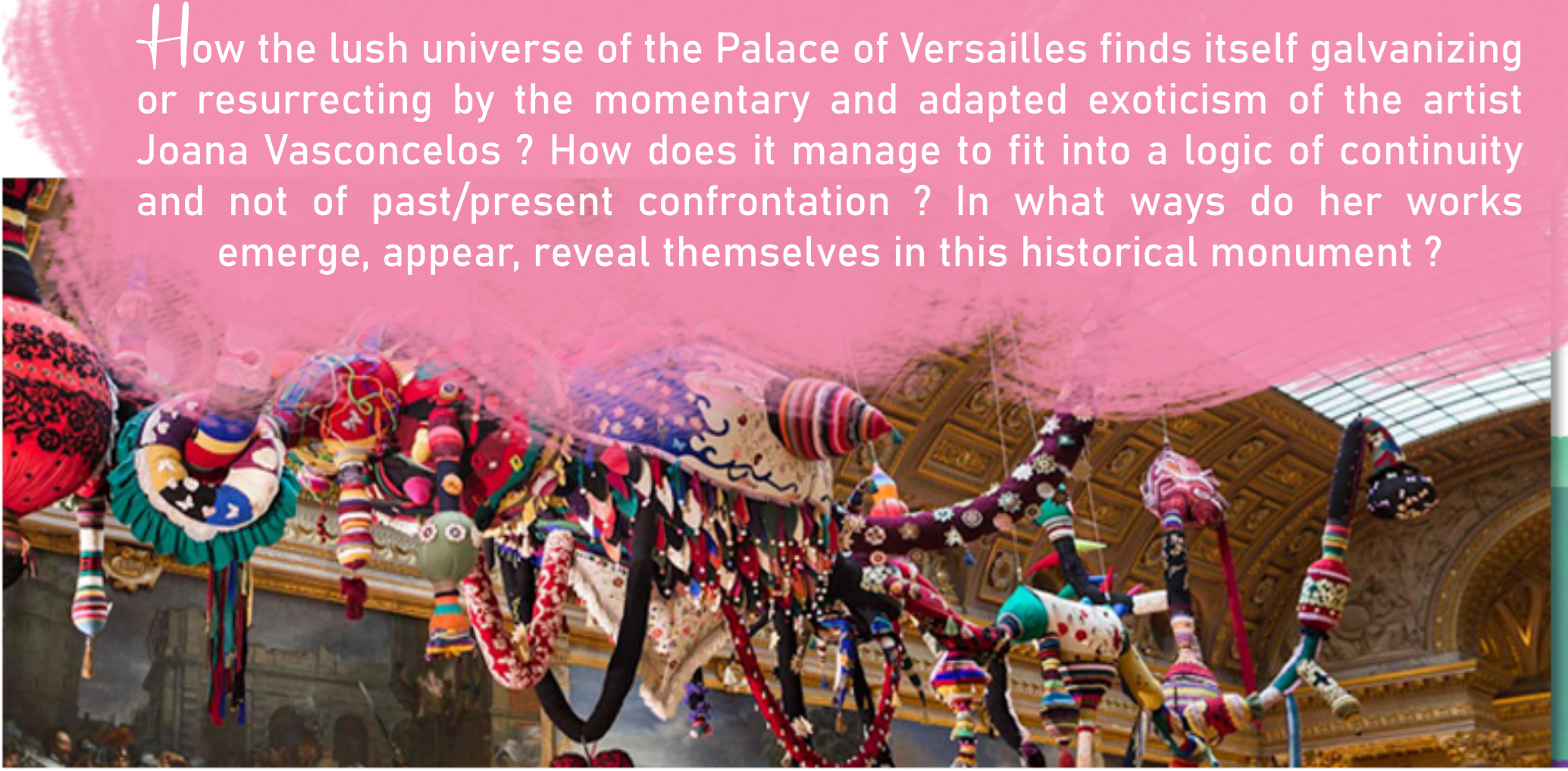
A brief observation concerning the establishment of contemporary art in historical monument but also a definition of the form of art concerned are developed. Thanks to the « Grand Versailles » project, it will be necessary to understand the process of popularization and to see how the promotion of contemporary art evolves in a temporary and/or permanent way and is constantly reinventing itself in the whole field.

### II. Joana Vasconcelos and her project in Versailles

This part allows to understand the interaction established by the artist which is a dialogue between Portuguese culture, living, feminism, colorful opulence, contemporary and French history, wealth, the ancient. In this way, her exhibition is conceived as a takeover of the castle and gardens and not as a simple decoration.

### III. The legitimacy of contemporary art to go into public space

The need for new locations has an impact. Creating new landscapes in order to develop a new aesthetic and guarantee the fulfilment of contemporary art becomes vital.



Vasconcelos Joana, Valkyria Enxoval or Valkyrie Trouseuse, 2009, suspended installation, Drawn-thread work and other embroideries, felt appliques, bobbin lace, tatting, quartz-decorated pottery, handmade woollen knitting and crochet, fabrics, ornaments, polyester, steel cables, 400 x 530 x 1400 cm, Municipal Câmara of Nisa, Nisa (Work produced in collaboration with the artisans of Nisa), la Galerie des Batailles, Château de Versailles, Versailles, in CHOUGNET Jean-François, etc. Joana Vasconcelos, Catalogue d'exposition, 2012, p. 63.

Vasconcelos Joana, Golden Valkyria, 2009, suspended installation, handmade woollen crochet, industrial knitted fabric, fabrics, ornaments, polyester, steel cables, 650 x 1140 x 1340 cm, Collection of the artist, Courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels and Haunch of Venison, London, la Galerie des Batailles, Château de Versailles, Versailles, in CHOUGNET Jean-François, etc. Joana Vasconcelos, Catalogue d'exposition, 2012, p. 77.



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