

My Journey Through the 1980s and 1990s as an Art Student and Young Artist

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ABSTRACT

I will present my journey through the 1980s and 1990s as an art student and young artist in Portugal. Based on an autoethnographic methodology, meaning an approach to research and writing that seeks to synthesize, describe, and analyze personal experience to understand a broader cultural context, I start to present my work as an artist of mixed media visual installations to later introduce the impact of new media technologies on my visual arts work. Finally, I present and document the Rupture installation (1998). This text aims to contextualize a historical moment that is about to disappear from the collective memory.

Introduction and background: the early years

In this text, I will use autoethnography as a tool to describe and analyze personal experience to make visible a broader cultural context and changes in artistic practices. I aim to describe my experience as a painter, digital artist, and designer. I will emphasize how I first mixed painting, and film, and ended up using digital tools in visual installations to speak about women’s roles and expectations, travels, and global changes across the years. This

story starts in the last century eighties and unfolds during the digital transition where experimentation took a lead role. Some of these experiments were processes to understand my journey through this world as a woman in a male-centered Western society. I intend to keep this as an accurate autoethnography, without reworking the language to fit certain standards.

Portugal is a peripheral country where changes are not always welcome. We tend to prioritize traditions over new ideas and the same narratives are

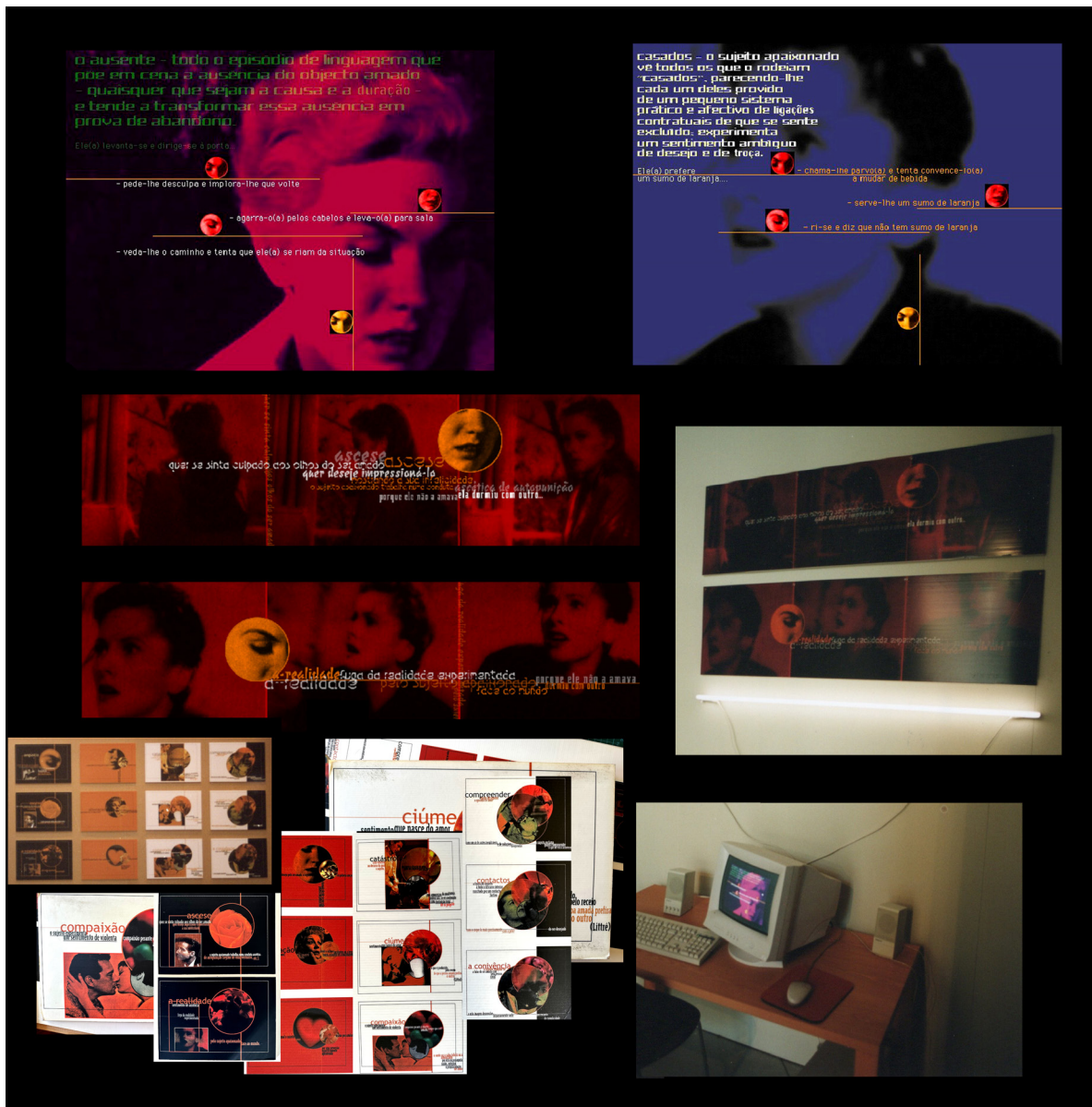


Figure 1. Rupture, the passion market: why love is not fashionable (Mixed media installation: two digital paintings and one neon, 12 postcards and an interactive CD-ROM, 1998, António Cachola private collection, 1998).

repeated like propaganda. Artists who want to work full-time in their practice depend in most cases on their families or from state funding. Currently, it is even more difficult to work in creative areas due to increases in rent prices and decreases in public policies to invest in young artists. Generally, artists work in informal ways or subsidize their artwork by working elsewhere in education, design, call centers, restaurants, or similar. Internationalization is still a mirage for Portuguese artists due to a lack of proper global contextualization and provincialism in art faculties around the country. Most young artists cannot find a way to finance their work or are dependent on others. In my case I chose to work first as a Communication Designer freelancer and later as a Scholar. For that purpose, after thirty years of practice in several art and design-related fields, which gave me the needed autonomy and sustainability to work freely, I decided to write about my early years as an independent artist to inspire others to follow the area with an informed perspective.

The installation *Rupture, the passion market: why love is not fashionable* (Figure 1, in Portuguese: *Ruptura, O mercado das paixões: porque o amor não está na moda*), was created in 1998 under the first digital arts postgraduation in Portugal at the Oporto School of Arts, second biggest city in Portugal, Portuguese Catholic University (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, UCP) in collaboration with Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California. Several American teachers came to Portugal to teach Portuguese students how to work in the newborn nineties digital art market between 1996 and 98. In my case, I was aware of the digital turn from previous experiences in the arts and advertisement world in Lisbon, Paris, and Copenhagen, but during my post-graduation studies I had the chance to explore programming languages and I gained a deeper knowledge of 3D and sound software. Before I arrived at this study plan, I had attended a five-year degree in fine arts/painting where I had the opportunity to exhibit my installations and paintings in various museums and galleries around Portugal. I was then a young artist and communication designer in my late twenties. Previously, in my paintings, I had explored themes such as women's identity in pop culture and cartoons, from Snow White to Jessica Rabbit and Electra (Figure 2). My travels around Europe in the eighties and nineties decades inspired my imagery (Figures 3 and 4), from the Danish director Carl T. Dreyer to Swedish director Ingmar Bergman (Figure 5) and, finally, to the digital revolution

(Figure 6). I expanded my painting imagery with gained techniques that merged pictures I took during these travels and newly acquired competencies in digital media software. At that time, my paintings merged my knowledge of analogic materials with Photoshop and other software filters and graphic manipulations in new assemblages of color and geometry to tell stories and memories from my own embodied life experiences.

The series of drawings and paintings about women's representation in comics, fairy tales, and other visual resources started in Paris, and it was afterward developed in my first years at the Fine Arts Faculty in Lisbon (Faculdade de Belas-Artes da Universidade de Lisboa, FBAUL) where I teach today. Bruno Bettelheim (2011 [1976]), and feminist archetypes started to flood my dreams and thoughts even before gender stereotypes started to re-emerge and I ended up reading Clarissa Pinkola Estés (2021 [2016]) work and her psychoanalytic perspective. I printed t-shirts and painted oil and acrylic images of visual characters to help myself understand the world I was then leaving as a young adult. In a century where women gained the right to vote, but still did not have the same rights as men. The Portuguese cultural arena was a misogynist predatory environment where women were allowed to work according to men's cultural rules. I could feel the distinction Barbara Kruger's work, from 1983, highlights when she states, "We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture."

Women's subjects and ideas were minor issues of reflection at that time in Portugal and so I decided not to follow the easier way. After several experiences with critics, gallerists, and collectors at that time, it became clear to me that I would choose the more difficult path and that I would not make concessions. For me, the work of an artist is related to the creation and production of knowledge. As I said elsewhere (Gouveia et al., 2022), quoting the Belgian philosopher Vinciane Despret (2021) in her presentation and dialogue with the artist Tomás Saraceno for the Centre Pompidou Festival *Hors Pistes*, artistic knowledge creation, dissemination, and production as the ability to establish weird connections. Research in arts is connected to transmedia contemporary practices where texts merge with images and sound to tell living stories. Conceptualism and intellectual artistic settings were and still are viewed with suspicion.

According to Carol Gigliotti (2022), for humans, whether the objective is scientific or artistic, similar



Figure 2. Two drawings and one painting from the early years (*Fantasy Comics*, painting 80X130cm, 1993, acrylic on canvas, sold in 2001 to a private collection, and two mixed drawings on paper).

processes are in action and, if we consider the distinction that the author establishes between creativity and innovation, creativity takes us to an idea and innovation to the concretization of that idea, we can then conclude that the creative process can result in failure and not merely in a product, existing merely as a thought or experiment. Sometimes the same person has an idea and manages to bring it to fruition, innovating. Other times, different people take on different roles in the creative process, implementing other people's ideas. Gigliotti dismantles the various historical notions of creativity, from the Greek notion that advocated that it was the result of a craft or practice, through the insistence of medieval Christianity on the notion of divine creation, to the contemporary model of multiple disciplines that define creativity according to their designs and specializations. Personal creativity and creativity that affects or impacts communities and cultures more broadly should also be considered. The author warns that "the way a cultural anthropologist defines culture is substantially different from the way a sociologist or art historian defines

it" (Gigliotti, 2022, p. 201) which implies that each specialization area or discipline normally highlights its object of study. During the 20th century, Gigliotti tells us, the limits of what constitutes arts and aesthetics expanded and beauty ceased to be a judgment category or quality outside the analysis scope that integrates justice, ethics, politics, identity, evolution, environmental aesthetics, and computation. The dismantling of disciplinary trends and artistic specificities was the theme of a previously published chapter (Gouveia, 2020) that aimed at integrating the arts into the scientific culture of the 21st century.

My artistic practice has always been complex for several reasons, conceptual in nature, mastery of cutting-edge technologies, and addressing subjects and themes that are uncommon in traditional artistic environments with connections to the role of technologies in defining human perception, feminism, and planetary globalization. Transdisciplinary profiles are more difficult to judge due to their complexity. However, in Portugal in

the nineties, some people were undoubtedly very generous with my work and encouraged me a lot. My end-of-course advisor's letter of recommendation is an excellent example of this encouragement. At that time, art schools were much more retrograde than the newly created technological environments associated with engineering. I now realize how working elsewhere in technological arts and communication design during that period opened an exploratory world that would otherwise been closed to me. Nevertheless, it was only at the end of the first decade of this millennium that I felt that being a woman was a disqualifying factor in work environments and not only a disadvantage. At that time, I already had a PhD in communication sciences (interactive media) and from then on, the rules changed in terms of symbolic power.

Misogyny has become more evident and alerted me to some ongoing twists in younger generations and artistic commercial arenas. Of course, aging in women is also a factor to consider from an intersectional perspective, but qualifications in the arts are still seen as threats, and when compared to men women cannot be pioneers or powerful achievers. The ongoing European research projects in which I participate as a senior researcher address these problems, namely arts hybridity (CAPHE, 2023-2026), digital citizenship (DCitizens, 2023-2025), and gender step-backs in gaming environments (eGamesLab, 2023-2025).

My background of five years studying Fine Arts/ Painting at FBAUL started in 1991. Travels, in the recently opened Europe (Portugal entered

Figure 3. Four paintings in an installation from the early years presented at Cordoaria Nacional in Lisbon (East/West, 2:50X200cm, 2:100X100cm, 1996), acrylic on canvas (sold in 2001 to a private collection).



the European Economic Community in 1986 and then the European Union in 1991) were easier. Cheaper flights, interrail train and car trips around European countries gave young people a new world to explore. I needed to wander through Europe in the summer and then paint about those trips. Photographs from Italy, Germany, Croatia, Slovenia, and many other destinations I traveled to by plane, train, or car, on these days, were later printed on canvases covered with acrylic pigments.

Bohemian Fantasy, was part of my fourth/fifth-year work (before Bologna European reform in higher education, a Bachelor in Fine Arts degrees in Portugal extended over five years, and two years of specialization). The installation was presented in Lisbon at Cordoaria Nacional facility, and it was part of the National Young Creators Show in 1996, among other places where it was presented, and that I barely remember. It was purchased in 2001, and I never saw it again. The work was inspired by a trip I took in the summer of 1994, and it shows photographs taken by me on the road, in Italy, Prague, and Budapest. In Prague that summer, I saw Joseph Koudelka’s exhibition of photographs of Podkuznohorí, the region of mountains and valleys in the western part of the “black triangle”, the most devastated and destroyed territory in Europe at that time. Bohemian fantasies were fading away.

In a recommendation letter from 1996, when I ended my degree in Fine Arts, Painting, Rocha

de Sousa, a Portuguese known artist, scholar and critic, who died recently, wrote:

keeping the general lines of her orientation, author completed her degree with brilliant theoretical and practical performances, including the extension of her research in the Painting III course (5th year), where she deepened the installation process, starting from photographic collections in the European urban world and abrogating the ways that contribute to the homogenization of *habitats*, to the recharacterization of spaces whose substance is now covered by “several cosmetic operations.” Advanced technologies were part of this project, for a work that associates this field with simple manual interventions, in exceptionally well-designed multi- and interdisciplinary paths. (Rocha de Sousa, recommendation letter, 1996, p. 2)

Other paintings (Figure 4) were using the same approach, meaning an arts-based research methodology. I named the red triptych in the left image (Figure 4) *North/South*, subtitled *East/West*, and it was exhibited at the FBAUL student final exhibition at Lisbon National Society of Fine Arts (Sociedade Nacional de Belas Artes, Lisboa) in 1996.

In these paintings, you could find images of Venice, a bit of the Berlin Wall, and a typography gear from Copenhagen, where I did an internship at the beginning of the nineties. Other trips, before the



Figure 4. Two paintings from the early years were presented at several exhibitions around the country and in this case where they were in progress at the FBAUL facility (series *North/South*, 2:100X100cm, 1996), acrylic on canvas, author collection).

1994 summer, were printed as living memories of a world that no longer existed, the dream of a Europe that enthusiastically opened itself to the contrasts between North and South. I never wanted to sell it. I knew these paintings would remind me of my youth years, they are part of me and give me confidence. Somehow they express what the Polish author Olga Tokarczuk suggests,

A recurrent Detox Syndrome. If we had to define it directly and without idealization, we would just say that its essence lies in the stubborn return of consciousness to certain ideas or even in the compulsive pursuit of them. It is a variation of the Mean World Syndrome, very well described in the neuropsychological literature in recent times as an acute infection caused by the media. It is a very bourgeois disease. (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 19)

Also, as the author states,

that despite all the dangers, whatever is in motion is always better than what is at rest, that change is nobler than stability, that everything that will stagnate will eventually suffer decomposition, degeneration and turn to dust, while what is in motion manages to last forever. (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 9)

Figure 5. Six paintings and a mixed media structure with light in an installation from the early years at Lisbon University Letters College (Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa, FLUL, Dreyer RGB, 2:50X200cm, 2:100X100cm, 1996), acrylic on canvas and mixed media acrylic techniques and structure.



I tended to keep moving along the way keeping in mind to follow the same freshness I had in my youth. A conception of the world as a global village, where you become responsible for your creations, and nothing is far enough away or surprisingly different. I merged these thoughts about ethics in my early works with Saint-Exupéry (1943) words in *The Little Prince*,

Men have forgotten this truth, said the fox. But you must not forget it. You become responsible forever for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose... [Les hommes ont oublié cette vérité, dit le renard. Mais tu ne dois pas l'oublier. Tu deviens responsable pour toujours de ce que tu as apprivoisé. Tu es responsable de ta rose...]. (p. 83; translation by the author)

The various cosmetic operations carried out in the interior of large cities promote their homogeneity, removing their individuality. In this context, these artworks are intended to fix moments that characterize the different European environments, even if they are out of context. Somewhere in another painting I just inserted Bon Voyage. In our national newspaper, *Público*, a Portuguese art critic, Leonor Nazaré (1996), wrote that the painting distinguished itself. I received compliments and people around me started to buy some of my works. Other

exhibitions came along and the painting on the left (Figure 4) was presented at the collective exhibition *Monologues and Dialogues* at the Centro Cultural Malaposta between April and May 1997.

In the eighties, at sixteen, I was introduced by a close friend to the films of movie directors, Carl T. Dreyer (Denmark) and Ingmar Bergan (Sweden). I became a fan of both, and my Nordic soul started to develop. In the middle of the nineties, with Nordic cinema in mind, I did an installation with three iconic figures from Dreyer movies, Marguerite Chopin, Marie Falconetti, and Clara-Wieth Pontoppidan. I intended to make a parable around the concept of an original image and to highlight the reproduction status of the current imagery manipulation available in digital systems. In these systems, the interlocutor's role changes, from a mere spectator of the manipulated image to someone who acts upon it. The access to the original is often a disappointment. I merge (Figure 5) these three women's images with the RGB color system essentially to highlight the video signal, television serving in this measure as a self-reference, as these were the means of communication allied to the new information technologies embodied by computer networks, which are better equipped to promote the massification of the worked images. In this way, the screen appears to us as a simulacrum of itself,



Figure 6. *Digital River, a river out of Eden*, Installation: three paintings, a website, and a video. National Young Creators show 97, Guarda, Portugal.

denying its original condition to assert itself as a reproduction.

These images used experimentation around Photoshop filters and possibilities mixed with CorelDraw lines. This software was introduced to me at the beginning of the nineties in Lisbon and Copenhagen and at that time I was able to play freely with these digital tools for painting purposes. I did not know I was merging the digital with the analog a long time before it was common sense. I was using *Persona* (Bergman) masks to speak about emancipated women and the proliferation of screens in a brand-new digital world. The RGB color system was added to these black and white iconic women, and I named the installation *Dreyer RGB*. A lot more of these paintings came and I sold some of them. Screens and the digital revolution just entered my life, and I was transitioning to another level of expertise.

The installation named *Digital River, a river out of Eden* came in 1997. As previously stated, I attended a digital arts postgraduate degree in Porto, in the north of Portugal, where I learned motion graphics, 3D software, and programming languages, with a group of Portuguese, American, and Asian-American teachers from the Porto Catholic University School of the Arts and Los Angeles Loyola University. The mixed media environment I created was presented in 1997 at the National Young Creators Show in Guarda, and it was composed of three digital paintings, a website, and a video. The concept was developed from gained knowledge in digital cultures and screen-based motion graphics software. My goal was to speak about on-screen identity and plasticity, various personas, and masks, and I was inspired by Sherry Turkle's book *Life on Screen* (1997). Kevin Kelly's *Out of Control* (1995 [1992]) ideas about simulation, post-Darwinism, nature, bodies, and synthetic evolution were mixed with Turkle's research, new age music, and flashy imagery of recorded children. I was also inspired by a *Wired* magazine article (Schrage, 1995) about Richard Dawkins's book *River Out of Eden* (1995). Through the decontextualization of the scientific text, which appears as an inspiration poem for the three paintings, a virtual environment of artificial creatures was built. The video proposed a reflection on the contemporary entertainment culture in which children end up becoming reflections of the digital screen. On the website, the theme of cyberculture was explored through a hypertext under permanent construction where the excess of information in contemporary

society is questioned. For that hypertext, I created the fictional character P., a human being who felt absolutely nothing, a person who vegetated in a world she/he knew only through images, a world where everything is sent by mail, the food pills together with the corresponding diskette, the updated medical exam and new image helmets. Everything is at our disposal through the central services of the networks... P. barely knew her/his street, but had a vast knowledge about the entire world, no experiences only images on screens. I was immersed in cyberfeminism and so I created a non-gendered character which also reflected my first impressions about the web. The brand-new cyberspace, which I previously cherished during my sociology one-year course at FBAUL, could become a space of oppression if people did not realize its potentialities but also its dangers. The Internet without borders, which opened possibilities for those in peripheral countries like me, could become an empty vessel of deformed content. I was fascinated by the digital revolution, but I could anticipate how things could become weird. It was before Etoy.CORPORATION (1999) toy war and the dot com collapse in 2000, where speculation took advantage of internet-based businesses and practices, artists started to see their work questioned by systems of legitimation, like galleries and museums, which at that time knew very little about the digital revolution. In those years I was still enchanted by the Electronic Frontier Foundation (1990) and John Perry Barlow chants, and I managed to work with digital tools to the web, for the web with the web and all its promises. At that point I knew I agreed with Virginia Woolf's (1947, p. 197) statement "as a Woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world."

The interactive artwork: *Rupture, the passion market why love is not fashionable* (1998)

After several years working in multimedia as an artist and as a communication designer, I created on my own the installation *Rupture, passions market because love is not fashionable* (1998-99). I intended to question the illusion often adopted in advertising discourses. In contemporary society, love speech is only used as a creation of images and slogans, it has long since ceased to be the expression of feelings and it is installed in our minds as a projection of something possible but never feasible (Montreynaud, 1998). In the passion market, "the

other” is always overshadowed by the awareness that there are many “others” and that, therefore, we have no time to waste. The illusion promoted by this awareness of an excess of supply “from the other” creates a state of entropy in which the subject no longer can choose, to act, and starts to live only in function of its gallery of possibilities, alone and dispersed. In 1998 two digital paintings (Figures 1 and 7) and a neon, 12 graphical post-cards, and a CD-ROM were created as an installation to highlight this concept. Together the work illustrated a narrative plot that is subdivided (on the CD-ROM) into three parallel stories, possible fictions around meetings, separations, and ruptures.

At the beginning of the CD-ROM the player of the interface can find a story written by the French artist Sophie Calle in her 1994 book *Des Histoires Vraies* (Calle, 1994). Throughout the work, the user must answer a questionnaire, which, like the women’s magazines that proliferate in the passion market, will define fate at the end of the trip, prompting the player to read some concepts from *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* book by Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1987). Thus, the interlocutor is confronted with three possible paths through a game of questions/answers that lead to an end also

divided into three different outcomes. The player profile is then defined by one of the final stories in which we can hear a possible account of what happened to a certain female character. The final confrontation with a real account offers the player a presupposed solution to previous answers, that is, it is the path taken by the participant that becomes decisive for the final “card”.

The project intended to highlight the hypertextual jumping system strangeness where “fragments of the loving speech” transported us to a new technology, the CD-ROM, but also to characters decontextualization like a children’s game, just like any lover, players also find themselves in this virtual world, fragmented, incomplete, and meaningless... because any information they decide to obtain involves them in an increasingly complex web. A collection of Alfred Hitchcock movies and actresses were depicted in warm colors and pixelated environments. I programmed the CD-ROM in Lingo, recorded women’s testimonies, and mixed them with interactive sounds and images. Players can hear stories from three different women about their love lives and affairs, can read fragments, jump between images, and hear sounds in an intertextuality fashion.

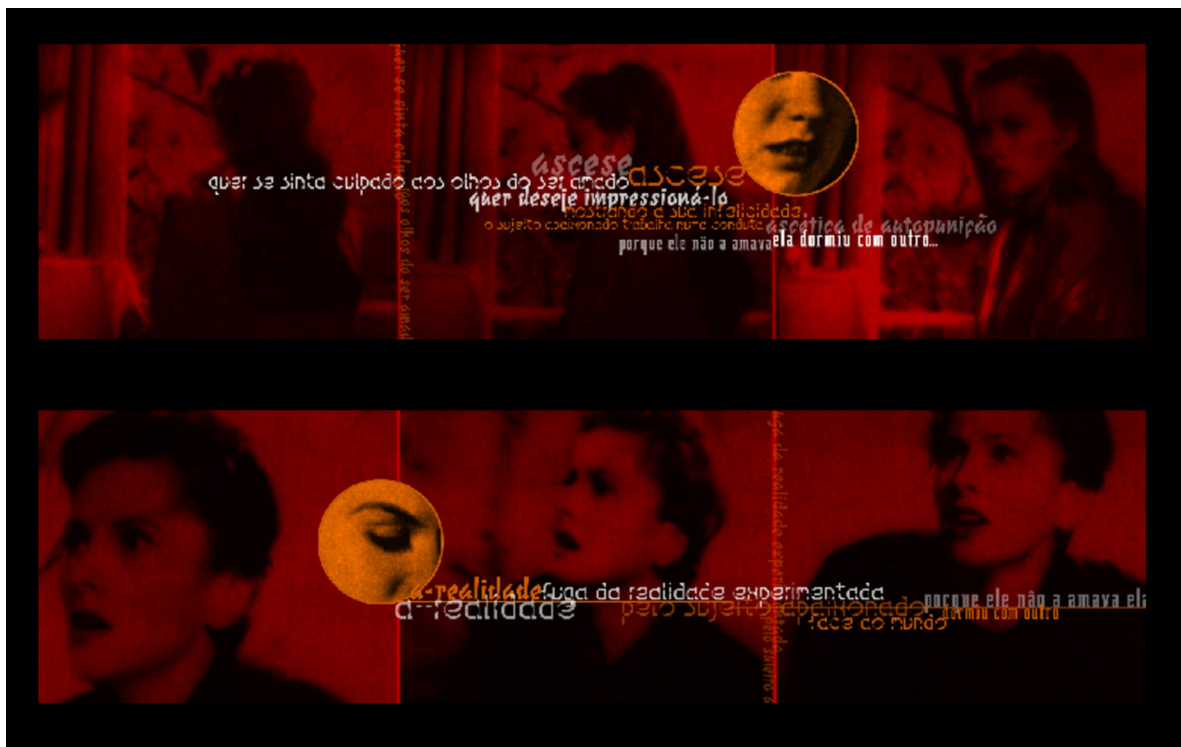


Figure 7. Rupture, the passion market: why love is not fashionable (two digital paintings, António Cachola private collection, 1998).

The installation was shown at some European festivals, museums, and galleries in Portugal and abroad. It was also part of my work-in-progress case study for the multimedia lab in Kent, England (1999), and later it was bought by a Portuguese art collector, António Cachola (Pinharanda, 1999). The twelve postcards were not sold, they are digital compositions or variations around the same theme. To document the work consistently and inspired by some suggestions made at the 2021 File Alive meeting, in which the importance of the artist's contribution to the digital future archive was made clear, here is the list of the festivals where the installation or part of it was presented:

- *Bandits-mages*, Multimedia International Students Festival, Bourges, France, 2001;
- *Medi@terra 2000*, International Art and Technology Festival, Athens, Greece, 2000;
- *Arco 2000*, Meiac Virtual Gallery, Madrid, Spain, 2000;
- *Portuguese Art, Years 80-90*, António Cachola Private Collection, Museu Estremenho e Ibero-americano de Arte Contemporânea, Meiac, Badajoz, Spain, 1999;
- Multimedia labs selection, Bore Place, Kent, England, 1999;
- Bienalle dei Giovani Artisti dell'Europa e del Mediterraneo, Visioni di Futuro, Roma, Italy, 1999;
- *Romarias*, Portuguese 1st International Video Festival, Lisbon, Portugal, 1999;
- Portuguese National Young Creators Show, Aveiro, Portugal, 1998.

The idea of archiving and documenting my works from the 1990s came to me after attending two File Alive (2021) meetings where mechanisms for preserving digital arts were discussed. At this Brazilian international symposium, it became clear that the contribution of artists to the documentation of their works is fundamental for future generations. Oliver Grau presented the submitting works possibilities within the scope of the Digital Art Archive (ADA, 1999) and the artist Thamiko Thiel explained in a relevant way the attempts to

make women's work invisible, especially when they have had pioneering work in the field of arts and technologies. It resonates with my own experience and since then I decided to alert other women to the relevance of documenting their work properly. The intention is not self-promotion but resistance to oblivion. I dare to talk and present my work in a bold way to resist and to prove that I am alive. Then, the future will tell if people will be forgotten or not. An artistic career is a long path we take, and it is very hard to judge its relevance.

The international research group of people where I belong at the Interactive Technologies Institute from the Laboratory for Robotics and Engineering Systems (ITI/LARSyS) has been working consistently since 2019 on these processes of making visible women work in the context of arts and gaming culture, showing how in Portugal the relationship between technologies and arts has always been a fight club territory between men and women. (Please see the *Game Art and Gender Equity* project link below). The idea is to enhance women's participation in technological environments to make them protagonists who also decide our future on earth. Recently, the group published a chapter for the book *Techno Feminism: Multi and Transdisciplinary Contemporary Views on Women and Technology* (Gouveia & Lima, 2023) named "Convergent Feminism, Gaming, Digital Transition, and Equity" and co-edited the Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts special edition concerning the merge of arts, gaming, convergent feminism, and speculative futures (Gouveia, Lima e Sá, 2023).

Conclusion

Challenging the stereotypical traditional view where inconvenient women's creations are disregarded and ignored because they show alternative realities that do not suit the normative and reifying male gaze is the main goal of this text. I aim to criticize a masculine construct that minimizes and denies the contribution of women in the creation and development of the country in terms of arts and technologies. The most recognized Portuguese female artists like, for example in the last century, Paula Rego or Vieira da Silva, had to leave the country to make their artistic careers relevant. Younger generations face bigger challenges due to a lack of opportunities and investment in the arts and due to the still difficult connection between arts and technologies.

Artistical educational environments in Portugal are still far away from technological developments making it difficult for artists to participate in the creation and definition of future technologies. My purpose is to create awareness so that more women pursue careers that in some way have an impact on both the arts and technologies of the future. As a scholar, I encounter students in bachelor's and master's classes who are unaware that they can work with digital tools and that there is a whole set of practices that have been ongoing for over thirty years. It is our responsibility to inform younger generations about the past to show how we can construct future alternatives. Recent major exhibitions in Europe, Kassel Documenta 15th and Venice Biennale, showed consistently how things can be different and how we can reimagine and revise the past to project a more sustainable future.

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