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Paris Musées

Francisco Tropa

The Lung and the Heart

15 October 2022 – 29 January 2023



A major artist on the Portuguese scene, Francisco Tropa (1968, Lisbon), has been invited to the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris to present an exhibition as part of the France Portugal 2022 Season organised by the Institut français.

Francisco Tropa's practice is essentially oriented towards sculpture, often in association with the photographic or cinematic image. References to antiquity, science and technology, and art history are interwoven, resulting in a multifaceted investigation aimed at dissecting the act of creation. *The Lung and the Heart* exhibition seeks to give form to the creative principles that define life and the workings of the world and of living beings.

A certain strangeness emerges from the work of Francisco Tropa and his constant search for a balance between conceptual thinking and traditional skills. Opening with *Scipio's Dream* and an ancient vision of the Cosmos, the exhibition closes with another dream: that of the narrator of *Gradiva* (1903), Wilhelm Jensen's famous short story set in the city of Pompeii during the tragic eruption of Mount Vesuvius. The setting is a metaphysical, dreamlike landscape calling on us to travel through different worlds and identify their motive forces. The muted, crepuscular light and the rhythm of interacting mechanisms conjure up a sensory experience. Set at the centre of the exhibition, the installation *the Lung and the Heart* is based on a principle of repetition and a consideration of the extraordinary functionality of the human body. Located on the same floor as the permanent collection, the exhibition conducts an ongoing dialogue with the great masters of modernity, who made their fascination with the machine one of the founding principles of their practice.

Devised as a condensed monograph, *the Lung and the Heart* is structured around movement and time frames – recurrent concerns in the artist's work – and puts into perspective the notion of cycles, the mechanics of terrestrial and celestial bodies, and the idea of the whole. The exhibition is accompanied by an artist's book designed as an integral part of the project and including a guide for visitors.

PRESS RELEASE

Museum director

Fabrice Hergott

Curator

Jessica Castex

assisted by Margot Koutsomitis

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Francisco Tropa
Le Poumon et le cœur / the Lung and the Heart,
2018
© Teresa Santos

Visitor information

Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris
11 Avenue du Président Wilson
75116 Paris
Tél. 01 53 67 40 00
www.mam.paris.fr

Open Tuesday–Sunday
10 am – 6 pm

Late closing 9:30 pm

Admission

Full rate : 6 €
Concessions : 4 €

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Manifestation organisée dans le cadre de la Saison France-Portugal 2022

The Lung and the Heart is part of the France-Portugal 2022 Season. The exhibition was made possible with the support of the Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian - Delegation in France, the Institut français and the City of Paris.

Manifestation organisée dans le cadre de la Saison France-Portugal 2022



SAISON TEMPORADA
FRANCE PORTUGAL
PORTUGAL FRANÇA
2022



Biography

Francisco Tropa, b. 1968 in Lisbon where he currently lives and works. A figure of the Portuguese contemporary art scene, the artist has a singular practice that cannot be attached to a specific movement. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the artist has revisited traditional sculpture by creating installations, mixing sculpture, etchings, drawings, photography, performance and engineering tinged with craftsmanship.

Francisco Tropa, who represented Portugal at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011, has achieved a certain recognition in France where he has been hosted in residencies (notably at CIRVA, Centre International de Recherche sur le Verre et les Arts plastiques Marseille, 2017; at the Atelier Calder, Saché, 2015). He has also presented solo exhibitions at Le Creux de l'Enfer, Thiers (2022), at the FRAC Nouvelle Aquitaine, Bordeaux (2022), at the MUCEM, Marseille (2020), at the Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon (2019), at the Grand Café, Saint-Nazaire (2018) as well as at the Musée régional d'art contemporain Languedoc-Rousillon, Sérignan (2015) and at la Verrière, Fondation d'entreprise Hermès, Brussels (2013). In addition to his show in the Venice Biennale (2011), he has participated in important events, such as the Istanbul Biennial (2011); Manifesta (2000); the Melbourne International Biennial (1999) and the São Paulo Biennial (1998).

His work has been shown in several group exhibitions, including at the Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon (2020); at Stanze del Vetro, Venice (2018); at the FRAC Bretagne, Rennes (2018, 2017); at CNEAI Pantin (2017); at Casa del Lago UNAM, Mexico City (2015); at the MUDAM, Luxembourg (2015); and at the Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid (2011). In France, he has presented performances notably at the Centre Pompidou (2018); at the Centre National de la Danse (2018) and at the Palais de Tokyo (2013).

Francisco Tropa is represented by the Jocelyn Wolff Gallery, Romainville; the Gregor Podnar Gallery, Vienna; and the Quadrado Azul Gallery, Porto.

Interview

with Francisco Tropa by Jessica Castex

Q1. Your work appears to have multiple compartments. Your major projects, “the departments” as you call them, are developed over several years and are divided into various parts. Could this *modus operandi* be similar to the writing process?

I sometimes use this analogy to show how I've constructed some of my projects, particularly those that I've developed in chapters and subsequently presented in this form. But the comparison stops there. It's simply a way of saying that my work departs from a general idea that I then explore in interlinked stages. The question of narrative, when it arises, can also suggest such a relationship, but in truth it's a narrative that's almost always constructed *a posteriori* and above all serves as a basis for superimposing another type of discourse over that of the individual works. It's a way of creating a second voice.

Q2. Indeed, in your projects, the narrative occupies an important place. This is not really the case in this exhibition. How are the works linked together here?

Some of the works share a common theme, which is why I've chosen to present them together. But the idea here was precisely to allow them to do their job without them really requiring a common thread. The way the exhibition is conceived doesn't really emphasise what unites them but rather what separates them. Starting with the distribution of the works in the exhibition space, where there's a clear border between the initial part, which functions as an antechamber, the central part, which is denser, and, finally, the two works in the last room, which in turn refer to what we encountered at the beginning.

Q3 Yet there's not an absence of narrative. The works contain clues that refer to a story or to specific events. Thus, the elements that make up the installation *O Pulmão e o Coração* [The Lung and the Heart] are named in precise fashion: the word “policeman” for example indicates an anthropomorphic helmet inspired by a colonial helmet. Was there any political analysis involved in your thinking?

Each of the characters has a small role to play within the whole, but I don't think that's enough for us to create a complete story. The objects were made in a rather schematic way, because I wanted to be as sober as possible

in the visual construction. As such, there's a fragmented nature to what the characters evoke. This is intentional, I wouldn't want to establish a rigid discourse on this scene, but it's clear that there are countless possibilities, offering as many potential readings. One way is to read the titles that name each of the figures presented.

As for the rest, I can't say that there was any kind of political analysis, far from it. What I can say is that I'm interested in what's happening around me and what we're experiencing as a society. Especially the way we continue to look at our past. All this is reflected in the work I do, naturally, but never in an objective form. It's something that's there, present, and remains hidden in the shadows.

Q4. Upon entering, the visitor is guided by the trickling of water from a work (Panta Rhei). This expression, attributed to Heraclitus, has given rise to numerous translations and interpretations: “Everything flows”, “Everything flows according to its own rhythm”, “Everything flows, nothing stays” ... Which meaning captured your attention?

I have the impression that there's something in the original phrase that can't be seen. Certainly there's a clear allusion to rhythm and a certain flow that evokes, I think, the idea of time passing in its various manifestations. But I'd say that if we broaden the spectrum, the expression suggests the existence of something else, something more disturbing and which cannot have a face because it's beyond time. That's why I put this work at the beginning of the exhibition, like a leitmotif.

Q5. The exhibition is accompanied with an atmosphere of sound, with the lapping of water, the puffing of gas lamps and the repetitive clicking of certain mechanisms, creating rhythms and cadences. Is it a desire to fully capture the viewer's sensibility or a reference to the experiences of *musique concrète*?

There's a profusion of stimuli that blend together and plunge the visitor into a kind of sensory journey. One can perhaps make a connection with certain aspects of experimental music and poetry. I'm absolutely delighted that people might think that and it's certainly an idea that can be borne in mind but my intention was above all to mark the presence of the movement emanating from the sculptures. I wanted the viewer to feel that they were walking inside a mechanism.

Q6. The exhibition can also be perceived as a nocturnal scene. The sound of the elements and the darkness invite the visitor to experience an immersive form. Is this the first time you've focused on the perception and experience of the route?

Normally, I prefer to work on the sequence and not really on the idea of the path that the visitor will follow. It's definitely a more abstract process and, therefore, one that's more interesting to me. But, in fact, I've already conceived a project based on the idea of a walk that unfolds in a given place. *Scenario*, presented at the 2011 Venice Biennale, is an excellent example. In this case, what happened is a little different. The route was dictated by the sequence of works, which in turn gave rise to a reading rhythm adapted to the architecture of the museum.

Q7. *O Pulmão e o Coração* is the third and final part of your latest major project, entitled *O Bigode Escondido na Barba* [The Moustache Hidden in the Beard]. The installation occupies a central place in the exhibition and also provides the inspiration for its title. The choice of the work was immediately obvious to you. Why is this so?

An artist always wants to show his most recent work and I'm no exception. It's a project that has never been shown before and I was very keen to see it finally working to its full potential. I'd barely finished it when the pandemic started and the work was on hold for almost three years. I'd imagined it set up in a large closed room, plunged into semi-darkness, since it's a scene that takes place at dusk. When I visited the space, I realised that the conditions were excellent and met all the requirements that I'd hoped for. The proximity of the museum's collections also helped. I'm so glad that connections can be made with the works in the collection, and there's also the history of the building itself, which added something in itself...

Q8. The title *O Pulmão e o Coração* sounds like something from a treatise on anatomy. It's part of a field of reference related to the body, to life, to the biological functions of the organism. Where does it come from?

It's a title I found in a publication I discovered in a pile of discarded books. I picked it up because the cover caught my eye. It's a booklet that was published by an old lung institute journal and it has precisely that title so I didn't have to change it. I remember that I'd just presented the second part of *O Bigode Escondido na Barba* and I was looking for a way to continue the work. Thanks to this little book, I had the idea of organising the third and final chapter around these two entities: the two organs that ensure the body functions properly.

Q9. Indeed, these two vital organs organise the management of flows.

Why focus on the functional aspect and the mechanics of the body?

Because that's exactly the point. I wanted to construct this project from the figure that was absent in the other two parts of the project, namely the human body. I was also interested in working on the idea of mechanism and developing this idea from the observation of a living body, which has a well-defined way of working that we know well, since it's our body.

Q10. The modular installation also allows a principle of repetition to be introduced. You're experimenting with this device for the first time. What role does it play in the configuration of the exhibition?

It's a way of highlighting each module and emphasising the importance of the relationship that this group of objects creates between themselves and with the visitor. The work was gradually simplified to function in a minimal way and I didn't want to add anything at all. Even the tiny variations that can be perceived in the repetition of certain elements end up disappearing in the apprehension of the whole. They simply serve to lend a certain rhythm to the reading.

Q11. You regularly mention the notions of interiority and exteriority, especially in *O Pulmão e o Coração*. Can you elaborate on this? How do these notions play out in this work?

These are notions that are always present and as soon as I became interested in sculpture, I was confronted with them. They frequently appear in quite diverse and sometimes even unexpected ways. There are instances where it can be difficult to disentangle them and I fear the work presented here is a case in point. The two visions are mixed and are both activated at the same time. They coexist on the same plane and it's up to the observer to discover the clues that will allow them to finally position their gaze.

Q12. Is it true that "everything starts with an image"?

That's not an easy question to answer. The image is such a vast field... But I think that yes, if I really had to choose, I think I would naturally give primacy to the image – with the caveat that often accompanies it...

Q13. The sentries' helmets in the installation *O Pulmão e o Coração* were part of a sculpture from 2006 entitled *Polícia – O Transe do Ciclista* [Police – The Cyclist's Trance]. Is "re-use" part of your creative process?

From time to time, I go and look for elements in older works with the aim of working on them again, so that they fit into a situation that's different from the one they initially inhabited. I find this process very curious, extremely tempting and sometimes more interesting than inventing new objects.

It obviously depends on the situation, but I like the idea of also being able to engage with a past time and touch something that's no longer here beside me.

Q14. Your works often contain mechanisms that are borrowed from clockmaking...

Yes, that's true, but it's not exactly clockmaking and it's not the idea of time that interests me most. What I'm looking for above all is a form of design, which can also be found in clockmaking mechanisms but which is probably older, originating in the ancient crafts (the first clockmakers were blacksmiths because they were the only ones who knew how to work metal).

This is what I'm looking for, this particularity that's difficult to discern and explain, and which is intimately linked to the practice. It's the drawing that exists in some things and which is progressively altered. A true testimony passed down from person to person, from the most ancient times.

Q15. *O Sonho de Cipião* [Scipio's Dream] belongs to an earlier project called TSAE (*Treasures submerged of Ancient Egypt*), which you developed from 2006 to 2015. This title refers to a text by Cicero.

Could you explain its content and tell us what inspires you in this text?

It's a dream that's transcribed in Cicero's *De Republica* and in which Scipio meets his late grandfather of the same name, the famous Scipio the African, who was a great general and a notable figure in Roman society at the time. In the dream, the meeting serves as a pretext for discussing various issues related to the Cosmos and the political organisation of society. Scipio finds himself in space and observes our solar system, which he describes with the Earth at the centre and the planets in orbit around it. I remembered this little text during a period I spent at the Atelier Calder, in Saché. I found it interesting to create a sculpture based on such an ancient text and, at the same time, to give a nod to the work of the famous American sculptor, whose studio was hosting me at that time.

Q16 Antiquity provides a veritable reservoir of forms and references in your work. Why does this period fascinate you more than any other?

It's a way of giving myself more space, of simply having more room to manoeuvre... If you look at it more closely, it's even somewhat related to what I just described in my previous answer: the further away we get, the scarcer the places become.

And this distance allows us to talk about what's close to us in a way that's perhaps freer...

Q17 In *O Sonho de Cipião* the Earth appears in cubic form.

The Greeks had previously demonstrated that it was spherical. However, they had a geocentric view and thought that the Earth was static. How does the history behind the representation of the cosmos inform your thinking?

It's precisely the construction of reality that fascinates me. That's why I went for this kind of depiction. Ultimately, it's not so much about their antiquity. Have you noticed how beautiful these theories are? We who live with our feet planted on a sphere decide to believe (and make others believe) that in fact we're all living on one of the flat sides of a cube. From there we construct an entire universe, a whole complex mechanism, based on an idea that is the antithesis of our true reality. Isn't that marvellous? I think it is and I feel like we're approaching art there.

Q18 *La marche de Gradiva* [Gradiva's Walk], filmed by the director Raymonde Carasco, closes the exhibition. Gradiva, "the one who advances", has been feeding your thoughts and your imagination for a long time. How did the story by German writer Wilhelm Jensen, which was taken up by psychoanalysis, intersect with your own story?

History is full of coincidences. Or perhaps more accurately, it's a history of coincidences.

1. A young Roman woman, seated, throws her dice (*astragalus*) on the ground.
2. During the first excavations in Pompeii, in the cellar of the house known as Diomedes, a perfect mould of a woman's breast was found against one of the walls, formed in the ash from the eruption.
3. Twelve bodies were found at the same location and the first of the group was holding a bunch of keys.
4. It's while he's in this very cellar that Norbert Hanold watches with admiration as Zoé Bertgang walks down the street where the stairs to the cellar are found.

Publication, 46 pages, 20€
Excerpt from the publication that accompanies the exhibition, *Francisco Trota, The Lung and the Heart.*

