

## Critical report about conference

### *Public Art: Place, Context, Participation in Santo Tirso*

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Exhibition: Theories and Practises I

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## Introduction

The international conference about Public art, with subtitle (and main focus on) *Place, Context and Participation*, took place on 23 and 24 October 2015 at Fabrica Santo Thyroso, in Santo Tirso. It was organised by The Instituto de história da arte, Faculdade de ciências sociais e humanas, universidade Nova de Lisboa. The conference was based on a proposal by the city council of Santo Tirso.<sup>1</sup> It has been a conclusion of a 10-year project of the international symposia on contemporary sculpture, headed by sculptor Alberto Carneiro and professor and art critic Gérard Xuriguera. As a result this conference was held and also the construction of the International museum of contemporary sculpture of Santo Tirso had started.

This text will focus on evaluation of the main topic of the conference, which is public art and site-specific sculptures. This theme emerged from a ten-year project of sculpture symposiums that were held also in Santo Tirso, and whose results are now part of the local urban public space. This text attempts to assess the subject of the conference itself, its conception of individual lecturers, program and course of the first day of the conference, which is also related to the overall impression of this event that I have gained from my presence that day, and finally I will think about the statues in Santo Tirso, their placement in the public space and also the idea of building for them the International museum of contemporary sculpture.

My criticism expressed in this text is not so much supported by theoretical evidence, it is mainly based on my previous experience with similar conferences. For example, I see as very comparable the conference organized annually by Fotograf magazine in Prague within the Fotograf Festival.<sup>2</sup> It is always an international event, including international speakers, held in the capital of the Czech Republic. The second point of view, which I can use in my evaluation, is that I had the opportunity to co-organize one such conference as a project of our university in Pilsen. The conference thematically complemented the topic of a major exhibition also exposed there. Finally, as the basis for my thinking about public art, I can use the knowledge from lectures and discussions with Professor Ludvík Hlaváček. His main focus is not just theoretical but also practical reflection and promotion of public art, lecturing on history and theoretical background of public art, and for his contribution to fine arts and for his curatorial practice, he was awarded the price of Ministry of Culture this year.

## Public art and individual papers

As stated in the official information about the conference, its main topic is primarily to assess the works created in Santo Tirso since 1991, when there was held a first sculpture

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1 Retrieved December 14, 2015, from <http://internationalconferencepublicart.weebly.com/>

2 Webpage of Fotograf Magazine available (Retrieved December 14, 2015) from <http://fotografmagazine.cz/en/>,  
webpage of Fotograf Festival available from <http://fotografestival.cz/2015/en/about-the-festival/>

symposium. This results into a slight confusion of conference visitors because the topics of the papers may not apply directly to Santo Tirso, but public art as itself. Which is of course understandable, because otherwise it would be very difficult to fill up the two-day program. The selection of public art topic I think is very appropriate because public art became a subject of interest worldwide. And of course we don't have to talk about sculptures only, but as also presented by some contributors at the conference, to the interest and financial support of the town hall and councilors come artists of, for example, street art or graffiti.

Although the topic of the conference was a public art as itself, the majority of contributions seemed to me rather focused on specific examples of public art throughout Portugal and also abroad, but for me, I was missing any kind of theoretical placement of the issue of public art. During the first day, I believe that only one contribution was not so specific and rather theoretical, from Javier Maderuelo of "Meaning in public art". I think it might have been useful for not so much educated and experienced listeners about public art to first hear a brief history and the basis for its present form. As well I was missing any notion about its present division between public art and new genre public art. Overall, it seems to me that the question of engagement of artists working with public art in civic activism was quite neglected.

My criticism over the lack of a theoretical introduction does not mean I dislike the contributions focused on specific examples of public artworks. On the contrary, it was an opportunity for me to learn about, for example, for me unknown Spanish authors working in Madrid, or get a new perspective on the interpretation of works by the well-known author as Anish Kapoor. And I have really appreciated the including of the contribution about the statues in Santo Tirso and the contribution about the statues in the park of Serralves in the same day, because the mutual comparison was very much obvious here. During the lunch break, I had the opportunity to go through the city of Santo Tirso and see all the sculptures placed there in their public locations and conceive my own comparison with the Serralves park.

#### Conference notion

As a very positive fact of the conference I see the thing that it was also open for Portuguese-non-speaking visitors and all the contributions were translated also into English language. (With the exception of one lecturer, who talked so fast that the translator did not manage to translate it.) However, when the conference program moved from the Fabrica Santo Thyrsos to the city park, there was nothing said in any other language than Portuguese anymore. It's a shame because I don't think there were so few English-speaking visitors and if the conference presents itself as an international, there should be at least one of the organizers able to summarize in one sentence the details about the current event in English.

The second thing, which is not expected at a major international conference is the fact that organizers failed to comply with time-scheduled program. Already early in the morning there was a noticeable delay that during the day only magnified. The result was the need to cancel one of the program points – a discussion with the participants of the symposium and for me, for unknown reasons, also a visit to the International museum of contemporary sculpture. Both, however, were scheduled in the program.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand I see as positive the inclusion into the program a visit of the various places in the city and seeing statues far from the city center, that were mentioned also during one of the conference speeches, as well as organizing the transfer of participants by buses. Likewise, I really enjoyed the area around the river, where are also located some of the statues, but this space seems to be mainly designed for leisure activities and connects to the nearby park, where are also located some of the sculptures.

Finally, I would like to mention the questions about the number of visitors and organizers present. It seemed to me that noticeable part of the visitors was not really public but rather people related by the symposium project itself or from the local city council. The only larger number of visitors, I believe, who arrived as visitors only, was our bus with students and professors from the Faculdade de Belas Artes. It wasn't so obvious in Fabrica Santo Thyrso as it was later while visiting the individual sculptures. It might have felt that there is a greater number of organizers and journalists present than actual visitors.

### Sculptures in Santo Tirso

I believe that the idea of financial support for artistic activities, such as the sculpture symposium, that started already 10 years ago in Santo Tirso, is a very unusual and therefore very valuable project. I admit a great merit to the city hall and its councilors, who supported this project all along and given the opportunity of creating unprecedented number of interesting sculptures. And not only that, I believe that also thanks to this project the artistic community was created and bounded to Santo Tirso.

I don't want to evaluate the quality of the individual sculptures, because, of course, I don't know them well, not even their authors. I would rather focus on their placement in public space and overall impression on the casual visitor to Santo Tirso. As I mentioned earlier, there is a comparison to Serralves park on the hand. I am aware of that this is a different institution and they are placed in different places, but it seems to me that they have essentially the same idea. To incorporate a larger number of sculptures in natural urban space, so they do not disrupt the space and still stand out.

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3 Conference program (Retrieved December 14, 2015) from

<http://internationalconferencepublicart.weebly.com/program--programa.html>

In this comparison, I would prefer the Serralves park. At a conference it was also mentioned by Adelaide Duarte that in Serralves Park it is basically the idea of a game of hide and seek. Some of the sculptures are quite visible and dominant in the natural environment but, on the other hand, some of them are hidden and you have to look carefully throughout the park to notice them. But we will never find more than one statue in one place and it is, in my opinion, a major positive. On the other hand we have Santo Tirso, where over a ten-year duration of the symposiums artists created a huge amount of sculptures, which are supposed to be placed in a public space. However, due to their quantity, the city not afford to give them such a space, and therefore some of them are also grouped. Even though they have space in several parks and open natural areas in Santo Tirso, for me as a visitor it seemed a bit crowded anyway. Which is very unusual, because I think that all the other cities have a problem of not having enough funds for at least one statue, while Santo Tirso has a problem with a lack of space for a large number of sculptures.

It seems to me that also the organizers got to this conclusion and that was the reason the idea of constructing the International museum of contemporary sculpture appeared. Unfortunately, the visit to the museum was canceled from the conference program, so I can only speculate about how they intent to fill the museum with artworks. I suppose it is meant to be a storage for some of the sculptures that were created during the previous 10 years, and there was no place left for them in a public location in Santo Tirso. If I am right, than the whole museum project denies the very idea of public art itself and it denies even the statues themselves, because they were created with the intention of public placement. On the other hand, the idea of creating a museum for contemporary sculpture is very interesting and unusual, I can not remember the only museum of contemporary art, which would be devoted to collecting contemporary sculpture only. Still, I think it would be more interesting to extend the project of symposiums for the next 10 years and create a new sculptures, with already knowing that they will be exposed in a museum and not in a public space.

## Conclusion

Although it may not be so obvious from my text, I see the conference in Santo Tirso as a successful one. I might have found some problems with the course of the conference and some other details, but despite that I'm glad I was able to attend this event and as a whole I have a positive opinion about it. As the most positive activity I see the interest in art from the city hall, and I don't mean only the financial support, but also way of thinking about art in their city. Just the fact that the mayor of Santo Tirso himself attended the conference and spoke about the project is significant. I hope that they will continue with the project, that it is not already over after those 10 years, but that they will find a new direction to continue with it.