

## Patrícia Portela.

*"If I tell you stories all the time I do not disappear."*

— *Scheherazade, Flatland (Portela)*

Patrícia Portela is an unclassifiable Portuguese writer, performer, media artist, producer, and stage designer who creates and manipulates language in a variety of multidisciplinary projects that include performance, installation, theater, movement, and video. Her playful, audacious, and speculative texts narrate a hyper-real world where words spill from the printed page onto screens and from audio and virtual platforms to the eyes and ears of audiences. Unrelentingly inventive, her creations require audiences to question the meaning of language and its relationships to narrating reality.

To discuss Portela in traditional literary contexts would be to ignore the particularity of her inventiveness and miss its provocative richness. Rather, her writing must be considered in the wider arena of interdisciplinary, contemporary art that integrates multiple practices and aesthetics on a project-by-project basis. Portela works on international stages, and as a result a number of her texts are available in English. She has also published several books in Portuguese. In theaters, public gardens, on virtual media, or in books, after more than a decade of original creations, inventive language and unusual storytelling are Patrícia Portela's enduring constants, attracting international coproductions, festival programming, and awards.

As part of the generation born in Portugal's mid-1970s "Carnation Revolution" period, she is a fascinating example of a New Wave of contemporary Portuguese creators shaping current artistic scenes. With regard to her training in stage design and affinity for the open-ended parameters of contemporary dance, she has called herself a "choreographing scenographer." However, her focus includes imagining stage space for text and combining movement, visual art,

The text on Patrícia Portela is part of a series of portraits of four contemporary Portuguese writers with support of Portugal's Instituto Camões and the Québec Arts Council.

theatrics, cyberspace, and words in multiple presentation platforms. Precisely, it is in mobilizing the synergetic movement, rhythm, and essence of each of these elements that makes her unique to both the performing and literary milieus.

With a team of collaborators, Portela explores the possibilities that technology affords in performance. "Our virtual space is just the building of a big book. We like this kind of mixing, the simultaneity of different layers . . . technology as a book. The book was our first technology. That's why we produce all the things we produce . . . because we can write and this was one of the important reasons for using a book and not another surface." More recently, political, social, and environmental issues have become primary subjects in her work (Hortus and 2084). To say one must see and hear Portela's texts in order to experience them is no extravagance. In surprising audio and visual dimensions she fabricates scenography from language and as a result twists its very essence as meaning and narrative.

Patrícia Portela agrees that "due to the historical, political, and social context following the end of the dictatorship, there exists a new generation of writers in Portugal who show different perspectives, using vocabulary and literary structures that are more cosmopolitan." She is exemplary of the contemporary artist who studies, works and lives fluidly in and out of her native country, uses multiple languages, and identifies more with a broad range of current artistic aesthetics than anything specific to her cultural heritage.

She studied set and costume design at Lisbon's Faculty of Theatre and Film and then gained experience working with independent theater and dance companies, mainly as a costume designer or dramaturge, and as a decorator for several short films. She moved on to do a master's degree in scenography arts at the Faculty of Theatre in Utrecht and Central St. Martins College of Art, and the European Film College in Denmark, specializing in sound design, scriptwriting, and documentary.

In Utrecht she was given the first opportunity to connect movement, text, and stage space in a single project rather than remaining limited to a single discipline. Surprisingly, the link between different disciplines emerged primarily through writing and images. It was also here that Portela became enamored with the "dramaturgy of space and small, portable things."

Starting in 1999 Patricia Portela began gaining attention and prizes for theater work, and in 2003 she received an Acarte/Gulbenkian Performing Arts Spe-

cial Mention for *Wasteband*. The first in a trilogy, *Flatland 1*, won a special mention for its dramaturgy, text, and use of space in 2006 by Portugal's Association of Critics. *Banquet*, a dinner-ambiance-performance about cloning and immortality, was considered one of the top ten shows in Belgium by critics in 2007, and in 2009 she received two-year funding from Portugal's Ministry of Culture to develop her research on transdisciplinary projects. She moves between homes in Antwerp and Lisbon, from where she directs her research/production company called Prado and collaborates with numerous researchers, program designers, and visual and sound artists.

Returning to the question of what distinguishes contemporary creators from the past, Portela comments, "Every generation has its own questions and themes, its fantasies that come from preceding generations. It's normal that some questions are recurring and others are replaced by more immediate preoccupations." She questions interpretations of reality, satirizes political discourse, and is playfully polemic and provocative. Such perspectives share deep literary traditions, but she articulates them in a singular manner using technology. Further, she adds, "The last ten years have seen the emergence of new and promising writers that could leave their mark on the period."

Because of the experimental nature of her work and the fact that published books are generally not her priority, one wonders whether Portela feels marginal with regard to contemporary Portuguese writing. "I can't say that I feel on the margin. I am still living in an astonishing period, but my primary occupation is performance. Literature and its environment are very recent for me. However, I think that poets are the ones truly on the margin, the real radical and experimental writers. With regards to prose, there are emerging writers who are respected and read with admiration. This all contributes to a strong literary generation and reinforces everyone individually." She has published four books, the last two with the renowned Editorial Caminho. Her publications "*Odília*" in 2007 and "*Para cima e não para Norte . . .*" in 2008 were considered a new revelation and style in Portuguese literature by critic Miguel Real in the reputed *Jornal de Letras*.

### Portela's Creations: "A book is a surface for words"

Muses are born between the little finger, the heart, and the human brain. ( . . . ) If we look very carefully we can notice that they have the shape of a plant or a leaf. They

navigate in a very organized and active way through the brain and they communicate through highly complex systems, by propagating electric signals and primary chemical reactions.

— Odília

Portela the experimenter appears obsessed with keeping language mobile, a seemingly contrary role to what is routinely expected of narrative descriptions and fixations of reality. Visually and aurally, her words are often in a state of flux, shifting positions, playing tricks, contradicting, and transfiguring themselves. Reading Portela slowly, pondering meaning, or beginning again is fruitless because the text will have possibly changed or disappeared as speed is a consciously integrated element in her inventions. A tour through Patrícia Portela's projects offers a view of her hyperliterary imagination.

The recent site-specific sound installation *Hortus* (2012) explores the tension between the ideals of nature and capitalist market economics. Portela's narrative framework "situates the sound garden in an environment of contemplation and reflection about how we can make the balance between man and nature shift again by rewriting and re-understanding our relationship with real-time and natural conditions." Visitors are invited to explore a garden where a sensor network, made by longtime collaborator and co-creator Christoph de Boeck, measures the dynamics of wind and light harvested by the plants during their photosynthetic process and translates them into bird sounds. Human movement in the garden provokes a financial algorithm similar to the ones used in a speculative economic market that interprets the variations of the received data and transforms and remaps the natural garden soundscape to which plants seem most profitable in that split second. When visitors decide to stop, to read, or to reflect, the original sound design for the garden returns, reflecting only the readings of natural energy. Simultaneously, a network of microstories loops in electronic paper botanical displays, comparing definitions of common terms in the economic, political, or natural worlds, such as "growth," "beauty," "regeneration," and "time."

Accompanying *Hortus* in the "Utopian Salon," the lecture-performance 2084, the title an apparent takeoff on George Orwell's satirical novel 1984, makes a similar "technological" metaphor from the relationship between nature and society. Portela presents two separate reflections about possible futures for a dying civilization, blending citations from President Obama and Mao Zedong in her

own text. Each presentation ends with a reading and debate led by a pair of invited guests from such areas as science, politics, and philosophy. Audiences are invited to “exercise and practice Utopia,” rather than be presented with a model, and to “imagine the impossible” by adding suggestions or themes to the debate.

The *Private Collection of Acácio Nobre* (2010) is a staged fiction documentary based on a trunk full of texts discovered in Portela’s grandparents’ house. Nobre was a controversial, avant-garde Portuguese writer and public figure who suffered from aphasia.

With elaborate lighting and giant screens that reveal texts typed live on stage, Portela’s performance documents and explores Nobre’s persona via the discovered letters.

The *Flatland Trilogy* (*Flatland 1, 2, and 3*) was created between 2004 and 2006 and is a whimsical, outrageous, and surreal three-part adventure. The first piece is a virtual performance for one astronaut/salesman, one musician, and one PowerPoint, subtitled “a performance about waiting, wishing, and wasting.” Tongue in cheek, Portela notes that the project is “based on the coincidental fact that both a Chinese ritual and scientific theories prove that the moon will soon fall on a beach full of frogs on the exact date we perform.” She leads a faux scientific discussion around a table where performers and spectators are seated and vertical images are projected on a screen.

*Flatland* tells the story of a Flatman as he discovers that his life is missing a third dimension. We follow the superhero’s reflections through worlds of bi-dimensionality until he finds out that existence in the 3D world is possible only if spectators are looking at him. Elated with the discovery but unhappy with his dependency, Flatman organizes a strategy to conquer his tridimensional immortality. The project uses a detective story format and has multiple presentation formats: audio, visual projection, and printed book.

*Flatland II*, subtitled “to be is to be seen,” is a performance in which “spectators are kidnapped and taken to an unknown place where a nonstop multimedia show presents many different entertainment options, all offered at the speed of a click, including salvation by a pizza delivery man.” Momentarily, the world obeys a parallel construction of the world itself. Polemical and probing, in this final installment of the trilogy, theater is terrorism and terrorism becomes theater, thus creating fiction in real time and risking bold statements about the very act of performance. “Before you’re a victim, you’re an audience,” says Portela.



Exploring the very notion of books and language as moving objects, *Para cima e não para norte* (*Above, Not to the North*) is a book-format extension of *Flatland 1*. Like Flatman's desired life, the book is three-dimensional, with words undulating on the printed page, sentences running off edges, circling, and recomposing in an animated circus of print acrobatics. Pausing in what seems like a literary madhouse romp, the reader wonders what mischief continues within once the book is closed.

*Odília* (2006) also exists as book and performance. Portela calls it "a journey through the house of ideas and impressions, like still lives in the brain. A labyrinth ( . . . ) as if we could lose ourselves in our heads." Perhaps in the persona of *Odília* we sense the writer's narrative voice best and glimpse her comic nature: "There are the normal muses and the confused muses! . . . They are regularly naked or semi-naked with semi transparent dresses and are responsible for romantic delirium and the Music of the universe . . . The confused muses are all *Odílias*."

Says Portela, "I would love to make a book that could be read in many directions and could have several possibilities of order, but both *Odília* and *Para cima* can be read from beginning to end. I would say I never know what to expect when I open a book and all I want is to be fascinated by what it wants to tell me . . . If people can expect that of my books I will be very pleased, but that is one of the most difficult things for books to be: fascinating and expectedly unexpected!"

In earlier work she used speed and information overload as dramaturgical tools and narrative strategies, "text and images sometimes running so fast that it is impossible to catch all of it . . . It's no longer an information, it's more an environment." Currently Portela, the probing contemporary Darwinian and activist artist is probing issues related to nature and survival. She is, among her generation of contemporary Portuguese creators, a treasure to be discovered.

Patricia Portela, images, videos, texts, information: [www.prado.tv](http://www.prado.tv).

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