

# SCHISTIME

SCHIST THAT HAS ALREADY BEEN TIME

PR

MSDM PUBLICATIONS

The uses of time and memory are challenging themes for me, that I approach beyond the parameters of the official history with its definite linear time line, choosing instead to move dialectically between past and present. I do very different artworks in terms of medium and the work is usually located in the public sphere and driven by themes of artistic research. Sometimes I publish books, work with archives and photography, other times I make movies, and when I'm not doing either, I accept commissions for participatory artworks that involve longer processes of collaboration with groups of participants and are, in terms of artistic time, a slower development process.

In 2013, I was invited to join a team of one artist, a technologist and a social worker, in such a project to create Schistories, a multi-media artwork investigating landscape, migration and memory in the Schist Villages of the Louzã Mountain (Portugal). The project was a research process of a few months that began with an initial visit in August, when I made the first photographs, before we returned in November to live and work in the villages. It was conceived as a relational work made of conversational moments. Conversations that enabled the formation of new bonds between us, the villagers and the audience, amongst the villagers themselves, and above all an extended conversation with time, place and the schist landscape.

During our research time in the villages, we met with young people and older villagers, gathering first-hand accounts, third-person memory, myths and tales, local folk music, personal collections and historical archives

with a focus on personal objects and photographs. These resulted in a script-like guide that organised the performances and installations that were developed during rehearsals, into the narrative that was the final event. The public presentation was a four hours journey-walk with fifty people who came from the cities of Coimbra, Lisboa and Góis to participate and were guided through a nature trail that connected the four villages where the stories were experienced as site-specific live moments.

This book - titled Schistime - does not attempt to fully catalogue what happened before and/or during the performative event. It is rather a personal document from my encounters with the schist and the people, and my research time, spent looking, listening, feeling, guessing what happened before we arrived and what is there now. Its timeframe is that of a very extended time, that has to do with real rock formations and mountains and a very wide geological time – the schist time. The book's subtitle- Schist that has already been time- is inspired in the 1985 ethno-sociological study by Paulo Monteiro about these same villages titled 'Land that has already been land.' In his study he addresses the crisis in the Louzã Mountain, analyzing it as the product of a series of very problematic state and regional initiatives that resulted in the abandonment of the villages.

The communal spirit of land use, that illustrated a wise approach to the commons as a means of collective survival in the mountains, exemplified a very autonomous way of living that challenged the dictatorial

regime of early 20th century. This infuriated the local government and the result was the institution of an authoritarian forestry regime that planted community land with pines and eucalyptus. That invasion came to destabilize the delicate rural balance between trees, bushes, pastures, crops and livestock based on collective practices of land use and led to the extinction of natural resources crucial for survival. The colonisation of the mountains by the city-based government as a way to control the region, culminated in successive waves of migration as the villagers had to look for work in the cities and abroad.

Currently, the four villages we worked with are mostly abandoned. In Comareira live two older women, one a single-mother in her seventies, the other a widow in her eighties; Aigra Nova has four inhabitants, a couple in their sixties that live with the woman's mother in her eighties, and a single man in his fifties; in Aigra Velha live a couple in their late sixties; and in Pena live approximately twelve people, including a couple in their forties with a daughter, the only teenager in these villages, whose friends joined in for a music moment with traditional concertinas.

The villagers are extremely aware that the "schist villages" became a brand of its own. The artists, invited to join in and be part of the current wave of investment that aims to transform rurality into touristic and cultural capital, are aware of this as well and such ethics guided our conversations and ways of working together. Today the mountain is being promoted as "the schist landscape" in an attempt to attract the tourist gaze that is also

a form of exoticism. This is an external time that is being deployed and is sometimes in contradiction with local time.

Such is the material process I attempted to capture in the photographs. In the editing, I placed the houses that are being rehabilitated side by side with the ruins, the new rural urbanity alongside local life, coexisting in a state of entropy, between growth and decay. A particularly uncanny scene, staged in a paintball field in the Góis village, (located in the base of the mountain) shows a battle scenario. A surreal creature with a cork mask (used in the villages during carnival) seems to be hunted by the other players, families who come with their children to the paintball field. On one hand, the performance of the masquerade seems to satirise the war game and the glorification of death implicit in the paintball game.

On the other, it suggests the coming together of two times: the time of the mountain villages, that we associate with a time-less-present, perhaps a time-more-past, and the time of the paintball field, that we associate with technological "edge," and perhaps a more-future-time. The presence of the mask shifts the time to a more ethnographic time associated with the primitive and the 'raw' cultural condition, with all the connotations of appropriation and mystification of the so called "peasants' culture" that has resulted in its colonisation. This time-split works as visual suggestion of the effects of globalisation in the schist villages. As an assistant in the paintball field pointed out: "It's all part of the same touristic process."

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