

Curatorial Fieldwork as a Critical Practice

Learning from Post- Nostalgic Knowings in Freixo

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The regeneration of urban areas and former industrial territories through the continuous activity, presence and investment of artistic practices and cultural projects has long been acknowledged as a significant strategy for achieving urban transformation. In addition to the better-known methods of architecture and real estate, other more immaterial and less permanent approaches to sites reveal the tensions, difficulties and resistances, and therefore can contribute to a deeper understanding of the city. Addressing the city through curatorial fieldwork as a critical practice can provide valuable readings of specific contexts, also contributing to the development of new narratives on site.

Curatorial projects operating directly in the fields activated by research have the potential to form temporary platforms and gather diverse agents around specific urban areas. Fieldwork is, therefore, central to curatorial

approaches that engage with unstable contexts, especially if we consider territories in the process of transformation, decay or abandonment. In this regard, the evolution of the relation of fieldwork to art and curatorial projects aligns with the experimental and context-specific approaches documented by Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi and Steven Izenour;¹ the new fieldwork methods collected by Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford;² the research strategies of fieldwork conceptualized by Irit Rogoff;³ and the performative *derives* and bodily actions with communities that Francesco Careri⁴ has described and that Grant Kester has further elucidated.⁵ Other modalities of material/semiotic production in cultural events add the conditions and sense of opportunity to work on specific sites, such as those presented by *Manifesta 9*.⁶ Far from a single stable methodology, fieldwork in curatorial projects is tentative and, as we will see, responds to the context, to the community, to participants and to artistic projects, therefore differing from other social sciences such as anthropology or ethnography, and from urban studies, which are more focused on the physical reality.

Curatorial Fieldwork as a Critical Practice

The relationship of the fieldwork with critical curatorial practices encompasses different possibilities depending on the sites they intervene in. Considering different performative and ephemeral practices *in situ*, we identify that some experiences are more oriented towards reporting on a field, while others are focused on knowledge production *about* a field. While some practices occurring in the field are more oriented towards an aesthetic or phenomenological experience of participants, we will focus on the intersection of the previous examples, reporting and contributing to knowledge *on* a site.

The present territory of curatorial activities, practices, and studies is a vast one, and the curatorial approach we are searching for relates to fieldwork as a critical practice, occurring outside the galleries and museum spaces and, as a result, embracing the urbanscape, its community and the site of

curatorial and artistic intervention. Therefore, in this essay, we learn from *Post-Nostalgic Knowings*, a platform that gathered international curators, artists, architects and activists from the Baltic and Iberian Peninsula, to look at Freixo, a post-industrial area in Porto, and propose a new reading through different lenses and by implementing field expeditions.

Fieldwork is a strategic curatorial operation to approach site-specific or context-specific projects, in order to achieve a deeper understanding of its problematics. Although curating may be a slow and subtle practice when compared with those of real estate and urbanism, fieldwork is a direct way to gain a better understanding of the territory, its conditions and the life cycle it inherits.

Post-Nostalgic Knowings was a multidisciplinary laboratory that gathered curatorial knowledge from around Europe as a collective critical strategy to embrace a forgotten area: the river slope zone of Porto's post-industrial waterfront, Freixo. Set up as a site-specific advanced platform, *Post-Nostalgic Knowings* was curated by tutors Inês Moreira and Aneta Szylak and presented the initiatives taking place on the new cultural panorama in Eastern Europe, which have long contributed to the social and political transformation of the territories in which they act.⁷ When trying to understand how curating can contribute to the articulation of new narratives on the built environment and new perspectives of its future, different approaches were conveyed and collected, presented by self-organized collectives, single artists and commissioned institutional projects. Freixo is a territorial fragment located in the eastern part of the city of Porto, Portugal. Enclosed by a cemetery, railway lines, the Douro River and the Freixo metropolitan bridge, the successive interventions in this area ruptured the relations with the surrounding urban fabric, highlighting that Freixo is currently simultaneously a vernacular community and a metropolitan infrastructure marked by a transgenic, hybrid, multitemporal condition.



Fig. 1. Performative walk during Freixo Infrastructural Takeover, Participants in collaboration with artist Anton Kats, 2019, Photo: Renato Cruz Santos.

From *Post-Nostalgic Knowings* sprang the reflection: How can collective thought be promoted to resignify places and territories that have lost their identity, while avoiding nostalgia for the past and a feeling of *loss*? The programme proposed to collectively learn from curatorial experiments in Riga and Gdansk and by reflecting on the Baltic Region, to find the conceptual tools and tactics that allowed them to embrace specific sites.⁸

Free Riga resulted from a curatorial practice that paradigmatically changed Riga's territory.⁹ Solvita Krese, curator and director of the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, proposed to investigate urban abandonment as a new opportunity and created 'Festival Survival Kit', which occupied ruins and empty spaces with new programmes and cultural projects. The grassroots campaign 'Occupy Me' operated during the night to identify derelict buildings in the city, bringing visibility to abandoned places that could potentially be used and appropriated by artists. This led to the creation of Free Riga, a non-governmental organization that manages and coordinates a system of temporary use of empty buildings. Fieldwork was a central part of this curatorial mapping and visualization, leading to negotiation.

The artistic and curatorial practices developed in the Gdansk shipyard, in Poland, are also examples of social and territorial transformation through fieldwork and engagement with the local community, highlighting the importance of artistic activism when connected to a specificity of context. The curatorial acts of Aneta Szylak, an experienced curator and art theorist, explore the shipyard in this 'in-between' post-industrial and pre-demolishment period, exploring the existing architecture, the ancient memories and new artistic narratives, contributing, over time, to the actual resignification of the site.¹⁰

Regarding curating context described as the 'field where the curatorial practice is extended beyond curating exhibitions into working with entire contexts',¹¹ it is important to grasp that cultural and artistic processes are

not responsible for material change of the context. The most significant contribution of context curating resides in the transformation of narratives, inscribing stories and, therefore, writing to posterity. If the processes of ongoing urban transformation change territories, we can state that curatorial and artistic processes resignify the political history and its industrial past, bringing it back to the present by intersecting the young arts community with local inhabitants and workers from the area.

Another Baltic transnational curatorial experience – taking place in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – causes a broadening in the perception of interconnectivity and interdependence between community and territory, establishing relations among the city, architecture, infrastructure and national identities.¹² *The Baltic Pavilion* reflects on the Baltic region's profound transformations as a result of the economic and political processes that took place in the time of the Soviet Union. The curatorial proposal explored the relations among nature, culture, history, energy, heritage and transportation, through the diverse scales and materials that define the built environment and architecture. The idea of fragmentation present in the different scales in the exhibition (and its partial entrances), mimics the contemporary Baltic nations as territories segmented by their past.

While in the curatorial programme *Free Riga* the art community reclaims and devises conditions of access to urban buildings and revitalization of the urban tissue, in Gdansk's *Alternativa*, the curatorial proposal resignifies spaces and history, adding value to the present-day condition and contributing to the preservation of the site. Also, the curatorial project *The Baltic Pavilion* restores a vast and an indicative dimension, showing that urbanity implies a relation between people and their settlements, but also a deeper connection between the ecosystems and the techno-cultural systems that support them.

The diversity of perspectives presented by international curators in the site-specific advanced platform *Post-Nostalgic Knowings* were amplified by the community engagement, attracting a wide spectrum of agents operating in the field – architects, artists, geographers, curators, museum conservators and even okupas. Therefore, the fieldwork in Freixo was motivated by both the dialogue with the site and the shared experience of previous curatorial projects.

Acting in Freixo

When approaching Freixo's territory, aside from the curatorial shared references of projects in other post-industrial urban areas, we adopted a specific physical and epistemological notion of fieldwork, in a double sense: first a reconnaissance of the field/area and, secondly, the re-creation of the territory/field. According to Irit Rogoff:

*'Field Work' connotes the convergence of fields of activity, intellectual disciplines, and methodologies with forms of artistic and other cultural practices, none of which can exist in discrete bounded isolation. Rather than interdisciplinarity which produces an intertextuality out of named and recognized disciplines, 'Field Work' suggests that if we focus our well-furnished attention on an unnamed something, it might constitute itself as a field.*¹³

From this double dare of fieldwork posed by Rogoff, we took the abandoned area in Freixo as a physical place of research and convergence to hold the *Freixo Infrastructural Takeover* workshop, guided by artist Anton Kats. The collective artistic takeover resulted in performative moments under bridges, in tunnels and along the railway lines of the hillside, exploring new meanings based on the problematics unfolded and underlining the artist's role as an enabler of social inclusion and new spatial meanings. A first collective sound analysis of the place allowed us to grasp the sounds that characterize Freixo and the activities that persist,

followed by an observation and a sensible reading of the urban issues and generations that subsist through routines, resistant to new proposals and disturbing changes.

Starting with a *cadavre-exquis* about the current context of Freixo occurring inside a deactivated tunnel, the takeover contributed to a physical activation of the space, using artistic devices that interfered with the vision and stimulated other senses, searching for different dimensions of reality and other ways of seeing and reading the territory. This analysis contributed to the notion of research in context and to a non-hierarchical positioning of different ideas, showing how new possibilities of transformation were amplified by the curatorial fieldwork as a critical practice.

Artistic practices display a key role in the process of territorial inclusion, when urban spaces are marginalized and forgotten, suffering from an amnesiac status that renders them invisible. Even when economic cycles are most favourable and private investment reaches urban areas more distant from the centre, as is the case in the eastern part of Porto, territories such as Freixo are held hostage to isolated routines and actions, left without an urban or political strategy, and therefore lost between the collective imagination of this place and its potential future. By recreating the meaning of various terms and using its own lexicon, this collective action created a 'Post-Nostalgic Collective Glossary' reflecting on the Nostalgia, Toska and Saudade, which is now an instrument towards future actions.¹⁴

This urban area is increasingly alluring to private investment. However, the steepness of the slope, the difficulty of creating a connection between the higher part of the city and the lower side, and the presence of urban barriers justify the lack of action. Throughout the years it has been the object of artistic actions, from ephemeral and dispersed interventions such as the spatial and photographic analysis developed by the collective Os Espacialistas with art students in 2009,¹⁵ who sought the performative and pictorial



Fig. 2. Os Espacialistas, Performative intervention with Fine Art School students, 2009, Photo: Filomena Nascimento.

potentialities on the abandoned architecture of the area; to performative routes *Espírito do Lugar 1.0: Bonfim – Campanhã*, staged by the collective Circolando, that revealed this territory through walks and derives that inscribed the expressions *Terrain Vague*, *Babilónia*, or *HoMo Ludens*.¹⁶ Until now, no larger resignifications or deeper reinscriptions have emerged in an area that offers itself as terrain of potentiality for both real estate investment and for artistic and curatorial action.

As fieldwork engages with specific contexts, turning singular and non-prescriptive modes of operation into new understandings of the site, it also offers insights into how diverse voices, subjectivities and expectations towards a site reveal new perspectives and instigate other strategies to occupy it over time.

Curatorial fieldwork actions in the city and its territories can provoke different modes of engagement with the site, its many actors and expectations, contributing to the transformation of perceptions and eventually influencing the intentions towards and expectations of its urbanity. If the most recognized and popular cultural interventions in cities are still related to artistic activation of urban spaces through public art, music festivals and other urban cultures, we also acknowledge that strategic artistic/activist actions can counter-propose top-down urban projects: their engagement with local communities, peculiar stories and many singularities are firm modes of strategic intervention in urban transformation.¹⁷

In forgotten areas, the nostalgia and memories of what was lost often become inertial forces that influence, or halt, the construction of new urban narratives. Over time we recognize how different actions have been occupying this site, establishing dialogues between architecture and heritage, territory and communities, material and discursive dimensions. From the self-organized activism that characterized Freixo in 2009, to the platform *Post-Nostalgic Knowings* presented in 2019, we recognize that curatorial



Fig. 3. Inscriptions by Circolando, 2022, Photo: Patrícia Coelho.

fieldwork as a critical practice allowed a continuous reading of this place that, through the years, displayed diverse and interdisciplinary actions. In 2022, returning once again to Freixo, we still find a territory stagnated:

When a specific territory, immersed in the city, becomes stagnant, in the final stage of a cycle, a state of amnesia and uncertainty is created between nostalgia and the uncertainty of the future. A gap is created that prolongs absence and fills the space with a void that repels movement. To stimulate the beginning of new cycles, it is necessary to open new opportunities that think and recycle the past reality of the place, in view of the moments and dynamics of its constituent urbanity.¹⁸

Freixo continues to be inhabited by spontaneous actions that engage in dialogue with this territory and its remaining species, scientifically named ruderal vegetation. Departing from Freixo's site, PhD student Beatriz Duarte, former participant of *Post-Nostalgic Knowings* platform, developed a fieldwork approach to Freixo's many possible futures and coordinated the workshop Collective Mapping of Freixo.¹⁹ This workshop reflected and experimented collectively on the potentialities and futures of this area and occurred during the Oblique Think Tank #2, promoted by the spatial cluster 'Curating the Contemporary: on Architectures, Territories and Networks'.

Also, the project 'A Recoletora', founded by photographer Alexandre Delmar and designer Maria Ruivo, aims to rebuild the reputation of ruderal vegetation by mapping it through performative walks in four green areas of Porto and Matosinhos.²⁰ One of these being the deactivated railway of Freixo's hillside, where botanists, artists and designers, among other specialists, collaborate to better understand these species and, inevitably, this place.

Wandering through forgotten urban territories is also the modus operandi of architect and professor Miguel Costa, founder of 'Micro Atelier de Arquitectura e Arte', which explores and speculates on ruderal species. The pro-

ject 'Vegetation Stories' results from a fieldwork collecting, involving Freixo and other abandoned places, aiming to catalogue species inherited by the European colonial project.²¹

In invisible territories and neighbourhoods in states of profound amnesia, such as Freixo, art and critical thinking offer crucial tools to expand their potential and hinder the eradication of pre-existent voices, materials and stories in the context. As a result, the marks of self-organized activisms, programmed takeovers and urban collectors are precisely what remains. Between the ruderal vegetations and the expressions marked in the concrete columns, Freixo remains a never-ending *terrain vague*.

Artistic projects resulting from curatorial fieldwork do not have the power to resolve the absence, abandonment or fragmentation of spaces and territories, but standing as critical practice they question their multiple possibilities. Fieldwork triggers new methods of analysing the qualities and possibilities of specific sites, relating heritage and local identities with new contemporary cultures, and contributing to alternative historical narratives and transformation of the urban space.

Developing curatorial fieldwork as a critical practice by learning from *Post-Nostalgic Knowings* demonstrates that curating may reveal new practices in the city, and its actions and interventions are open and multidimensional, presenting relational practices of care for urbanity and communities while acting beyond counter-practice to real estate interests. Following the thought of Suzanne Ewing on the distinction between site and field: 'Site is the place to practise in/on/with, and field is a place to learn from/in . . . "To field" is more contingent, responsive, and depends on flowing, pervasive conditions, cloud, indeterminate edges.'²² We believe that Freixo has become a field of possible futures/actions that we can all learn from/in.

- 1 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977).
- 2 Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford (eds.), *Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social* (London: Routledge, 2012).
- 3 Irit Rogoff, *Field Work in Visual Culture*, Curatorial/Knowledge PhD Seminar, London, 2004 [Online] Available at: <http://ck.kein.org/>, accessed 27 May 2022.
- 4 Francesco Careri, *Walkscapes: O Caminhar Como Prática Estética* (Spain: Gustavo Gili, 2018).
- 5 Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art, Updated Edition with a New Preface* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).
- 6 Cuauhtémoc Medina, et al., *Manifesta 9: The Deep of the Modern, a Subcyclopaedia* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2012).
- 7 The programme was commissioned in 2019 by the Municipality of Porto as a critical take on an industrial area of Porto and offered conferences, masterclasses, hikes and group work sessions where participants had the opportunity to learn about the research of the authors Elena Lacruz, Jonas Žukauskas and Solvita Krese; follow geographer Jorge Ricardo Pinto on a field visit; and produce the workshop ‘Takeover Infraestrutural do Freixo’ with artist Anton Kats. An initiative by the PLÁKA platform, commissioned by the municipality of Porto, which took place between 28 September and 4 October 2019. In its second edition the project organized three courses throughout 2019 that promoted thought about contemporary artistic practices [Online] Available at: <http://www.plaka.porto.pt/pt/colectivos-plaka/>, accessed 27 May 2022.
- 8 The debate ‘Post-Nostalgic Knowings’ had the presence of the tutors: Inês Moreira and Aneta Szylak; the guests: Anton Kats, Elena Lacruz, Jonas Žukauskas, Jorge Ricardo Pinto, Solvita Krese; the participants: Almudena Martins, Beatriz Duarte, Beatriz Takahashi, Bruno Almeida, Carla Gonçalves, Juan Toboso, Leticia Costelha, Martín Molín, Miguel Teodoro, Orlando Castro, Patrícia Azevedo, Patrícia Coelho, Sérgio Magalhães.
- 9 ‘Free Riga’ is a project that stimulates urban transformation and valorisation by implementing artistic processes, departing from crisis and emptiness as mottoes towards artistic creation with the potential power of urban and sociopolitical transformation. [Online] Available at: <https://freeriga.lv>, accessed 27 May 2022.
- 10 The continuous interventions in this political and social territory motivated the creation of *Alternativa*, an International Contemporary Visual Arts Festival that occupied industrial buildings and external spaces with the works and processes of contemporary art.

- 11 Magdalena Malm (ed.), *Curating Context – Beyond the Gallery and Into Other Fields* (Sweden: Art and Theory Publishing, 2017).
- 12 *The Baltic Pavilion* was produced for the 15th edition of the Venice Architecture Biennale (2016). The Pavilion was a pioneer, representing the three Baltic nations (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) for the first time ever and simultaneously celebrating the centenary of the Independence of 1918.
- 13 Irit Rogoff, *Field Work in Visual Culture*, Curatorial/Knowledge PhD Seminar, London, 2004 [Online] Available at: <http://ck.kein.org/>, accessed 27 May 2022.
- 14 Inês Moreira (ed.), *Post-Nostalgic Knowings* (Porto: Ágora – Cultura e Desporto do Porto, E.M./ Galeria Municipal do Porto, 2021).
- 15 ‘Architectural/artistic laboratory project of analysis and programmatic modification of the space. Through the use of photography and video as devices for drawing, thinking, perceiving and diagnosing natural and built space’, in: Filomena Lopes Nascimento, *A Relevância do Estudo Sociológico do Lugar para o Desenvolvimento Projectual em Arquitectura*, Porto: PhD dissertation, Faculdade de Belas Artes da Universidade do Porto, 2011, 88.
- 16 Circolando, ‘Espírito do Lugar 1.0: Bonfim – Campanhã’ [Online] Available at: <https://circolando.com>, accessed 27 May 2022.
- 17 Aneta Szylak, ‘Archived Communities in the Works of Cora Piantoni’, in: Piantoni, Cora, *Buon Lavoro: Four Films on Workers* (Berlin: Archive Book, 2018).
- 18 Patricia Coelho, ‘Lifespan/Lifecycle’, in: Moreira, op. cit. 85.
- 19 Beatriz Duarte, ‘Mapeamento Colectivo do Freixo’, in: Inês Moreira (ed.), *Curadoria de Enigmas Territoriais + Incursões ao Porto Oriental* (Porto: Parábola Crítica, 2022), 258-275.
- 20 Alexandre Delmar and Maria Ruivo, ‘A Recoletora’ [Online] Available at: <https://arecoletora.com/>, accessed 27 May 2022.
- 21 Miguel Costa, ‘Vegetation Stories’ [Online] Available at: <https://maarqa.com/vegetation-stories-research/>, accessed 27 May 2022.
- 22 Suzanne Ewing et al. (eds), *Architecture and Field/Work* (London: Routledge, 2010).