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### **Trees as Visual Thinking**

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with Sérgio Tavares (sound/music)

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## Trees as Visual Thinking

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### Abstract:

The work forwards an aesthetic and sensory reflection concerning the presence of trees in our contemporary landscapes, namely in urban contexts, conceiving them as "visual thought." Their materiality, mutability, and imagistic charge shape the individual and collective experience of places, transforming the perception and experience of space. The project starts by observing the differences between spaces inhabited by trees and those whose absence is noted, exploring at the same time the implications of this presence in constructing the urban imaginary. The work falls under the theme "Exploring Contemporary Realities," articulating an artistic journey and a theoretical essay anchored in photographic representation as a research tool. In addition to photography, audiovisual and sound capture are used, exploring the relationship between still images, moving images, and sounds, in a synesthetic approach that prioritises the perception and affective experience of the landscape. The research focuses on the changing effects caused by trees: the visual impermanence generated by light and wind, tonal and chromatic variations, the metamorphosis of shadows, the movement of leaves and trunks, and the sounds of other living beings that inhabit them. These elements will be collected and analysed in a dynamic between sound and silence, noise and natural melody, allowing for the creation of visual and sound compositions, eventually integrated into installations. Inspired by Aby Warburg and his expression "the external cause of the image", where wind is a vehicle of emotion and pathos, the essay proposes an approach in which the body, in interaction with the landscape, actively participates in the redefinition of places. Accordingly, the sensitive mediation between body and space becomes the core of an artistic process, and by doing so, it reveals the uniqueness of trees as agents of transformation and meaning in the contemporary urban environment.

Keywords: Trees, Urban landscape, Sensory perception, Photographic representation, Spatial transformation

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In their material concreteness and changing appearance, trees reveal a universe of transformation of places, shaping the personal and collective experience of the territories we inhabit. The tree, in its corporeal and visual power, guides reflection toward the senses, toward the way it transforms our presence and experience in space. As an aesthetic response, the aim is to draw attention to the transformation, modification, and, most importantly, the difference and relationship between places inhabited by trees and those devoid of them.

To respond to the thematic challenge "Exploring Contemporary Realities," the research will be directed toward the imagery of trees in contemporary urban landscapes, projecting the development of an artistic work accompanied by a theoretical essay framed within the field of photographic representation as a tool for artistic research. Photography, but also its exploration alongside audiovisual media (including still and moving images and the sound dimension), as visual and sound research resources centered on the perceptive, sensory, and affective experience of the landscape in the urban context, will be the means to be used in the search for and exploration of different forms of artistic research, enabling the construction of different discursive spaces – series of works whose results will be highly dependent on the procedural resources (between image and sound collection).

As a starting point for the collection, we will seek to identify the expression of these places through the effects of change, the perceptive and sensory transformation that the presence of trees imposes, exploring their visual impermanence provided by the influence of light and wind. What might we find? Variations in the treetops, resulting from the movement reflected in the visual effect of changes in lighting, which necessarily include the effects of changing shadows, as well as chromatic variations with their tonal and saturation differences. But also, the effects of the wind passing through the leaves and the swaying trunks, as well as the sounds of other living elements that inhabit the trees. These and other elements can be collected and analyzed in a dynamic between sound/silence and sounds/noises, elements that constitute these soundscapes and that can add value to the images or serve as material for the creation of a sound installation.

It will be through the imagery of trees, from the glimpse of its uniqueness (trees as visual thought), that we intend to consider the dynamic connections between place and the changing effects that trees provide. Therefore, reflecting on an effective/aesthetic and synesthetic experience of an active body operating in a participatory dynamic. Or, to paraphrase Aby Warburg, working on "the external cause of the image"<sup>1</sup>. This expression Warburg uses to refer to the wind as a vehicle of affection and *pathos*<sup>2</sup> through which we access the most intimate reasons for the body's movement as it reacts to stimuli. The body will be redefined with the concept of landscape of these places in a dialogical process of resignification. In the end, the mediation of a body in space as a natural result of incorporation.

1. In Didi-Huberman, *Diante do tempo*. (Lisboa: Orfeu Negro, 2017).

2. Greek word for suffering, emotion and intensity.

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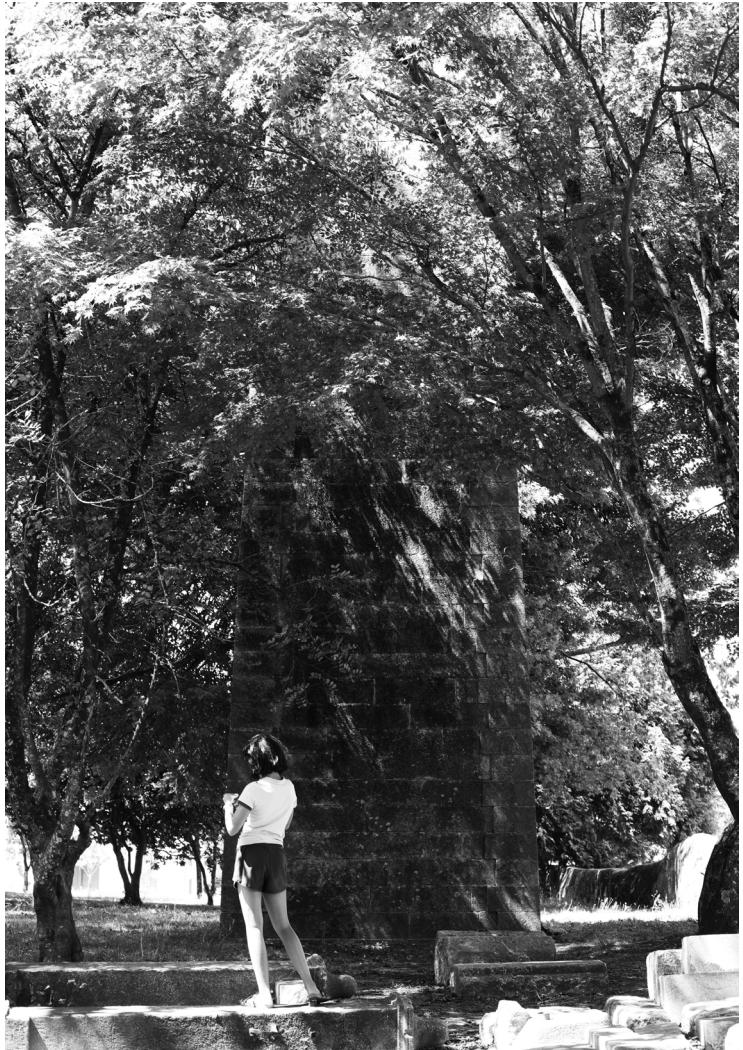
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Trees-As-a-Visual\_thinking

## Visual Essay

### **Exploratory Possibilities: Reflecting on Trees in Urban Landscapes**

Through a suggestive collection of images and sounds, resulting from forays or wanderings through the city of Porto, in contexts that we can relate to the idea of forested areas, this visual essay proposal, which is also intended as an exhibition, installation, and experiment, seeks to develop careful and thoughtful attention to the presence of trees (in the form of experiences), as well as the emotions these experiences can evoke, resulting from this individual and/or collective connection with places. The project seeks to create meanings worked in diverse times and spaces with poetic repercussions, a meaning where emotion and political participation unite. An active participation that both invokes the senses, the sensory, the well-being and connection of individuals, as well as social responsibility in the city.

Problematize the physical relationship (presence) of trees in urban spaces, or what it means to be a tree in cities and how it affects us, established the starting point for a photographic and sound collection and study. How can their erect bodies reclaim their status as living elements – beings that create habitats of total affection – actants of cities that, in their isolated appearances, enhance places and spaces, making themselves known through their visual expressiveness – which is life and movement?



Series\_In the city\_light/shadows\_foliage (imag. 12\_13\_14\_15)



A proposal established through the combined relationship of visible and invisible elements in a movement articulated between plant elements (trees, soil, and subsoil), atmospheric elements (light, wind), and psychic elements (emotion) in an urban context where the boundaries between the natural and the artificial intersect. The images address the frame of reference, the movement of leaves, the diffuse overhead light, and the luminous, formal, and chromatic changes and transformations of the places. Sound transcends the frame of reference, addressing the invisible, the apparent stillness and silence of these beings, and therefore the listening and vibration we can feel before their (subterranean) presence – their communication system.



Triptych  
From inside | the window

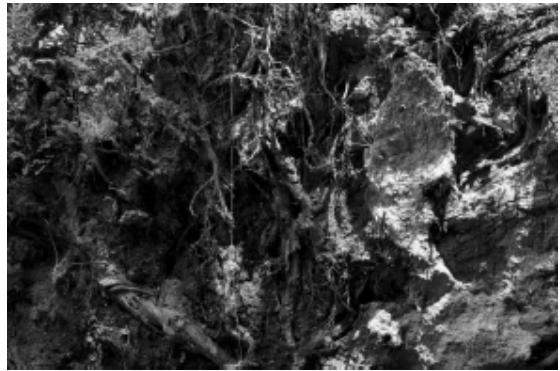


Two exploratory dimensions are projected – the immeasurable plane, the invisible and inaudible dimension of the trees, represented by the roots (the micorrhizae system – a system of nourishment, communication and survival), in its relationship with the measurable plane, in which the physical, palpable body joins and connects the subterranean and the surface – with the visible, the arboreal structure, the trunk, the treetops, and their changing effects provided by light and shadow. To return to the immeasurable plane, in which the work begins to be perceived by the physical and psychic senses of the audio-spectator – the experience of the place, or what it is to be and be in the presence and company of the trees, through the sonic dimension that aids in the totalized perception of space, assertively reproducing the experience of it.

The sonic dimension mirrors the experience of visible and invisible duality through the audible and the inaudible. The audible anticipates and amplifies the sensations that resonate with the eye, which seeks and complements the origin of the sound in the landscape by incorporating animated and resonant elements. In the inaudible dimension, sonification aims to provide continuity to what is invisible – to the subterranean, to the roots – where a networked system of internal communication operates.

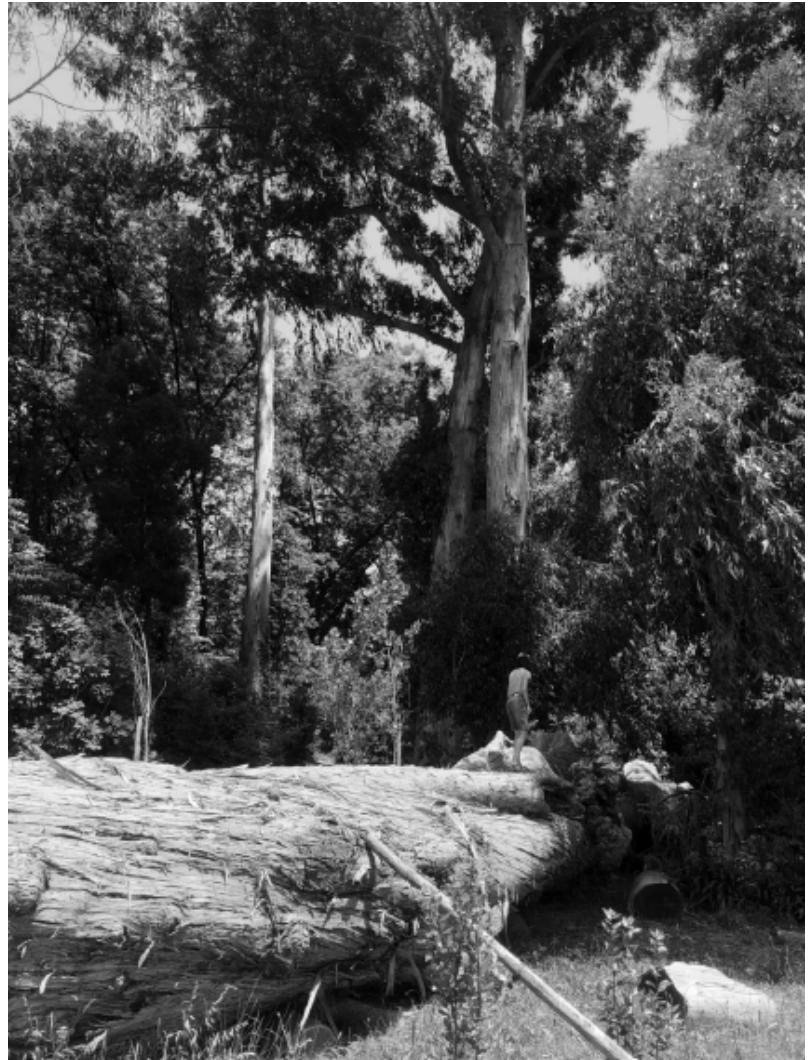
I am a tree

The trees' survival in their relationship with other trees. A nourishment system that ascends, structurally connected (trunk) to the treetops, where the sun's energy, carbon, and water absorbed by the roots are transformed into sugar. Therefore, we work with the idea of microrhizae (starting from the bottom up, from the inside out), of silence, of the inaudible (interior-roots) to the audible (exterior-trunk-canopy), through the speculation or sound imagination that we can intuit and create based on the mechanisms of survival propagation networks and communication and nourishment networks.



Among the trees, particularly in larger gardens, we perceive acoustic ecosystems that allow for a greater auditory range. We notice their presence when they break the silence with the stirring of the wind, hearing the creaking of trunks or the rustling of leaves. Or, by contrast, when they restore silence by creating acoustic barriers, establishing boundaries between wooded areas and urban areas. Thinking about borders is usually an exercise in geography. We are also interested in identifying the more diluted and permeable sonic boundaries that result from the existence of these green barriers and understanding how we adapt to and sense these acoustic gradients.

From the roots



... to the fall of a trunk



a tree body

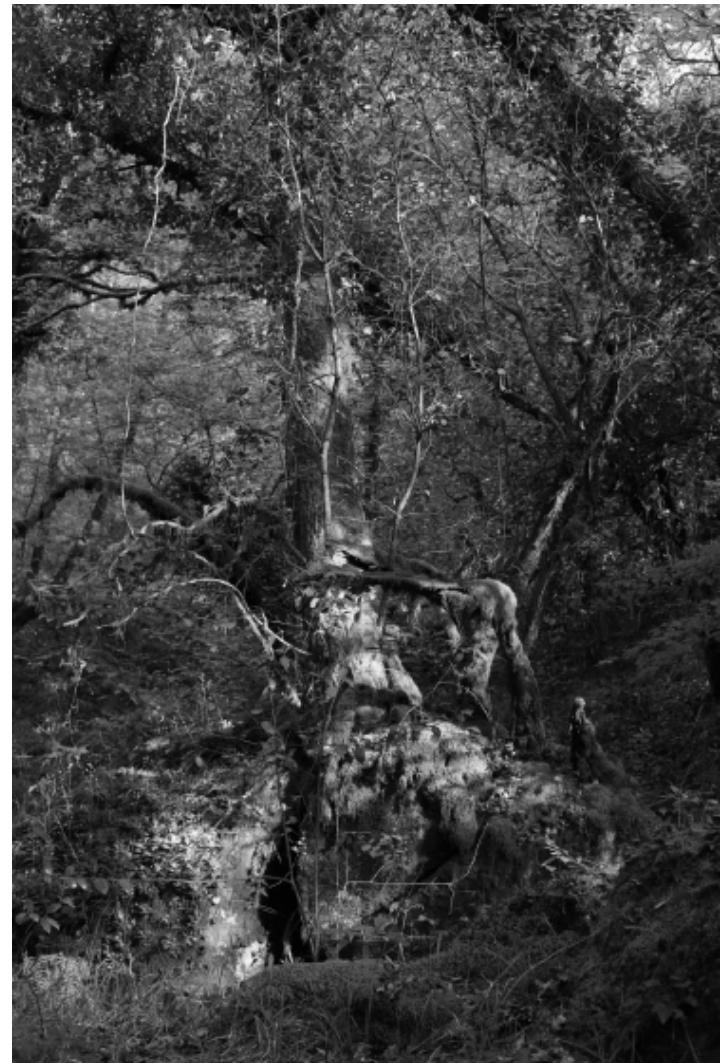
In the research and collection process, we sought, through compositional relationships of montage and manipulation of soundscapes, to materialize and spatialize the relationship between the visible and invisible, the inaudible and the audible. Returning to the idea of silence, and possibly how we understand it after Cage in its radical impossibility and simultaneously in its openness to the immanent sonic space, we approach Louis Kahn, whose architectural work was based on the dialogue between silence and light, in a synthesis and blending of the visible and inaudible. For him, silence was the potential, that which had not yet taken shape and therefore gives space to the imaginary, to connection, and to discovery. As we can see in his book *Silence and Light*, through his words:

*I put this on the board: Silence – and – Light. Silence is not very, very quiet. It is something which you may say is lightless – darkless. These are all invented words. Darkless – there is no such a word. But why not? Lightless; Darkless. Desire to be; to express. (...) But one can say, light to silence, silence to light [draws two curved arrows], has to be a kind of ambient threshold and when this is realized, sensed, there is inspiration.<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> Luis I. KAHN, *Silence and Light*. (Zurich: Park Books, 2013), 26.



In the forest



between silence and light