

Visual Spaces of Change

Photographic documentation of environmental transformations



SOPHIA
SCOPIO EDITIONS

volume 6, issue 1 | publication year: 2021
issn: 2183-8976 [print] 2183-9468 [online]
doi 10.24840/2183-8976_2021-0006_0001_13
homepage: <https://www.up.pt/index.php/sophia>

© SCOPIO EDITIONS

Experimental persistence of change: collages of the palimpsestic temporalities of Freixo's Thermoelectric Power Station (Campanhã, Porto)

Beatriz Duarte, Martín Hernández Molín

Abstract

This paper presents an artistic work developed as part of the curatorial research *Persistent Materialities*, that experimented with different modes of documentation and mediation of loss of the post-industrial ruins of Freixo's Thermoelectric Power Station (Campanhã, Porto). Whereas this building becomes less legible as an official object of industrial heritage and yield into continuous ruination and post-human condition, the collaged photographs presented here constructs a narration and interpretation of a retrospective history.

The visual representations usually surrounding the imaginary of this landscape highlight two fixed modes of its existence: historical photographs are instrumentalized in a conservative discourse of preservation while architectural collages and technical drawings project a possible future where the building is no more. Distancing from these visual representations that conceive the landscape apart from its contingent and material reality, the retrospective collages stage the complexity of layers that assemble and reassemble this palimpsestic landscape. The recollection of segments, traces and fragments of a dynamic and mutable history quest for the endurance of the transformed and transforming aspect of this *heterotopic space* rather than the landscape itself.

Keywords: *architecture, photography, collage, ruination, experimental persistence*

Beatriz Guimarães Duarte (Brazil, 1993) is a PhD researcher in Art Education at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Porto (Porto, Portugal) and is collaborating researcher on the cluster Curating Contemporary Cultures: on architectures, territories and networks (IHA-FCSH/NOVA). Holds a master's degree in Art Studies|Museology and Curatorial Studies at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Porto (Porto, Portugal). She graduated in Architecture and Urbanism at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (Belo Horizonte, Brazil) and studied part of her degree at London South Bank University (London, England) through a grant funded by CNPq (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development). Her research focuses on ruined buildings, empty or interstitial spaces, techno-natured landscapes and "difficult heritage" in which she is interested in their potential dynamics and potentialities as a curatorial matter of concern and care. It is also an object of interest spatial practices approaches and interpretations on the mediation of these contemporary inheritances.

Martín Hernández Molín (Spain, 1991) is currently a PhD researcher in Fine Arts by the University of Porto (FBAUP, Portugal). He has a degree in Fine Arts in the specialty of painting from the University of Salamanca (USAL, Spain), a master's degree in Fine Arts from the University of Porto (FBAUP, Portugal). He has participated in different group exhibitions since 2012. In 2017, he was invited by the University of Extremadura (Badajoz, Spain), to be part of the organizational committee of the IV International Congress of Artistic and Visual Education, where he exhibited his work "Bosque". He was selected for two consecutive years (2017/2018) at the San Marcos Awards, where he exhibited his selections at Sala La Salina (Salamanca, Spain). In 2018 he received the 11th Ciudad de Badajoz Prize for the work "Inhumãre", acquired by Ayuntamiento de Badajoz and exhibited at the Museo da Ciudad de Badajoz Luis de Morales (Badajoz, Spain). His artistic practice focuses on material and experimental painting, based on components from different origins, and on the investigation of their change processes together with the artist's experience and individual vision.

Introduction

On the east side of Porto, a spectacular ruined building stands out near Douro's riverside: Freixo's Thermoelectric Power Station. Seen as an apparent stable and categoric composition, this contested site is rather in a gradual process of transformation and disappearance, incorporating divergent interests and performing a productive relationship with the past and the future. The curatorial research *Persistent Materialities*¹ looked at the techno-natured condition and ruined landscape of this former industry by testing new modes of interpretation of its materials remains, usually framed as a by-product of material culture. The decaying, conflicting and post-human conditions embodied by the lifecycles of architectures are appropriated as raw material for revealing and overlaying possible narratives in contemporary culture. Artists and other agents were invited to (re)think the present conjuncture of the building through diverse instantiations and mediums, in a twofold dimension²: in hindsight, reassessing its pre-existing narratives, discourses, medias and materialities; and in foresight, with new art pieces and fragments of thought reflecting on the truth regimes and devices that shape its storytelling as a static object rather than a "moving project"³.

A "flat" visual imaginary

When searching for the visual representations and storylines of Freixo is notable how they translate approaches and discourses that are usual to architectural remains of the recent past: a historical speculation recalls its former original state and an economical one project a new desired future through the demolition of its infrastructures⁴. Conventional heritage narratives and management operate around archival documents and historical photography to deliberately commemorate the golden age and symbolic importance of the Power Station in the past. As a selected orientation of history, shows the achievements of modernization and industrialization in the country as if its chimneys are still ejecting smoke. Advocating the need to perpetuate the material depiction of the past, the currently ruined condition is seen as a threat to memory that needs to be saved through preservation.

1 Beatriz Duarte, "Potentialities of curatorial activation: Freixo's Thermoelectric Power Station & Curatorial Project: *Persistent Materialities*" (Master diss., University of Porto, 2020).

2 Beatriz Duarte, "(Re)think", in *Post-Nostalgic Knowings*, ed. Inês Moreira (Porto: Ágora Cultura e Desporto do Porto, E. M. / Galeria Municipal do Porto, 2020), 91.

3 Bruno Latour and Albena Yaneva, "Give Me a Gun and I Will Make All Buildings Move: An ANT's View of Architecture", *Ardeth*, no.1 (2017): 103.

4 Beatriz Duarte, "Potentialities of curatorial activation: Freixo's Thermoelectric Power Station & Curatorial Project: *Persistent Materialities*" (Master diss., University of Porto, 2020).



[Fig.1]
Collage 1.

Contrastingly, pages of newspapers already advertise this territory as a land for sale integrated to the market economy. Architectural collages (Figs 1,2,3) and perspective drawings represent the re-establishment of order and usefulness to the site. With approved allotments and the wiping out of the post-industrial ruins, spectacular residential and commercial properties emerge by the river scenery and enter the mediatic apparatuses as a visual narrative of progress.

Following Latour and Yaneva's thoughts on the article "*Give Me a Gun and I Will Make All Buildings Move: An ANT's View of Architecture*"⁵, it seems that the discipline of architecture, being it in its heritage or economical discourses, is always back to an ideal notion of buildings. In a continuous attempt to reconstruct a state of wholeness and unity of architecture as when it was built or to reinstate new productive architecture, the visual discourses around these forms of knowledge production always falls back to an objectual and static ideal placed in the intemporal and immutable realm of geometry⁶. Thus, two fixed stages of the lifecycle of the building are recognized, bringing static and utopic notions of time and of a building itself, while the present becomes either failure or waste.

A layered condition

Whilst the destiny of this territory is still unclear to the public concern, the ruins of Freixo's Thermoelectric Power Station doesn't eject smoke for more than fifty years since ceasing its human use. The entropy, previously a phenomenon confined to its boilers and furnaces, violates the limits that kept it in control and take over the entire area. The persistence of its lived and conspicuous materiality manifests itself as a counternarrative to the ones consistently inscribed to it. Instead of a static, linear and utopic narrative, the remains and reminders of the ruins amalgamate a gradation of uses, processes and inhabitants that are suggestive to new interpretations and perceptions.

Closer to what Foucault coined as "*heterotopic spaces*"⁷, the fractured landscape is a real and locatable space that manage to function in non-hegemonic conditions. By stubbornly being there, it constitutes a mental and physical critique of social everyday places by evidencing heterochronic temporalities, operating deviant uses from the ones before predetermined,

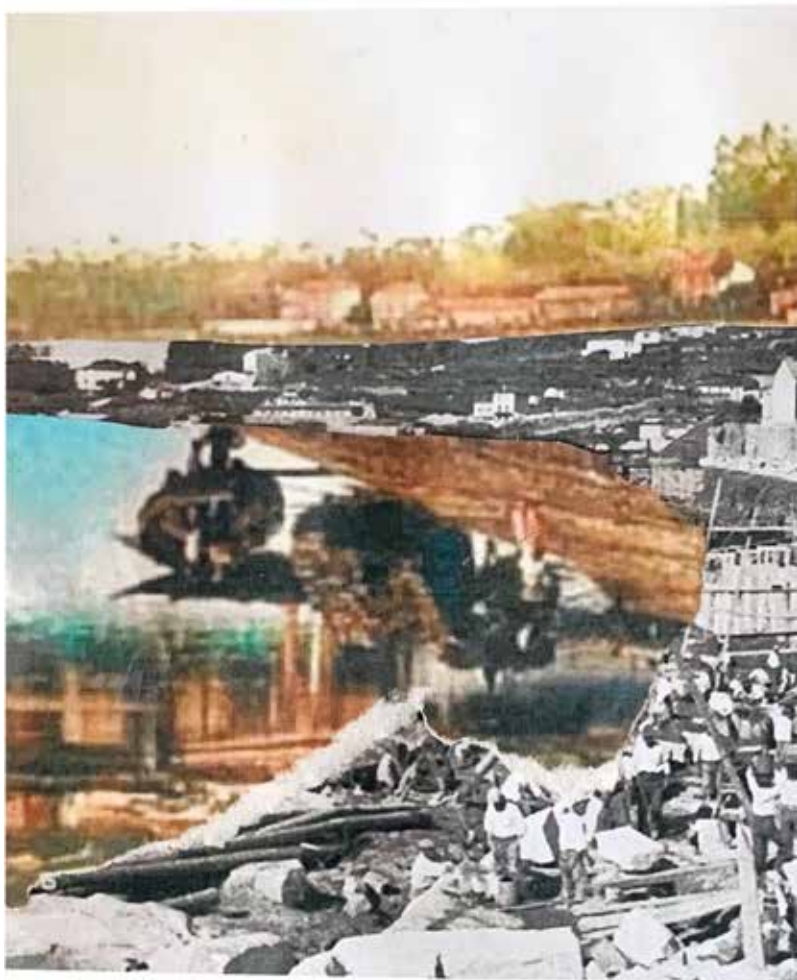
5 Bruno Latour and Alben Yaneva, "Give Me a Gun and I Will Make All Buildings Move: An ANT's View of Architecture", *Ardeth*, no.1 (2017): 103-111.

6 Bruno Latour, "Can We Get Our Materialism Back, please?", *Isis* 98, no. 1 (2007): 139.

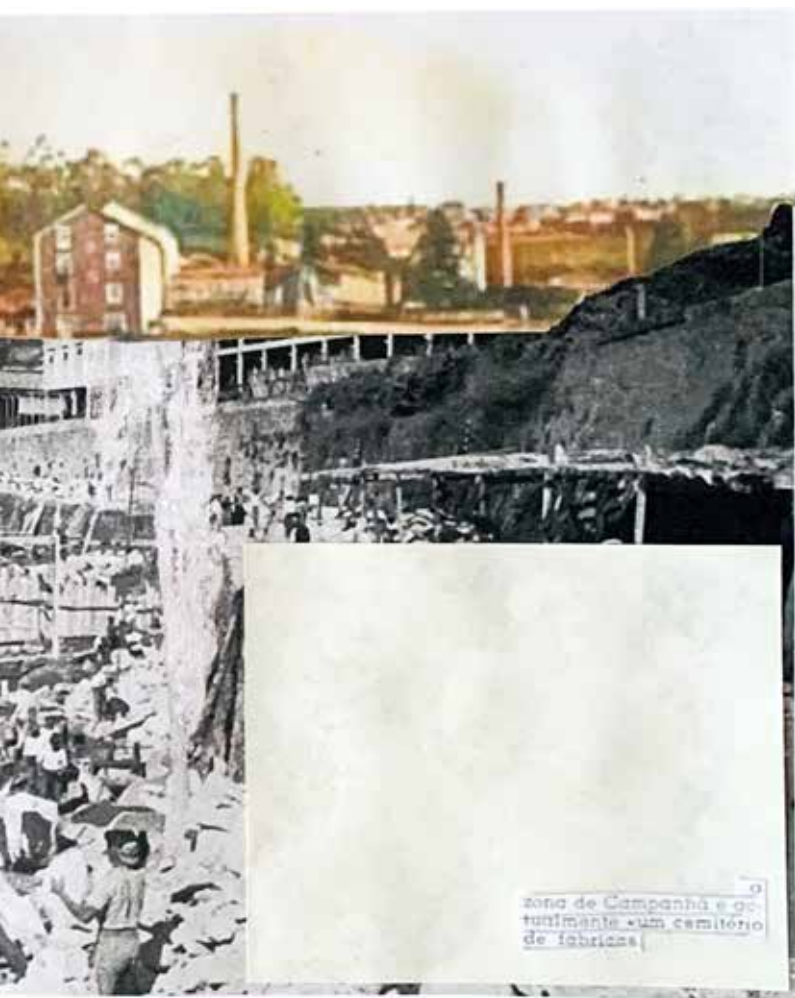
7 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces.", *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22-27.



[Fig. 2]
Collage 2.



[Fig. 3]
Collage 3.



articulating paradoxical tensions of value and waste, of progress and failure, of unity and fragmentation. As a palimpsest⁸, the building embodies a material memory⁹ of successive acts of writing, erasure, and rewriting of history, showing uncertain and partial narratives that navigates between redundancy, investment and abandonment.

A retrospective montaging of history

In this context that the project unfolded by the artist Martin Hernández Molin is relevant: as one of the proposed readings for the *Persistent Materialities* project, the work narrates a new representation of this landscape. As part of the personal investigation of the artist on *residues* as both a leftover from the past and "a starting point for the creation of new perspectives and ideas" that "generate new discourses and narratives in a specific context"¹⁰, that the work (de) constructs a retrospective and nonlinear visual storyline from actual traces and fragmented representations of the place.

Questioning what constitutes a visual depiction of change, the collaged photographs perform by its medium the coexisting of events, interpretations and matters that compose the palimpsestic and transient character of the building through time. Alternatively to freezing into a definitive configuration, the imaginative and singularized montaging put traces of multiple temporalities and things, normally dissociated, together in the same surface and don't focus on whether its records are objectively true or accurate.

A former arable earth pairs with constructors working for the modernizing project of the city and to what became a disturbed and unstable soil of "factories cemeteries"; discarded objects and materials found in a visit to the ruins of Freixo's Power Station mingle with archival reports, maps, photographs, events and, also, with accidental acts unfolded during the production of the work; informal activities and expressions through graffiti and acts of trespassing are put into dialog with heavy machinery and overly-prescribed "official" uses or hierarchies of the bygone industry and combined with fragments of documents which once placed this industry at the core of energy distribution in Portugal.

8 Palimpsest is a notion that came from the history of books which represent ancient forms of register that used to scratch a written surface to write new entries. After years of use, the books became a juxtaposed record of all the writings inserted in the paper, once the act of "erasing" always left a trace of what was previously written.

9 Beatriz Duarte, "Potentialities of curatorial activation: Freixo's Thermoelectric Power Station & Curatorial Project: Persistent Materialities" (Master diss., University of Porto, 2020), 78–82.

10 Martin Molin, "Residue", in *Post-Nostalgic Knowings*, ed. Inês Moreira (Porto: Ágora Cultura e Desporto do Porto, E. M. / Galeria Municipal do Porto, 2020), 72.

The task of (dis)assembling and juxtaposing shares with Kevin Lynch's¹¹ overlap and association of temporal collages an emphasis on the rhythms of change that constitute landscapes as discontinuous and contingent set of stories and uses. Avoiding crystalizing a visual reading of the place, the activation of this abstract, fragmented and incomplete evidence documents an experimental persistence of constant changes. By grasping the present through the "telescoping of the past" instead of "telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary"¹² the collages mimic in itself the very aptness of memory as a living and incomplete thing in constant dialectical process of remembering and forgetting.

Bibliography

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History". In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 253–264. USA: Schocken Books, 1995.

Duarte, Beatriz. "Potentialities of curatorial activation: Freixo's Thermoelectric Power Station & Curatorial Project: Persistent Materialities". Master Thesis, University of Porto, 2020.

Duarte, Beatriz. "(Re)think". In *Post-Nostalgic Knowings*, edited by Inês Moreira. Porto: Ágora Cultura e Desporto do Porto, E. M. / Galeria Municipal do Porto, 2020.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces.". *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27.

Latour, Bruno. "Can We Get Our Materialism Back, Please?". *Isis* 98, no. 1 (2007): 138–

Latour, Bruno and Yaneva, Alben. "Give Me a Gun and I Will Make All Buildings Move: An ANT's View of Architecture". *Ardeth*, 1, (2017): 103–111.

Lynch, Kevin. *What Time Is This Place?*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972.

Molin, Martin. "Residue" In *Post-Nostalgic Knowings*, edited by Inês Moreira. Porto: Ágora Cultura e Desporto do Porto, E. M. / Galeria Municipal do Porto, 2020.

¹¹ Kevin Lynch, *What Time Is This Place?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972), 93.

¹² Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (USA: Schocken Books, 1995), 263.