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**The first portuguese Art Agency: a case study**

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## Abstract

Observing agents and dealership processes relating to a particular artistic territory, specifically the plastic arts. And, furthermore, seeking to make a contribution to filling gaps in the interpretation of the organisation of that characteristic system<sup>1</sup>, a system that, excepting certain incidences, “*may not have been the subject, as such, of sufficiently public assertion, absent both in the media and sociological analysis*”<sup>2</sup>. At a time when new places for art are emerging<sup>3</sup>, the search for a critical reflection on the processes mentioned above is extremely relevant, in an attempt to attain something new that is sociologically significant and also able, perhaps, to contribute to an understanding of certain features of the present context of the Portuguese contemporary art space. In terms of what I would dare call a *research style*, it is appropriate to say in advance that the investment was made in a singular and empirical observable, namely, an art agency that is an unprecedented initiative. And since it is always relevant to define an orientation on the subject, the general questions at the base of this paper are as follows: appearing in December 2003, what did the “Vera Cortês – Art Agency” model bring to the space of contemporary art? How is it to be understood within that same panorama? An art agency not taken in a merely descriptive sense but as an “immersion zone”, in an attempt to unveil, along the route, a nexus of reciprocal interactions, i.e. by creating a dialogue between the configuration of the artistic field and the singularity of the case-study and then seeing how they question each other. And how both question the paradigms and the sociological corpus relating to art.

**Key words:** innovator, project, gatekeeping, Art Agency, art of the agents

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<sup>1</sup> The «system of the plastic arts» means the group of individuals and institutions responsible for the production, diffusion and consumption of objects and events that they themselves label as “artistic” and also for the definition of the patterns and limits of “art” for a whole society, over a historic period.

<sup>2</sup> Seabra, Augusto M., “Arte e sistema, continuando”, *Público*, 25 January 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rato, Vanessa, “Novos espaços para a arte de Oeiras a Telheiras”, *Público*, 26 December 2004

## Resumo

Olhando agentes e processos de intermediação atinentes a uma territorialidade artística particular, designadamente as artes plásticas. E ademais querendo contribuir para preencher vazios na leitura da organização desse característico sistema<sup>4</sup>, sistema que, com a ressalva de certas incidências, “*não tem talvez sido objecto enquanto tal de um enunciado suficientemente público, em omissão quer nos “media”, quer na análise sociológica*”<sup>5</sup>. Numa altura em que assomam novos lugares para a arte<sup>6</sup>, a busca de uma reflexão crítica acerca dos supramencionados processos revela-se de extrema pertinência, procurando pois alcançar uma novidade sociologicamente significativa porventura capaz também ela de concorrer para o entendimento de certos traços da presente orgânica do espaço português da arte contemporânea. Em termos do que arriscaria denominar por *estilo de pesquisa*, convirá já antecipar que se investiu num observável empírico singular, a saber, uma agência de arte que é iniciativa inédita. E porque se trata sempre de definir uma orientação sobre o objecto, as interrogações gerais que estão na origem deste artigo são aliás as seguintes: aparecido em Dezembro de 2003, o que trouxe o figurino Vera Cortês – Agência de Arte ao espaço da arte contemporânea? Como percebê-la/interpretá-la no quadro desse mesmo panorama? Uma agência de arte tomada não sob mera aceção descritiva mas como «zona de mergulho» numa tentativa de desvelar, em percurso, um nexos de interacções recíprocas, isto é, pondo em diálogo a configuração do campo artístico e a singularidade do estudo de caso, vendo como se interpelam um ao outro. E como ambos interpelam os paradigmas, o *corpus* sociológico de alusão à arte.

**Palavras-chave:** inovador, projecto, *gatekeeping*, Agência de Arte, arte dos agentes

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4 «Sistema das artes plásticas» designa o conjunto de indivíduos e instituições responsáveis pela produção, difusão e consumo de objectos e eventos por eles mesmos rotulados de “artísticos” e também pela definição de padrões e limites da “arte” para toda uma sociedade, ao longo de um período histórico.

5 Seabra, Augusto M., “Arte e sistema, continuando”, Público, 25 Janeiro 2004.

6 Cf. Rato, Vanessa, “Novos espaços para a arte de Oeiras a Telheiras”, Público, 26 Dezembro 2004.

«The most successful way for a dealer to differentiate his products from those of other dealers was the introduction of a new style. It was a major advantage for a new gallery entering the market to find a new style in order to differentiate its products from those of existing galleries that were already established in the market»

Crane, Diana (1987), *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde. The New York Art World: 1940-1985*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 72.

«We're still independent, even though working with a commercial structure»<sup>7</sup>

Nuno Ribeiro and Ricardo Jacinto

I understand what, as a postulation, the controversial Bourdieu wished to propose in the question *But who created the "creators"?*, leaving the focus of attention on legitimation and gatekeeping mechanisms to be clarified (*"the sociology of cultural works should take, as its subject, the set of relationships (objective and also effectuated in the form of interactions) between the artist and other artists, and, in addition to him or her, the group of agents involved in producing the work or, at least, the social value of the work (critics, gallery directors, art sponsors, etc.)"*<sup>8</sup>). In this light, I note the fact that against the background of contemporary art, and *"this space of contemporary art is defined by its being, to a great extent, a space of exclusion"*<sup>9</sup>, the simple choice of this or that artist for a certain exhibition or text reveals a chain of *accessory* agents<sup>10</sup> who operate there by means of daily selections. It is certain that through them a creator is 'being created'. Meanwhile, in the sociological work, if, for example, we put the accent on the different players participating, in the full knowledge of how much slower the focus on cultural producers has been, it is necessary to agree that it is indeed a momentary glance that the sociology of art casts on the issues of dealing and dealers and on the space in between, where a large part of the artistic happening occurs. On everything that intervenes between the artist(s)/work(s) and public(s), stimulating the relational dynamics and oiling the axes of creation/reception.

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<sup>7</sup> Spoken in the agency's promotional video, presented in the *3rd session of the European Cultural Parliament*, Genoa, 4 December 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, "Mas quem criou os "criadores"?", in *Questões de sociologia*, Lisbon, Fim de Século, 2003, p. 219.

<sup>9</sup> Critic interviewed.

<sup>10</sup> Paraphrasing part of a title by Alexandre Melo (1995).

Set in its field and time, the agency under examination has connotations with a centre that, as Vera Zolberg thinks, embraces a multiplicity of “*processes, institutions or agencies that reward or penalise artistic practice or creation. They vary from single relationships between an artist and sponsor to highly complex relationships that involve dealers, networks and circles*”<sup>11</sup>. In my intent of questioning how Vera Cortês – Art Agency is placed in those parameters, the prism of innovation that I skimmed over above leaves me struggling with a procedure to which the approach in sociology is characteristically sensitive – that of operating by conceptual abstractions and analytical approaches to the portions of reality over which we pore.

At this stage, it is important to clarify what the terminological umbrellas just used substantively cover. In the field of the visual arts, in a broad sense, the *innovator* concept is sufficient, with the use of an image or metaphor, to relate an atypical and unconventional deed of interference and invention, revealed in the organizational alternative of an agency that, through its *projects*, is an unequalled achievement. From the sociological point of view, “*innovators, pioneers and projects are terms applied to those who are interested in the processes of change and their observation and analysis, and who participate in them. There are no projects without people and there are people who live in projects. These people – innovators and pioneers – exist, are, act and intervene in a different, divergent way from the majority*”<sup>12</sup>. To accept such dimensions requires a rapid sketch of what, historically, was a manifestation of the various inadequacies of a plastic arts panorama like ours. With the exclusion of exceptional episodes, a single field animated by a general intermittence associated with the phenomenon of the galleries, in a context where the isolation and chronic deficiencies meant that they were solely dependent on certain economic situations and/or cycles. As an example, it is sufficient to glimpse occasional expressions of survival such as occurred in the case of 111, as we pass through successive peaks and troughs of speculation, or, afterwards, in the mid-70s, the period in which Portugal opens up and becomes acquainted with a certain type of “experimental” art, as we remember examples such as Módulo or the successes of Quadrum, today a highly distinct initiative. In accordance with the euphoria of the 80s boom and without neglecting the continuations that can still be seen in certain circumstances (Cómicos/Luís Serpa

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<sup>11</sup> Zolberg, Vera L., *Sociología de las artes*, Madrid, Fundación Autor, 2002, p. 163.

<sup>12</sup> Benavente, Ana and Leão, Cristina, “Inovadores e Pioneiros: viver em projectos”, in *Estruturas sociais e desenvolvimento*, Actas do II Congresso Português de Sociologia, Vol. II, Lisbon, APS/Editorial Fragmentos, 1993, p. 199.

Projectos, Pedro Oliveira, etc.), there was a great number of galleries that, at the time, emerged one day and closed the next. It is not possible to ignore the ephemeral and rather inconsequential nature of their establishment – and, by implication, the usual lack of continuous plans in relation to their concept and work programme. On the subject in hand, among other arrivals and departures, the following decade saw the birth in Oporto, under the inspiration of Magda Laires, of the G L Box, which was as fleeting as it was the originator of significantly novel ideas: it presented the mould of a gallery without a space, with its exhibitions being held in suitable places for the characteristics of the works on show. It basically worked with “emerging” artists. In the present day, we are witnessing the rise of a model, personified by its founder and director, Vera Cortês, that is organised on the basis of activity regimes between an agency and that type of producer of exhibitions, in and outside conventional circuits. With the due differences, these are two original formats in relation to what existed earlier, both arising at a time when the art market is undergoing a certain downturn in values, although it is enriched with innumerable young artists appearing on the Portuguese artistic scene, many of them still being initiated as students in the schools of art. But I shall come back to this.

Let us go back a fairly long time to the turn brought about by the Impressionists, with the initial and progressive abandoning of a unified public and official classification system concentrated in the trio of the Academy – fulcrum in the passage from artisan to artist<sup>13</sup> – the Salon, and the criticism to which the artist was exposed in it, in favour of a private and pluralistic arrangement, with many competing classifying powers under the responsibility of the *marchands*<sup>14</sup>. They knew how to acquire their authority, with a reputation being a product of accumulated credit in the market. Similarly to the dealers at that time, such as Paul Durand-Ruel or Ambroise Vollard, I would think of considering Vera Cortês as someone who in this day has chosen to make a long-term investment – perhaps a life project – in artists that she believes in<sup>15</sup>, as she assembles and motivates collectors to purchase that same production. She is thus creating worlds,

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Moulin, Raymonde, “De l’artisan au professionnel: l’artiste”, in *Sociologie du Travail*, No. 4, 1982.

<sup>14</sup> Moulin, Raymonde, *Le marché de la peinture en France*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1999; Wolff, Janet, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> She is backing a new “generation”/group of artists, which, if we take a good look, various gallery owners have done. The most important is Leo Castelli. A similar example is Manuel de Brito, initially with Álvaro Lapa, Ângelo de Sousa, Lourdes Castro or Joaquim Bravo (only that afterwards, he himself will admit, he had other goals). “*The innovating marchand gambles on an unknown work: his aim is to give it a public existence and impose it on the market*”, Moulin, Raymonde, *Le marché de la peinture en France...*, p. 118.

according to the definition of Antoine Hennion<sup>16</sup>, an exercise common to any intermediary.

The pivotal figure of Vera Cortês appears at the moment for analysing how it all began – a tireless mover, consultant and intermediary for the emerging trends in the visual arts, rising above the simple role of a dealer. Her function does not just consist of dedicating an immense amount of time to sending materials and information to the players who distribute and disseminate works of art. On a daily basis she divulges, gives form to and acts as an intermediary for artists' ideas. However, what really deserves emphasis demands an appreciation of the problem of the mission and an understanding of it. This is unavoidable if we wish to decode a given organisational posture (the contribution of the management has brought me closer to certain conceptual perspectives and reconsiderations; for the spaces of creation, a multiform notion of organisation, offering myriad possibilities). The agent suggested to me, when I sounded her out about objectives, that it was a question:

“of the existence of a modality, if it can be called that – given that the agency is not a museum or a gallery and did not fit into either of them – in fact, the existence of a modality which young artists fitted into. Why? Because there wasn't one. And because I felt this need existed for them, if, on the one hand, they did not wish to fit directly into more traditional moulds, and for the galleries, too, in the way they were established. From the outset with young artists, it is possible to have some but not many because young artists are still at the beginning of their career. As such, it is supposed that they have low prices, while the galleries have high costs. And it is supposed that they enter a modality not directly created by the market, because their work and the very idea of the young artist is something that demands very great flexibility. The projects are all very different (...) It therefore has a lot to do with what the artists need”.

It is to be emphasised that one of the concerns implicit in the agency's intervention, with an impact mainly on the young creators, though on others too, is based on the consciousness that *“for many artists juggling part-time or full-time paid work with their own creative work is a constant struggle. Many get worn out by the struggle, with no time or creative energy left for their own creative work; some give*

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<sup>16</sup> “The agent is not a passive employee who applies laws (...), he produces worlds. (...) The agent is not at the interface of two known worlds: he is the one that constructs worlds and attempts to put them in contact”, in Hennion, Antoine, “Une sociologie de l’intermédiaire: le cas du directeur artistique de variétés”, *Sociologie du Travail*, No. 4, 1982, p. 460, p. 462.

up”<sup>17</sup>. In fact, a parallel aim was to allow artists at the beginning of their careers to dedicate themselves exclusively to artistic activity. This purpose comes over strongly in some of their conversations (“*at the moment I am financing my own work with my own work, with what I sell. And it is enough for the things I am doing now. (...) The great change that I note has been to have a closer relationship with the market, to be able to sell my work, and survive to work. I think this has been the great change, financial stability. (...) I expect to be able to continue living from what I do*”). Vera Cortês makes the same thing clear when she says “*since we began, two of them have already been able to give up their part-time jobs*”<sup>18</sup>. In effect, I daresay that what functions best in the agency model is its ability to find the right point between full-time commitment to artistic work and the conception of mechanisms restricting the risks in its materialisation. Once artists who are making their first steps are regularly called on to show the results of their work (something almost unheard-of in Portugal) and to draft proposals for a number of specific places (all used on an ephemeral basis, Bartolomeu 5, Assírio e Alvim, the gallery Promontório Arquitectos, Politécnica 38, etc.) away from the narrow physical place of sales, they can be adroitly led to think beyond completely solitary studio work. The stimulus lubricates the constant questioning of the artworks, on the one hand, and close contact with the dealers, on the other. From this point of view, we undoubtedly begin to uncover a strategy of differentiation, undertaken by the agency in relation to other galleries – Bourdieu's theoretical assertions stress the existence of status struggles, divergences and/or distinctive principles in the self-assertion of new entrants, whether creators or intermediaries, in their attempt to gain access to and hold firm in a system occupied by entrenched positions.

A bold term, “Agency” – the word itself presages the freedom, lightness and flexibility of the way the task is performed. The simple structure<sup>19</sup>, small and functional,

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<sup>17</sup> Coffey, Stella, “Main challenges for visual artists in Europe”, <http://arcultmedia.de/cedatasets/ds2/GotoDesc2.asp?ResourceID=9>. Young artists are acquainted with double employment, i.e. a main occupation, especially in education, and their art, in the form of a parallel activity, cf. Pais, José Machado (coord.), *Inquérito aos artistas jovens portugueses*, Lisbon, Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa, 1995; Freidson, Eliot, “Les professions artistiques comme défi à l’analyse sociologique”, in *Revue française de sociologie*, XXVII, 1986, p. 438.

<sup>18</sup> Gonçalves, Hugo, “Afinal, a arte é para todos”, *Elle*, No. 192, September 2004.

<sup>19</sup> I refer to the classical considerations of Henry Mintzberg: “*An organisation directed by an entrepreneur seems to be the best illustration of the Simple Structure; practically all its characteristics – structured and accidental – are closely associated in a highly integrated system. Such an organisation is aggressive and often innovative, it is permanently looking for high risk environments where the bureaucracies fear to tread. Thus, Pareto (...) qualifies entrepreneurs as «adventurous spirits, thirsty for novelty ... in no way afraid of change». (...) In other words, (...) [they] are looking for simple and dynamic*

combines the pure or restricted nature of the dealing office (set up in an apartment in the Largo Barão de Quintela, Chiado, thus dispensing with the restrictions and expenses inherent in permanently maintaining and providing surveillance for a large space<sup>20</sup>), the mere negotiation of transactions, and a strength of being an agency, the capacity to represent the artists recruited, many of them without a gallery. I speak of Vera Cortês – Agência de Arte filling the space between the gallery owner and the dealer (a showroom in the miniscule headquarters, promoting the artists in the most private way, perceptibly collector by collector, the guarantors of its survival) and assuming an alternative aspect of cultural programming. In other words, it offers authors tied to contemporary art the opportunity of access, by different routes, to career development and visibility/viability. It happens that if we read the term using Raymonde Moulin's<sup>21</sup> interpretative matrix, based on the ideal types of the *commercial* gallery (essentially given to economic gains, with little commitment to aesthetic/stylistic innovation), the *institutional* gallery (not taking too many risks, it represents artists with a certain acclaim; albeit on a different scale of values, it is worth mentioning the celebrated 111 and Cristina Guerra – Contemporary Art, with Sarmiento, Calapez or the “young and acclaimed” Filipa César and João Onofre) and the *gate-keeper* gallery (an economic risk-taker devoted to the search for new names (from this discovery perspective Módulo is exemplary) and from the outset a top innovator), it is close to the latter vein that we should seek to place the agency.

As the artistic field is a socially complex space inhabited by an array of participants whom we see positioned there asymmetrically – the plan of the positions portrays the different distribution of cultural, economic, social, and symbolic capital and of expectations and interests (coupled with those distinctive manoeuvres) – it is important to stress what Vera Cortês has to say:

“Some people openly and sincerely supported the project. (...) Some people made no value judgment and waited to see, some had been highly sceptical at first and then met us and acknowledged that the project was needed and made sense, and others remained objectively disturbed. There was also resistance to the new arrival, as the agency was not a project that people

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*environments*”, in Mintzberg, Henry, *Structure et dynamique des organisations*, Paris, Les éditions d'organisation, 1982, p. 277.

<sup>20</sup> Since September 2005 the agency has been based in another space (now in Avenida 24 de Julho), on a much larger scale. An upgrade that indicates how the organisation has grown in these two years of its existence.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Moulin, Raymonde, *Le marché de la peinture en France...*, pp. 89-149.

fitted into a site – it was not a matter of another gallery or curator appearing or a new museum opening. Nobody knew what the agency was (...). And it was a player that made a stir and had good sales. It could even be said that this was something that was not as successful as I expected, the agency's relationship with the galleries. (...) Things didn't always run so very smoothly. The percentage of success there was not as great as this. Today “I exist”, I'm not that thing that's going to start, but in some cases it was pretty difficult.”

In fact, the agency inserted itself into the environment in a surgical manner, rapidly gathering together an array of artists who, according to what I was given to believe, desired work incentives and relationships of a different order.

“I have never worked with any gallery; I don't exclude the possibility but I'm more interested in a system of this kind. Though I know some, I have never shown or presented work to gallery owners. I always tried to resist the idea of going into a gallery immediately after my studies, the idea is to try to do things on my own initiative, too. After getting to know Vera, I thought that finally there was going to be the chance of a new work relationship in Portugal. The fact that, on the one hand, there is someone who can sell the work and, on the other, also do this side of production is fundamental.”  
[Artist]

It happens repeatedly that what certain artists exhibit in galleries is excessively limited by the volume of investment that they are prepared to make in the creation of their work. One of the interviewees explained that a piece of work corrupted right from the start, almost with self-censorship in the drafting of the projects.

“one thing that seems, in fact, unthinkable but is in fact common in Portugal is for a certain artist to propose projects to the gallery owner and the gallery owner to reply “OK, very good, if you have the money to invest in this project, let's go ahead; if you don't, let's present something else” [Critic]

*On the contrary*, distancing itself from the orthodox gallery, the first Portuguese art agency is progressively shaping this or that balance, aiming to make them viable; “*the money saved is used to finance production of the artworks. The dealer participates in the creation and can gain the loyalty of the artist that he or she promotes*”<sup>22</sup>. If we consider the point of *resistance to new ideas*, this would be enough to make certain gallery owners feel affected, to a greater or lesser extent, in virtue of the fact that they are not managing to offer their creative talents the same conditions. Or they never

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<sup>22</sup> “Marché de l'art. Les galeries parisiennes se donnent quartier libre”, *Le Monde*, 26 January 2005.

needed to, exactly because, hitherto, competition in this area did not exist. However, a basic criticism remains, stemming from the fact that the agency has made young artists the mainstay of what it presents. Matters have reached the point of paroxysm, in a context leading progressively and rather perversely towards a model that tends to consist solely of the acclaimed artist and the emerging artist turned legend<sup>23</sup> (it suffices to note in the composition of biennials and collective exhibitions that, between the ages of 35 and 45, artists are rarely invited – indications of a block on a group that is truly crossing the desert). Some accuse the agency of *commercialising* the idea of the “young artist”, a style that it adopted, in practice and in talk, and a little in the train of the *zeitgeist* of an era, as if it were a discovery fever<sup>24</sup>, in the hope of putting its artists on the map.

It is often argued that Portugal reflects a paradox in the young artists' situation. Sociologically, evident over-evaluation prevails in initiatives launched in the meantime, of enormous institutional consequence and media visibility (museum titles such as the *project room* (CCB/CAV) and *7 artistas ao 10.º mês* (*7 artists in the 10th month* – CAM/FCG) or the *edp novos artistas* (*edp new artists*) prize and the rejuvenated *união latina* (*Latin union*) prize). Simultaneously, there is a disjointed plan, in its purposes and manifestations, regarding the emergence of artists in that age group. Excluding the segment shared by one or another gallery, by Zé dos Bois, by the efforts of a decentralising *Art Attack* (Caldas da Rainha) or, in Oporto, by places such as *In. Transit/Artes em Partes* (one thinks of the commissioning time of Paulo Mendes, who focussed 10 years ago on hunting for the very youngest talent), someone close to the national artistic fabric, who facilitated perception of it, alleged that “*art schools do not foment discussion of their pupils' work with external agents such as art critics, other artists, philosophers, those in charge of art institutions etc. Few of them present their finalists' work in appropriately publicised public exhibitions. There are no institutions*

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Fernandes, João, “Born to be Famous: a condição do jovem artista, entre o sucesso pop e as ilusões perdidas...”, in Bock, Jürgen (org.), *Da obra ao texto – diálogos sobre a prática e a crítica na arte contemporânea*, CCB/Ministry of Culture, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> “(...) the field of the plastic arts, which has been being transformed into a space without a space, i.e. a space where the new is extolled as the rule and where a disquieting distrust is shown towards the passage of time as the minimum guarantee of the evaluation of a context, an artist or a work”, in Faria, Óscar, “O jogo do sucesso” (dossier '*a nova arte portuguesa*'), *Público*, 29 November 2003. Cf., by the same critic, “*Voilà tout. 'Who's next?'*”, *Público*, 29 October 2005.

*specifically focusing on the selected programming of young artists. Art galleries hardly take risks on proposals that are not sufficiently justified*<sup>25</sup>.

“Young artists have more attention but, on the other hand, I think that the number of artists has increased and the structure has not increased proportionally.” [Artist]

Recently, that same niche has been in the company of an array of different experiences. (There has been an expansion in the number of collectors looking towards the market of rising stars<sup>26</sup> – I include middle/upper class individuals and professionals who, valuing the personalised reception by Vera Cortês, wish to purchase/collect young artists, as they are attracted by the risk and/or a less costly investment. There has also been an increase in the artists who are candidates for the recognition of that status in the *social place of the name*, along with the prospects of a market revival or an economic upturn<sup>27</sup>. These factors, *per se*, make it possible to try or test certain formulae that are endowed with different budgets, philosophies and opportunities). Among the experiences referred to is the one that is the object of this case study, one far from passive in its connection with the system, with its casting preferably decided from among young plastic artists, inventing, sponsoring and growing with them.

In 2001, in his *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*, the final lesson that submitted him to the act of reflexivity, Pierre Bourdieu stated at a certain point: “*To understand, is, first of all, to understand the field with which and against which we have set ourselves*”<sup>28</sup>. Beyond the action strategies (*the purposeful, goal-oriented activities that agents perform*), and their consequences, lies an analysis of the situation arising from the context and its inductive conditions, which the *grounded theorists* also aim at.

To condense the great amount that could be more extensively developed here, with regard to what more precisely relates to this *contextual* extension, let us first recall the exponential increase not only on the side of the creators but also of the new players and functions to be included in that dimension *par excellence* of contact and interface. For example, the independent production and dissemination structures that have

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<sup>25</sup> Fernandes, João, “Prémios para quê?”, in AA. VV., *Prémio EDP Novos Artistas 2003*, EDP/Fundação de Serralves, 2003. David Barro also put his finger in the wound: “*Undoubtedly, there is a lack of interconnections, intermediate spaces, bridging points for the rising artist to develop*”, in “Poder dos museus ou museus para o poder?”, in *W Art – Contemporary Art*, No. 2, 2004, p. 112.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Cunha, Sílvia Souto, “Arte, prémios e vídeo”, *Visão*, 17 March 2005, p. 144.

<sup>27</sup> Faria, Óscar, “Mais tempo, menos apatia”, *Público*, 29 March 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*, Paris, Éditions Raisons d’Agir, 2004, p. 15.

emerged are particularly conspicuous, from João Fiadeiro's recent experimental laboratory (LAB) to *Salão Olímpico*, *Maus Hábitos* and *Pêssegos prá Semana*, and on to platforms originating on the fringes, such as the multidisciplinary ZDB (structures focussed on presenting and sponsoring singular creative experiences and almost always generated, managed and programmed according to the will of the creators; they represent parallel entities, at the most cooperating and marking out interdependence with the more institutional arrangements<sup>29</sup>). And what is to be said about figures like the *curator*, an increase in esteem especially accompanied “*by the rise in importance of institutional markets (site specific works, exhibitions hosted/commissioned by cultural institutions) over that of gallery markets in leading areas in the 1990s, together with the emergence of parallel circuits in non-institutional spaces*”<sup>30</sup>, or even the Vera Cortês agency, a fledgling dealer in the art market, joining a chessboard traditionally composed, broadly speaking, of gallery owners, collectors – on the border between dealership and the public –, critics, museums, and public and private cultural institutions? Well, if this happens, and it does not happen arbitrarily, transformations triggered in the artistic field are what it is the duty of a more acute sociological gaze to clarify.

Power chess, that is the gateway to our cultural fabric, in the conviction that it has more and more not of the *bi-* but *multipolar*. What changed? The conditions of the situation itself changed and it should also be suggested that we possibly did not possess the conceptual models to work with them in an orderly manner. However, if I may, I shall observe how what is in question in sociology is to get down to the “ground”, beginning with deducing the handling of theoretical apparatus – the applicability of the contextualiser *field* is illustrative – that does not reflect the propagation of symbolic power<sup>31</sup>. If this line of reasoning is pursued, the facts may be stated as follows: the

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<sup>29</sup> Particularly elucidating is the “underground/institutional” state of Zé dos Bois (Lisbon). Set up in 1992 without the profile of a gallery (at first, sales were not in question), it quickly institutionalised itself, managing to receive support from the state and sponsors (see, in particular, Almeida, Carla Gonçalves de, “Zé dos Bois com novo mecenas”, *Público*, 18 February 2004). Besides its studios and progressively more consistent production of contemporary and electronic music concerts, it maintains partnerships with Serralves.

<sup>30</sup> Conde, Idalina, “Making Distinctions: conditions for women working in serious music and in (new) media arts in Portugal”, in AA. VV., *Culture-Gates. Exposing professional ‘gate-keeping’ processes in music and new media arts*, p. 310.

<sup>31</sup> In the light of what Bourdieu proposed, symbolic power is understood as “*a kind of capital that acts as an addition of prestige, legitimacy, authority and recognition to the other forms of capital and principles of distinction and differentiation that are put into play in front of the other agents in the field, who gather at the position held by the management of the specific capital fought for in that field*”, in Gutiérrez, Alicia

game has become confused; different formats have been emerging since the beginning of the 90s (in the plastic arts, “since the ways of affirming other artistic discourses and young artists not quoted on the market were blocked”<sup>32</sup>, the “emerging talents” created new structural prototypes in non-institutional or non-gallery circuits, on the flexible model of projects, platforms and networks, with the ZDB collective in the vanguard; some became commissioner-artists, Pedro Cabral Santo, Paulo Mendes), more anxiety in the field, a proliferation of gatekeepers – I would even admit, comparatively to what is happening in the scientific area – “and, as in the sciences, the worlds of art are “political arenas” where participative democracy is confronted with a hierarchical differentiation that leads back to unequal positions in the fields. This inequality cuts across the projects, centres or institutions where artists and scientists, as authors, organise themselves with others in various interfaces in a collective system of actors”<sup>33</sup> –, a perhaps less prominent “door latch effect”, and the commissioners/intermediaries themselves need to be brought up-to-date, as they cannot operate on the basis of the lobbies.

“What is happening at the moment is dispersion, a complication of the situation, the inability to see everything in its place. Everything is slipping through our fingers...”<sup>34</sup>;

A contemporary art system that is changing its configuration, in which powers, options, strategies and channels of visibility are also multiplying. It will be in this reconfigured space, then, that I have to reconsider what I assimilated with Bourdieu<sup>35</sup> on what he terms “field”, “in analytic terms (...) defined as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (situs) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the

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B., *Las prácticas sociales: una introducción a Pierre Bourdieu*, Madrid, Tierradenadie Ediciones, 2002, pp. 40-41.

<sup>32</sup> Tavares, Emília, 1980-2004, *Anos de actualização artística das coleções do Museu do Chiado*, Castelo Branco, Instituto Português de Museus/Museu de Francisco Tavares Proença Júnior, 2004, p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Conde, Idalina, “Artistas e Cientistas: retrato comum”, in Viegas, José Manuel Leite and Costa, António Firmino da (orgs.), *Portugal, que Modernidade?*, Oeiras, Celta Editora, 1998, p. 199.

<sup>34</sup> João Pinharanda, in a debate on the topic “*Young Artists*” (23 October 2004, Antecip’Arte, Estufa Fria).

<sup>35</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, *Les règles de l’art – genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris, Seuil, 1992; *O poder simbólico*, Lisbon, Difel, 1989; Chateau, Dominique, “Le champ artistique”, in *L’Art comme fait social total*, Paris, Éditions L’Harmattan, 1998, pp. 27-41.

*specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.)*<sup>36</sup>. It is true that the characterisation of social relationships at the heart of the fields of symbolic production (intellectual and artistic, religious etc), known to be anchored more in opposition and conflict – typically Marxist ideas – than in integration, is rooted in the ability of individuals to fight. The place where the “game” of social interaction is conducted, where the relationships of force between individuals or institutions competing to reach the same objectives take place, “*in addition to a force field, a particular social field represents a field of struggles aimed at maintaining or transforming this force field*”<sup>37</sup>. What was going to be discerned in the turning point in the matrix over the last fifteen to twenty years may even be recognised in the agonistic and Manichean primacy abbreviated into the dominant and dominated: they embark on strategies, of preservation for the “established” (the most senior) and usurpation/subversion for the “heretics” (the aspiring or emerging), with the strategies of the latter dedicated to destabilising the hierarchical, aesthetic geography that embodies the artistic universe<sup>38</sup>. In the narrowness of a dualist scheme<sup>39</sup>, which judges the behaviour of the generations in terms of succession and the monopolisation power by the “established”, the *field* escapes changes of a generational nature (the growing *praegnantz* of the “young artist” demands a correction of the partitions of old; not being exactly heretics, today they hold highly central positions<sup>40</sup>) or a structural and mercantile nature – changes meshed with a

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<sup>36</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre and Wacquant, Loïc J. D., *An invitation to reflexive sociology*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992, p. 97.

<sup>37</sup> Gutiérrez, Alicia B., *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> Both in the new Portuguese dance world and the plastic arts – challenging the artistic practices supported by the earlier generation, “*the generation that we identify as that of the 90s* [F. Brito, F. José Pereira, J. Louro, P. Mendes, M. Palma, J. Tabarra, C. Vidal, etc.], *the spirit of the 90s has a lot to do with this combative, virulent, highly aggressive and politicised discourse that asserted itself on the basis of the demonisation of the artists of the 80s, the predominance of the market, possible lobbies that were built up at the time, and relationships that, it may be thought, led to the affirmation of a generation that was supposedly highly favoured by the boom in the market and at the same time, let us say, created artificially. Artificially and extremely over-evaluated, with extremely speculative work*”. (Commissioner interviewed), cf. Lapa, Pedro, “O Grupo e as suas Migrações”, *Arte Ibérica*, No. 32, February 2000.

<sup>39</sup> Because they appear as variants of centres and peripheries, stylistic and competitive developments that could be restored within a given position and that would have been squashed or absolutised by Bourdieu in the concept of position, cf. Conde, Idalina, “Artistas. Indivíduo, ilusão óptica e contra-ilusão”, in *Sociologia – Problemas e Práticas*, No. 19, 1996, p. 50 et seq.

<sup>40</sup> Because the form of distributing positions is alterable, there are clear reversals with the rapid acclamation of the “new” or young artists of recent decades (if my memory is correct, not long ago João Onofre was drawing us to an *anthological* show in the Museu do Chiado). The museums were correcting patterns of action and entirely oriented to the present. For the projection of ‘unknown’ names (probably even more than the galleries) they went to look for them in the schools, giving the first example of official integration. (Among others, Mário Pires Cordeiro, Isabel Simões, the ones selected in the 1st Anticip’Arte, a show-window for promising talent with artists still outside the commercial circuit, and art

disturbing swiftness in relocating the uniform concentration of symbolic power. Facilitating processes of opening up to a plethora of gatekeepers, brokers and competitors – firmly based on the hallucinating hyper-productivism of events, in the sociological argument of the *abundance* of creators, many of them working together –, connected with this is the polychromatic contemporaneousness of the highly segmented artistic scene, of the pulverisation of struggles by various sections, an interpretation rather at variance with that stated in the theoretical framework of the French sociologist. Collaterally, I cannot fail to think of artistic spaces that spring up refurbished. They are organisational and economic dealigns points, with technology – which allows them to relocate. Following the track of Manuel Castells' network society studies, we all have aspects of social practice, including cultural ones, operating with a boost from electronic communication technologies. They provoke a dynamic of flows that in the agency, through the constant use of e-mail, results in the constant interconnection between Vera Cortês and the artists – some live and work between Lisbon and a base abroad – and in the non-stop national and international transmission of pictures of their work.

But not only. Very particularly, the mediation of communication, in its broad sense, not just the judgmental one of the criticism that produces value in the commentary. Experimental in appearance, grouping a series of institutions around it, it is what results from the character of conceptual competence that some apply, giving rise to the compactation and the defining coherence of the identity of the event, whether tracing out a theme for a music festival or at the fourth edition of the biennial ExperimentaDesign, according to the saying *the means is the material*. The institutional cooperation to which the Vera Cortês proceeded with LuzBoa (*Sala do Risco*, 2004) and LisboaPhoto (2005) effectively proves that the gatekeepers cannot close ranks on this avalanche of networks.

Following these considerations, woven together not long ago, the field coordinates that first have to be made clear lead to this kind of power chess, embodied in a person like Guta Moura Guedes who, from an artform with a small 'a' such as design reaches

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course finalists in 2004, 2003 and 2002, participated in the exhibition *7 artistas ao 10º mês | 2005*; also worthy of note is the 2003 exhibition, in the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, of the EDP prize *Novos Artistas* (the 2004 edition was in the Belém Cultural Centre), transformed into an instrument to legitimise creative artists at the beginning of their careers – despite commentaries reiterating the ever more precocious institutionalisation of artists, cf. the responses of Faria, Nuno, “Ver em negativo” and Pinharanda, João, “Como se faz um prémio”, *Público*, 4 January 2004; Lapa, Pedro, “Para não morrer de tédio”, *Público*, 11 January 2004).

the board of the Belém Cultural Centre, in the vitality of an ESTGAD<sup>41</sup>, in the present significance of Zé dos Bois, in the exhibition that Serralves hosted of the double Entertainment Co., in the *Blind Runner* brought to the CCB last year by João Louro or in the route of a João Tabarra from ZDB to the São Paulo Biennial (nor is the fact to be disdained that both he and some of his fellow travellers in the struggle against the 90s establishment are represented in almost all the main art collections in the country<sup>42</sup>). Summarised to the main points, the picture of a historic process in the field, now given up to an instability involving cross-dealings, of a symbolic power that forces out the *institutional*, of generational currents, of a multitude of instances of legitimation (e.g. Bartolomeu 5 (Lisbon), on the threshold “*of a new squatter legitimacy, which is increasingly positioning itself as an alternative to the spatial and institutional conventions of the galleries*”<sup>43</sup>), and of fringes that, though Bourdieu saw them as distant from recognition, dribble their way to the centre.

Within the span of specific rules that make up the microcosm of contemporary art, we should see Vera Cortês – Art Agency as a reflection of the dynamism alluded to above. Let us say that, in the face of a gallery quadrant that, metamorphically, has been expanding without bringing in train a proportional alteration in the types of operation, the device of management, publicisation and artistic marketing conducted by Vera Cortês, and given a generational mark, opens up other mechanisms or tiers of legitimation. In the final analysis, organisations, whether artistic or not, produce operating territories and are fundamental places and points of mediation: thus they can be a support and determinant<sup>44</sup> in the launching and success of creative talents in (the various stages of) their careers, with a programme selection that informs peers of the existence and value of a particular artist and his or her work. Nevertheless, how is it to be explained that a considerable part of these *professionals* – in the assumption of an organisational approach to management, dealing with animating the relational vector,

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<sup>41</sup> Not a long time ago, the artistic scene was almost exclusively represented by artists produced by the Faculties of Fine Arts in Lisbon and Oporto or Ar.Co. Now ESTGAD (Escola Superior de Tecnologia, Gestão, Arte e Design in Caldas da Rainha) is also part of that scene. After opening 13 years ago as ESAD (Escola Superior de Arte e Design), it is beginning to attract an increasing number of references through students who have been gaining visibility (two examples, Cecília Costa, one of the three Portuguese representatives in the Sydney Biennial, and Hugo Canoilas, in *7 artistas ao 10.º mês | 2003*).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Tavares, Emília, *op. cit.*, and *o Roteiro da coleção do Centro de Arte Moderna José de Azeredo Perdigão*, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2004.

<sup>43</sup> Barata, Paulo Martins, “Um pintor arquitecto”, *Egoista*, No. 20, September 2004.

<sup>44</sup> Giuffrè, Katherine, “Sandpiles of Opportunity: Success in the Art World”, in *Social Forces*, No. 77, March 1999; Menger, Pierre-Michel, *Portrait de l'artiste en travailleur – métamorphoses du capitalisme*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil et La République des Idées, 2002, pp. 43-44.

Eve Chiapello saw in them the resources and human capital of organisations – favour the agency over the gallery? And, purely and simply, how does this intersect with the issue raised, of the innovators in projects?

“For me, her project is to do something with artists. The idea isn't for the artists to give money but... I mean, she wants to make money with the artists but essentially wants to work with the artists. And that is the type of gallery owner that is missing in Portugal because most galleries want to do something but want to make money with the artists. And for Vera that is separate, because she needs it to work. What she wants is to work with the artists in a real sense. And it is this passion that I note in her and think is great (...). I know some galleries are not very content with this work because they think that Vera, in that she sells the artists, basically takes their profit or the money they should get with the artist that they represent. (...) But Vera only has the artists who put themselves at her disposal and who are perhaps, in some way, dissatisfied with the galleries that represent them. I think that Vera has played an important and interesting role in that she helps to publicise artists who would probably not be seen so much.” [Gallery owner]

“It is always comparatively to the gallery owners that I make my comparison... my idea of gallery owners is rather of agents, those individuals who go and meet people and look for opportunities for their artists, for those they represent, and show and publicise the work as much as they can. They understand where each artist can be and can do best, who should know the work of this one or that, and the type of connection that a commissioner might have with this work or that. I think that gallery owners here in Portugal are not very much that way, I think they do a lot of sitting and waiting. In this sense, Vera is a serious agent. I think that she actually goes and looks for things and attracts people. This is my impression until now and I think that things have worked.” [Artist]

“Of course, there is pressure on me to open a space that is closer to a conventional gallery but I'll make every effort for this not to happen. A gallery has huge overheads and needs to be profitable and, per artist, it can't organise more than one exhibition a year or every two years. That isn't what a young artist needs. A young artist needs to experiment, produce.” [Vera Cortês]

In the actual, and rigid, case of a traditional gallery, high overheads demand a high level of sales and a commercial attitude involving artists with characteristics and prices that can guarantee the earnings necessary for it to be able to invest and operate in a professionally effective way. It is, indeed, this perspective that underpins the relative immobility of the galleries in backing young creative talents and in taking or not taking

risks. I said 'relative' since, curiously, those most in tune with their times assimilate them at a fair percentage rate, which indicates a great deal about who counts symbolically in the circles of legitimation.

“What I feel is that artists in Portugal are highly dissatisfied with the support they get and are highly dissatisfied with the way the galleries operate in general, with the way the institutions operate in general and with the way the institutions that support them operate.” [Artist]

Within a deeply idiosyncratic environment, with few opportunities, it is to be noted how Vera Cortês – Art Agency responds to a series of gaps with its morphology and adaptability. Its manner of confronting the difficulties of economic sustenance and a space to present work make it a natural target in the eyes of the younger stratum. It is also possible to see the advantage of the fact that artists in the starting phase of their careers, and still cheap, have<sup>45</sup> speedier ways of starting to place their work in the meanders of the market: the agency produces most of the pieces for them, charges lower commissions than the galleries, uses partnerships and arranges sponsorship<sup>46</sup>. Moreover, the establishment of informal relationships and great complicity and empathy with the artists makes Vera Cortês a partner, a link, a source of primordial support that is permanently surveying the relationships between the works (which she also buys) and the paraphernalia of players in the milieu, collectors, critics and curators. The attachment to an excessive sociology of power, Bourdieu's on this occasion, centralised on the *structure* of objective positions and invisible relations that unite and connect the contending agents, obscures concrete and observable *interactions* among those who cooperate to produce and evaluate works of art (*dixit* Loïc Wacquant<sup>47</sup>); this is the aim of the art world, shared in the militancy of Arthur Danto and Howard Becker<sup>48</sup> and able to explain how a division of labour of hyper-specialised complementarity is organised,

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<sup>45</sup> Of course, risky projects need thoroughly profitable exhibitions that counterbalance them, hence in the agency we come across perfectly established artists, some with parallel representation in the gallery, which the agency compliments.

<sup>46</sup> “*The innovativeness is also reflected in the mobilisation of resources, the ability of the initiators and managers to convey to the public authorities and financiers the practical importance of their initiative*”, in AA. VV., *Creative Europe...*, p. 306.

<sup>47</sup> Wacquant, Loïc, “Mapear o campo artístico”, in *Sociologia – Problemas e Práticas*, No. 48, 2005, p. 117.

<sup>48</sup> With the forms of organising cultural activity prioritised, exploring the concept of “art worlds” (of an inter-subjective, non-destructive tenor), H. Becker proposes an analysis of art as a collective activity, resulting from the division of labour and the cooperation of a plethora of professionals and players, who, together, contribute to its production, distribution and consumption. See Becker, Howard, *op. cit.*; Conde, Idalina, “O sistema, o campo e o mundo – paradigmas na sociologia da arte”, preface to Melo, Alexandre, *Arte*, Lisbon, Quimera Editores, (3rd ed), 2001.

and ruck a mosaic, on this occasion, bending alliances. Probably, in a more up-to-date notion of network (the motricity of the individuals and projects nourishes the agency's network), also, too consensual, with its dose of sociological ingenuity<sup>49</sup>. (In fact, in addition, for example, to a predator component characteristic of art prizes, I felt a disturbing atmosphere of power implicit as I witnessed the refusal to invite a certain gallery owner to a *vernissage* supper. But, also, the exit of certain artists already pointed to the “*pressure from the places with whom they work, from galleries, and at a certain moment the annoyance was greater than the pleasure of doing things*”, Vera Cortês told me. On another day, I had the same impression when she told me of a disagreement with the manager of another new space – in question was the press release of an artist who was exhibiting there; as it was an artist of the agency, the latter proceeded to publicise it –, a sign of “*places (...) that compete fiercely to gain media visibility and to be able to sell*”<sup>50</sup>).

Let us hear what a Tate spokesman had to say at the time of the exhibition presenting the British painter Joshua Reynolds: *Reynolds did not simply paint these individuals. He was their friend, he put them in contact with each other, formed their public image...* One example attracts another, and both inspire sociological understanding. It was in Alberro Alexander's book on the birth of conceptual art, admirable how it combines sociological analysis and the record of the history of art, that I came across Lawrence Weiner, in 1971, explaining the contribution and charismatic leadership of the dealer and maverick Seth Siegel: “*Seth did a very good job. His packaging and his selling were done in a superb manner*”<sup>51</sup>. I can attest to the same attitude in the gatekeeper-art publicist Vera Cortês, who is the dedicated driving force behind a band of artists, without the unfavourable background of economic collapse with which the *infelicitous* 90s generation had to contend (I refer to the label of Miguel

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<sup>49</sup> It is not by chance that Idalina Conde prefers to refer to the polyvalence of *contexts*, made up of the world, field or *system*, that Alexandre Melo aligned with the great merit of the global dimension – involving geographical variables in the construction of artistic values, a dimension not simplified to the dependence on specific players and times. We should especially be speaking about an international structure of contemporary art or, what is equivalent to it, the limited legitimacy of artists and dealers who are confined to a strictly national scale of production/distribution. In the agency we see this quality of the *system* echoing in the goal of internationalisation (during Arco 04, outside the fair, it appeared with a video and an installation in an apartment in the centre of the Spanish capital; it was at Loop 05 from 11-13 November: the place for video art lovers, Barcelona; it hopes to take part in Liste 06, Bâle), in the artists who study, travel, live, work or exhibit, naturally, in Portugal or abroad – de Melo, Alexandre, see *Arte...*, p. 87 and “Portugal XXI, a primeira década”, *Expresso*, 15 August 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Critic interviewed. See above, note 36.

<sup>51</sup> Alberro, Alexander, *Conceptual art and the politics of publicity*, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 2003, p. 5.

Wandschneider<sup>52</sup>); she set in motion a whole narrative that became a viable and well-reputed entity.

“I think that we also lack a certain promotion among the younger age-group, people who are now able to buy, because they have a fixed job and a house, have begun their lives and may be inclined to buy art. But they are not people who have been used to searching out the galleries or trying to inform themselves about art, so if art doesn't find its way to them, they don't find their way to art. I think Vera does this job very well. She introduces me to this field very effectively, she successfully publicises the fact that there's a place where you can buy young art. She created this image of the purchase of young art.” [Collector]

The telephone calls, the e-mails (a manner of technologically advanced by-word-of-mouth), the eating together, the invitations to see a new piece – she had telephoned collectors and called in other artists. Making use of her own home, she received 90 guests that night. It seemed the most suitable place to her to combine art purchasers and producers. Social capital (positive<sup>53</sup>) is acquired and cultivated here, an indispensable requisite<sup>54</sup>, from the strategic viewpoint, in gaining a *name*. In this way, the tactic of arranging an exclusive *inner circle* or framework of contextual interaction<sup>55</sup> – if we are mindful of the bundle of interpersonal and informal links that make up groups or circles of an aesthetic and cultural complexion, sharing points of reference and works and divided by positions, battles and interests in the intrigues of the market and reputation (I do not fail to mention the unequivocal regularity, which I observe and remember from *vernissage* to *vernissage*, of those who most keep up with the agency's work, including the specialist press) – is the way Vera Cortês achieves good results in the contemporary

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<sup>52</sup> Fixing the artist as an autonomous being obscures part of the conditioning arising from the context of where he or she is born and works. The *happy* generation (that of Julião Sarmiento, Pedro Cabrita Reis...) is the one that found the Arco fair in Madrid, with the market growing and galleries and collectors emerging; for the 90s Portuguese (still waiting for the cultural institutions such as the CCB or Museu de Serralves), the barriers to the survival of young artists led them to take their chances in spaces and/or circuits away from the gallery system: a versatile and *unhappy* generation – for an overview see, for example, Pomar, Alexandre, “Os anos 90 não existiram”, in AA. VV., dossier “Arte portuguesa actual”, *Espacio/Espaço Escrito – Revista de literatura en dos linguas*, No. 15-16, 1998, pp. 106-115; Martinez, Rosa, “The Iberian Front: Spain and Portugal”, in Maraniello, Gianfranco (ed.), *Art in Europe 1990-2000*, Milan, Skira Editore, 2002, pp. 13-26.

<sup>53</sup> On the positive aspect (acquisition of benefits derived from sociability/the inclusion in networks or groups), and the negative, of heuristic social capital, see Portes, Alejandro, “Capital social: origens e aplicações na sociologia contemporânea”, in *Sociologia – Problemas e Práticas*, No. 33, 2000.

<sup>54</sup> In *Distinção*, Bourdieu qualified it as the “*capital of social connections (...) that is often necessary in winning and keeping the confidence of high society, and with it a clientele*” (*Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, Cambridge/Mass., Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 122).

<sup>55</sup> To pick up Idalina Conde's terms, “Obra e Valor. A questão da relevância”, in Melo, Alexandre (org.), *Arte e Dinheiro*, Lisbon, Assírio e Alvim, 1994, p. 174.

art business. Nevertheless, her management skills and this *policy of publicity* that she has developed do not stop at the investment in public relations; she has “*ideas that not even the devil would think of*”<sup>56</sup> with regard to the promotion of artists; examples are what was published in the *Público* inserts and the newspaper *Linha* (distributed in railway stations)<sup>57</sup>. And, in addition, the temporary (site-specific) projects planned for the CUF Descobertas Hospital or the sale of young artists to new hotels in the city.

Of course, (with the resurgence of the decision directive of the individual, usefully restored in methodological individualism<sup>58</sup> by Raymond Boudon, or of the voluntarist and volitional resourcefulness of social action<sup>59</sup>) we find ourselves within the influence of a project established at the will of a group of people who draft alternatives and seek to solve problems and set changes in motion:

“The idea of opening the art agency had something to do with certain things that I felt the market could do and set in train with the artists. Mainly young ones. The agency operates almost like a dynamic force in the art world. (...) For the artists, it is going to do what is necessary and try to help with the question of visibility, as well as contact with the public for their art. (...) Opting for the agency is related to the fact that I find there's a great trend towards formatted names and projects, and I didn't want this project to be formatted from the outset. I think this is a project that's going to be formatted by the artists and the agency. Basically, there are no very great limits and there's no standardisation. And because I feel it is a pity for the market to be centred basically on galleries and institutions, that is, there is a need for projects that get away somehow from that sphere and I think that this is possibly one of the reasons for the great euphoria with the agency and the success of its inauguration. It has something to do with the fact that it is something different. The space is different, the way it operates is different.”  
[Vera Cortês]

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<sup>56</sup> Amélia Muge, cited by Benavente, Ana and Leão, Cristina, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>57</sup> The insert *Daniel Barroca, Gonçalo Barreiros, Hugo Canoilas, Virginia Mota* (exhibition at *Bartolomeu 5*, 13 May > 13 June), *Público*, 2004; the newspaper *Linha*, property of Rede Ferroviária Nacional, No. 1, December 2004.

<sup>58</sup> *For people in their own situation*, methodological individualism recommends that they seek the meaning of and motivation for action, without implying any atomism (also because it is insisted that the actor's deed should be understood in relation to a *situation* that is partly determined by macroscopic variables); cf. Corcuff, Philippe, *As Novas Sociologias. A realidade social em construção*, Sintra, Vral, 2001, p. 19.

<sup>59</sup> “*What social theory needs is to regain a notion of the knowledgeable human agent. (...) Social scientists overlook the fact that most of what we do as human beings we do intentionally, and we are conscious of the reasons for doing it*”, in Giddens, Anthony, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24. In fact, for a long time, sociology disdained the contributions of an analysis based on the actors and the relationships woven between them, following the holistic route of institutional/structural forces and attaching little importance to the protagonists themselves of the phenomena. This trend lasted until the 60s, diminishing in recent decades.

Here it is that a platform of artists' activity, such as the agency, offers an opportune element to ascertain how the ambiguity of the format, not irremovable in its implantation, is extremely productive in an area of human activity such as the artistic field, which is also quite adaptable to the work and ambition of the creative artists.

As the meaning of *project* is fluid, I apply it to the agency *tout court*, as well as to the exhibition situations that it progressively delineates<sup>60</sup>. However, perusing the bulk of the reflections contained in Ana Benavente and Cristina Leão's text, we should gauge this dimension, worthy of closer examination, in relation to the profiles of those who invest in projects, members of *active minorities*<sup>61</sup>. To this extent, it is interesting to consider Vera Cortês and the solid nucleus of her professionals in the singularity that characterises them. In the end, in accordance with a certain consensus in sociological literature, we generally have the *innovators* empirically identified as cosmopolitan, of high social status on the plane of education and prestige, and usually middle-class, because, indeed, the increase in projects in today's society is contemporaneous with markedly more flexible lifestyles, the result of the growing liberation of individuals and groups in relation to structural norms and/or restrictions<sup>62</sup>. When the analysis contains similar parameters, the designation of *innovator* is approved for the person who conceived the agency, Vera Cortês (with long experience in business, communication and public relations).

From the brief assault on the useful concept of Moscovici, there comes to light the innovation/modification deliberately carried out on a system in order to improve or perfect some aspect of its appearance, content or operation<sup>63</sup>. Clearly, it is localised, but when I re-read of the thesis of a specialist in the sociology of art such as the American Diana Crane, I cannot forego suggesting the opening-up of the framework structures that the agency embodies. “*As the number of new galleries increased (...), the number*

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<sup>60</sup> I would describe it as tentacular in form, more than nomadic, with its physical location left behind. It does not bring people to the circuits to which they were accustomed but demystifies them, producing others that even are looser.

<sup>61</sup> Borrowing Serge Moscovici's expression, *Psychologie des minorités actives*, Paris, PUF, 1979.

<sup>62</sup> According to H. Mendras and M. Forsé, individuals “*choose their way of life on the basis of their values, ambitions, and career and life projects*”; then, “*the multiplicity of small differences are organised into a system of differentiation that disavows the former rigid contrasts to stress the new diversity*”; in Mendras, H. and Forsé, M., *Le changement social – tendance et paradigmes*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1983, p. 228.

<sup>63</sup> In a rather similar way to what happened with the agencying structures for actors and models, the agency site tells us: “The project began (...) with the goal of freeing up, facilitating and developing the market relationships between artists, collectors, museums and institutions. This concept did not start from the usual conventions established by the market; it was developed on the basis of an analysis of the area in which it could complete and complement the gaps and contact points in this very market”.

of new styles steadily increased. From a purely economic point of view, this proliferation of styles can be seen as the anticipated outcome of the structure of the market”<sup>64</sup>. The densification of the organisational infrastructure will have been the touchstone in the public configuration and appearance of abstract expressionism and other manifestations of New York artists. Valid for artistic movements, the decisive responsibility of the (new) reception spaces for promotion and visibility is also valid for individual artists. “Undoubtedly, the agency represents the artists who began their careers at the end of the 90s, 1999, 2000, 2001; it is here that we find them. They aren't in other galleries”<sup>65</sup>; an independent driving force for young artists<sup>66</sup> (a laboratory for the new, encouraging the exploitation of the aesthetic potential of contemporary artistic practices) or interference introduced by a powerless minority (“This is not a gallery set up for those it suits to be here for their artist's CV; it is as important for them to work with me as me with them, since, for all purposes, we are all at the beginning of our careers. We all need each other to the same degree, basically we all want the same thing”), merely based on their style of behaviour. Without possessing special resources, the minority is the divergent party, an exception in a system to which most have conformed. Innovation confronting and jolting what is established (classificatory stability, and I quote, from memory, words that I picked out of an artist's talk with the agent: “What annoys the gallery owners is that they don't know how to deal with you. And, in addition, you sell more than they do”), is linked with a conflict<sup>67</sup> of greater or lesser subtlety, the product of this position of a clean break.

In the artistic world, in order to recognise (creative) inventors who launch new modalities, conquer zones and succeed in producing works, the movement of criticism (“Yes, the market is small, but nothing is done to change it”) to individual and collective transformative behaviour would be an additional classification topic. The heirs to Marx,

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<sup>64</sup> Crane, Diana, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde. The New York Art World: 1940-1985*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 113.

<sup>65</sup> Artist interviewed.

<sup>66</sup> And an entrepôt with visibility for a few international artists and, also, Portuguese artists, who have no support structures and are even not agency artists, but temporarily have the benefit of the solution of Vera Cortês to show and market their works.

<sup>67</sup> An intrinsic property of human relationships and creative processes. Creative people who break out of established structures and habits commonly provoke interpersonal conflict and face resistance from their contemporaries. The conflict basically consists of a situation in which something or somebody appears as an obstacle in the way of the desired objective, success, and is produced even when simple differences arise. The social psychologist Serge Moscovici describes it as a threat felt on the arrival of a different solution or felt as a disturbance, on account of the inability to react in the face of a new and unexpected circumstance (see, for example, the opinions in the appendices on pages 71, 75 and 76). Studies on creativity and innovation have concluded that there is no change without resistance and conflict.

or at least to his 11th thesis on Feuerbach (1845) – “the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in different ways; the question, however, is to *transform* it”<sup>68</sup> –, in their discourse, there appears a relationship with the real that is in perspective and forward-looking.

“I have been in this field for a very short time, so I feel I’m prepared to talk about what I feel. I find that our art market has not renewed itself, that is, if we look at most gallery owners, they have been in this field for twenty years, there are very few new spaces. Certain things have sprung up in the last two or three years. But most are completely stationary, there has been no renewal. And even in the market itself, when there is nothing new, there is also no motivation and so I think that now there is beginning to be some change, and it is not specifically connected with the agency alone; there are “x” spaces with different models, there are non-profit galleries, there are collectors who open galleries, and there are non-profit spaces such as *Bartolomeu 5* that now support artists. The market has to be more agile, objectively we are not of great importance externally, the Portuguese art agents who are important, or even artists, can be counted on two or three fingers. We are very resistant to change and new things and are very introspective. We are tiny, the market is tiny. (...) I think our galleries often act more like institutions or museums. Not galleries. (...) But I think it is possible to do better.” [Vera Cortês]

And in these circumstances the way she accompanies, almost teaches, the (young) collectors/buyers injects a similarly innovative practice, which certainly contributes to the gallery's success<sup>69</sup>. She proves this with the high number of transactions completed, adapting herself both to the private market situation and the expansion of institutional acquisition practices.

On the interactive front, or in the context of the players' strategic interdependence<sup>70</sup>, it is difficult to separate the agent's actions from those of the artists. An osmosis is in action. A dynamic that, without exactly being recent, was transferred to the agency by a certain group of artists invited to join it. They came from the bubbling climate around ESTGAD, bringing the habit of working in a group. Also an attribute of certain people, not from Caldas, already used to arranging spaces and producing their own exhibitions and projects<sup>71</sup>. Vera Cortês has obviously proved that

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<sup>68</sup> Braga da Cruz, M., *Teorias Sociológicas. Os Fundadores e os Clássicos (anthology of texts)*, Vol. I, Lisbon, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, (2nd ed), 1995, p. 9.

<sup>69</sup> Jorge, Rui Peres, “A arte de criar mercado”, *Semanário Económico*, 22 April 2005.

<sup>70</sup> Mintzberg, Henry, *op. cit.*

<sup>71</sup> R-6, exhibition organised by (Re)Size\* in Palácio Marim-Olhão, Lisbon, 16-26 January 2001; Reóstato (catarina dias, gonçalo barreiros, joão seguro), espaço interpress, Lisbon, from 13 May to 10 June 2005.

she is an important catalyst but vertices coexist in the two directions, synergies, the artists were bringers of ideas and they formulated some of the proposals, *I have seen this place, would like to do that project, do you support me or not, do you think you can work with us in this direction...*

“So the agency (...) is a gallery, but more abstract. The limits are not so clear as a gallery because the things that can be done are also perhaps much more wide-ranging. The possibilities are greater. Everything depends on her energy and our energy, that we are with her and have a relationship that allows us to talk things over and spur each other on, a very democratic relationship.” [Artist]

“It's an open situation. Vera is available for new projects and, in turn, also nurtures the will to continue producing things that pass through the agency, as a team of two. It is also a close relationship, it is fun in that Vera gains a rapid understanding of the needs that crop up with the work.” [Artist]

“(...) With regard to the artists, I think they couldn't have found a better means of becoming known, i.e. a better place to work. For what she invests in them, personally and financially. (...) And she connects with the artists, something that also stopped happening among the gallery owners. They have moved on to working with the artists' work and that is a means of making money. I think that Vera connects with the artists.” [Collector]

Consequently, we draw near to that crucial component of immersion and involvement in the profession, which Chiapello reported. Interpersonal cultures that operate as the constitution of affiliative ways of doing things. “*A strong motivation for artistic practice favouring self-control* [perceived in the title right at the beginning], (...) *the essential role of emotional relationships and mutual encouragement, and finally, the avoidance, marked to a greater or lesser degree, of formalisation and bureaucratisation*”<sup>72</sup> nourish an art agency whose *modus vivendi* is an art of the agents or, in other words, that lives from the ingeniousness, dexterity and various juggling tricks of a restricted group of individuals armed with the common convictions, in the affirmation of a collective project. The triumph of cooperation, they all lead, guide the energies of and impress a rhythm on the agency that they sustain.

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From the CVs of the young artists interviewed I also see the way many circulate in this “region of emerging talent”, are nominated for prizes, pass through project rooms, and exhibit in new art spaces. Some are already included in collections and have received critical attention.

<sup>72</sup> Chiapello, Eve, *op. cit.*, p. 103.