

Document to preserve: a case study of the contemporary work of art "Radiologias" (1979), by Silvestre Pestana.

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Bibliographical research

Materials and techniques

The installation consists of 8 black-painted pieces made of galvanized iron. The metal displays an orange-brown patina (characteristic of iron alloys) and a protective layer of zinc, a product of the metal's galvanization.

They have rectangular openings in the metal sheet, allowing intermittent illumination of different radiographs.

Inside, each piece contains an electrical installation consisting of at least a single circuit starter PHILIPS® S10 and one tubular halogen lamp connected through an electrical cable to the perforated platex board located on the back.

All pieces contain one red luminous rocker switch and at least one indicator/pilot or rear position light.

Paper and/or self-adhesive vinyl labels of various colors, sizes and formats (including reflective labels) and black decal characters/letters were attached to almost every radiograph.

Samples collected from areas of the radiographs hidden by the metallic sheet were analyzed using the PerkinElmer Spectrum 100 FT-IR Spectrometer (range 600-4000 cm⁻¹, 7 scans, and resolution 4 cm⁻¹), which allowed the identification of the foil's material through ATR-FTIR (Attenuated Total Reflectance - Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy) analysis. Both infrared spectra (in transmittance mode) coincided with the infrared spectrum of polyester fibers, present in the ATR-FT-IR spectra of conservation-related materials in the MID-IR and FAR-IR region database¹.



Historical context

The artwork belongs to the Postmodern period in Art history marked by the rejection of Modernism (first half of the 20th century). Faced with the rise of Pop art, originated with Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades which were conceived as forms of anti-art manifestation and provocation that, in turn, were recognized as aesthetically pleasing objects by neo-dadaists, and the Kitch, in the 50s, Postmodern Art acquired an assumed political conviction, militancy and subversive criticism aimed against consumer society. During the time that Portugal was under a dictatorial and authoritarian political regime (1933-1974), a literary movement called PO.EX. (Portuguese Experimental Poetry) emerged. This movement brought together several experimental poets, including Silvestre Pestana, who opposed the regime and excelled in formal radicalism and progressive constructivism.



Technological obsolescence

In works that integrate obsolete technology, such as "Radiologias" (1979), which contain tubular halogen lamps that are no longer manufactured and sold, one conservation strategy found to avoid the loss of material and functionality, as well as changes in the work's concept, is to replace obsolete technological equipment with up-to-date equipment. It is important that the new equipment reproduces the old equipment's function as faithfully as possible without compromising the authenticity and integrity of the artwork. To preserve the original components, documentation must be produced. The original lighting system will be replaced by an alternative LED system consisting of an arduino microcontroller, a 5V relay and a 25W LED lamp. The new system, developed in partnership with Prof. Dr. Diogo Tudela (CITAR; School of Arts of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Oporto, Portugal), was approved by the artist but with the requirement of having the exact lamp reproduction, with the same color temperature, measured in degrees Kelvin (K), and luminous intensity, measured in Lumens (Lm).

Interview with the artist

Artistic context

In the interview, the artist clarified his intentions behind creating this artwork, which resembles a set of televisions. According to the artist, these pieces highlight the human body, encouraging an interpretation of the artwork's concept based on the visual retention of images. The signaling instruments that emit "pulses", including the reflective labels and the indicator/pilot and rear position lights, represent a form of conditioning, control and social manipulation. In his artistic practice, Pestana employs modern technology to expose how humans engage with the world controlled by the different social, political and economic forces governing them. Therefore, this work is a tribute to those who lost their lives - in combat, in accidents or due to illness - during the Portuguese Colonial War (1961-1975) and aims to raise awareness of the consequences of war.

Exhibition

According to the information provided by the artist (1st conversation - January 8, 2024), the work fulfilled its purpose when displayed on the wall in the early stages. Since then, the black-painted wall fixing elements, folded and nailed to the inside of the metallic structure, were deformed and sometimes even broken, as they do not properly distribute the weight of the pieces. However, two decades after its conception (late 90s/early 00s) and after new possibilities had been tested, the work gained a different communication power and became regarded as an artistic installation to be placed directly on the floor. Nevertheless, the artist clarified that he also intends to keep the previous display manner and make it feasible. In this sense, a new system was developed. This new system approved by the artist does not impair the correct visual reading of the work and was designed to guarantee its exhibition on the wall and on the floor. The new elements can be easily removed if the work is intended to be exhibited on the floor and are strategically located on the screws incorporated in the angles welded to the inside of the structure, which prevents deformations of the metallic sheet and improves weight distribution.

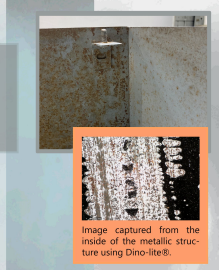
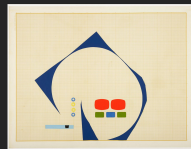
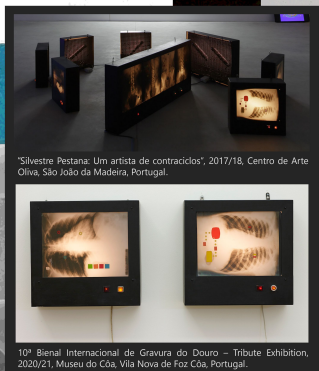


Image captured from the inside of the metallic structure using Dino-lite®.

This elements are present in other works created by the artist, such as the series of drawings and collages on graph paper "Pautas" (1975).



Silvestre Pestana (Funchal, Portugal, 1949) is a visual artist and performer who began his artistic work in the mid-60s. The artist is also known as an important figure of the 2nd generation of portuguese experimental poets.

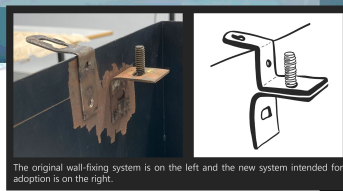


"Silvestre Pestana: Um artista de contradições", 2017/18, Centro de Arte Oliva, São João da Madeira, Portugal.

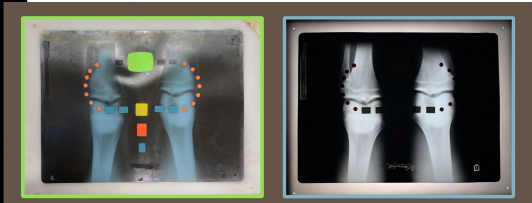
10ª Bienal Internacional de Gravura do Douro - Tribute Exhibition, 2020/21, Museu do Cão, Vila Nova de Foz Côa, Portugal.

Conservation of radiographs

The radiographs show a significant degree of deterioration, presenting deformations on the plastic foil and bubbling/white solid particles in the emulsion due to the migration of the plasticizer to the surface. As such, it is not possible to halt the progressive aging process. To preserve the artwork's appearance, which will inevitably still suffer further decay, photographic documentation of the radiographs in their current state (with and without light transmitted from behind) was produced for future reference. Photographs with light exposure document the plastic and visual language of radiographs in an artistic context, while those without represent their current state of conservation.



The original wall-fixing system is on the left and the new system intended for adoption is on the right.



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