

Mistake! Mistake! said the rooster... and stepped down from the duck

Jürgen Bock

*Writing the way you speak
A kind of diary – ten years after the events
An interview with myself
Skilfully spontaneous
Whatever else, no art
Superficiality
No psychological coherence
No equivalents*

Hubert Fichte, *Hotel Garni*

So, let's have an exhibition featuring Portuguese artists who are supposed to have read Fichte's *Eine Glückliche Liebe* (A Happy Romance) which has been translated into Portuguese as part of a worldwide project instigated by the House of World Cultures in Berlin and the Goethe-Institut in Portugal.

NB. Alas, we don't have a book illustration up our sleeves.

One of the curator's friends used to be a goldsmith and when word got around that he could ply the alchemist's art after a fashion and transform old gold into new pieces of jewellery, hosts of ladies turned up with their old dental gold and brilliant ideas upon which the craftsman was swift to lavish praise. "We can definitely do something with your absolutely wonderful ideas", said he.

Hubert Fichte and his partner, the photographer Leonore Mau, began their worldwide project in 1964 with a sojourn in Sesimbra lasting several months. Situated less than an hour's drive to the south of Lisbon, this fishing port used to be picturesque, nowadays the picturesque foists itself upon the resort. Their stay in Sesimbra resonates in a number of Fichte's works. For example, the novel *Eine Glückliche Liebe* itself, which he finished on Grenada as late as 1984 or his radio play *Caparica – Besuch in einem portugiesischen Fischerdorf* (*Caparica – Visit to a Portuguese Fishing Village*) from 1967 are based on this first great expedition – from Hamburg, boarding a boat in Bremerhaven to Lisbon, avoiding the major metropolises of Europe en route.

Initiated by Diedrich Diederichsen and Anselm Franke, the worldwide project on Fichte's work kicked off – as far as the Portuguese section is concerned – with a meeting of a number of names organised by a Portuguese curator in an hotel in Sesimbra in January 2015. A two-day seminar in Sesimbra at the Hotel Espadarte, where Fichte and Mau had rearranged the furniture in their half-board accommodation. Nowadays, the rooms are ill-suited to such antics – you can shift a chair perhaps or an armchair, but not the bed or sideboard.

Alongside a number of artists potentially taking part are the following:

Diedrich Diederichsen, Anselm Franke, initiators of the "Hubert Fichte: Love and Ethnology" World Tour, recalling Kippenberger's global Underground network, próxima estação Lumiar Cité.

Martin Bach, director of programmes at the São Paulo Goethe-Institut is representing the Goethe-Institut.

The Portuguese academic Manuela Ribeiro Sanches from Lisbon specialising in the field of comparative literature, speaks fluent German and shares an empathy for Fichte, but as a native Portuguese doesn't want to be an insect under his microscope – Manthia Diawara said once that Africans are not particularly fond of anthropologists.

Two of the artists are heavily embroiled in their professional careers – emails need to be answered – whilst Franke and Diederichsen are busy translating passages from Fichte's *Sesimbra* novel *ad hoc* in a conference room with views of the ocean. There's a lot of debate and ultimately everybody is as perplexed as the artists in Alexander Kluge's *Big Top*. We're not out of time yet.

2017. The list of names of the ensemble, in alphabetical order, long since demanded by the participating institutions, including the Lumiar Cité, was ready for publication in the web journal a mere three weeks before the opening:

Gabriel Barbi, born in Brazil and who has lived in Lisbon for a long time, turned up in *Sesimbra* with Brazillian-Portuguse translations of Fichte: *Hotel Garni / Hotel Garni; Waisenhaus (Orphanage) / Orfanato; Pubertät (Puberty) / Puberdade*.

Hubert Fichte, duly appropriated.

Ramiro Guerreiro read the Portuguese version of *Eine Glückliche Liebe (Um Amor Feliz)* and was ecstatic. Like Fichte, he is an admirer of Proust. An emotive affinity of souls and a conscious sensitivity – does this mean identification?

Ana Jotta, the diminutive *Grande Dame* of the Portuguese art scene. After having read *Eine Glückliche Liebe*, a convert, yet old enough to have known the places Fichte describes as they were – almost every one, some of the places were only known from hearsay. Simply electrified by what she had read, she finished her artwork without much ado, beating about the bush and endless throat-clearing within a week of reading the book. As per normal, somewhat stifled by the thin air of the local art scene, the ideas and descriptions of Portugal at a particular time in its development by a hitherto and still to this day unknown writer was nothing short of a blast of oxygen for more important matters.

With a Greek forename and a Sanskrit surname, Euridice Kala from Mozambique, not Portugal, actually speaks Portuguese and – from a safe distance – eyed the linguistic style that the translator, José Maria Vieira Mendes has come up with as a Portuguese equivalent for Fichte's directness with a degree of puzzlement. As the cliché has it, the Portuguese are anything but direct. Black and white aquariums cross Kala's mind during the talks. The German spell checker warns us that both the artist's forename and surname have been misspelled.

Simon Thompson, not Portuguese; not remotely interested in the banalities of where people come from, he read a few English Fichte translations in Brussels, but our book only exists in German and Portuguese.

Sensitivities: The contract governing matters relating to the Portuguese venue Lumiar Cité hosting a show as part of the overall initiative "Hubert Fichte: Love and Ethnology" is translated into English. All of a sudden, the stipulations and penalties for non-compliance seem less intimidating. The clause stating that the curator – at the behest of the participating institutions – has to deliver texts by the artists is deleted upon the curator's request.

Report: four meetings, or in the art-world jargon: *residencies*, sometimes with everyone, sometimes with part of the group of artists in the seminar room of the Maumaus Independent Study Program in downtown Lisbon. It becomes a site of study and discussion: W. A. Auden, Raymond Briggs, Leigh Bowery, David Bowie, Michael Buthe, Michael Clark (dancer), Diederich Diederichsen and his Fichte lecture at the Lisbon Goethe Institute, Lukas Duwenhögger and his rejected gay memorial sculpture in Berlin, Harun Farocki – Fichte's slanty Indian from the "Palette" with Wittgenstein in his knapsack,¹ Hubert Fichte and his radio play: "Caparica – Visit to a Portuguese Fishing Village", a trilingual debacle in the Maumaus seminar room: the radio play in German, a Portuguese translation as a text in a film and the whole shebang *ad hoc* in English, Jean Genet, who allegedly hid in the bushes as France was occupied and masturbated as the troops marched

by, James Joyce – peduncle, Georgia O’Keeffe – flowers and apples, Richard Lindner – juke boxes, Leonore Mau in a film by Nathalie David, Thomas Mann, Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro, Beatrix Potter, Andrei Tarkovsky, *Cliffy* Richard, Paul Thek, Wings (post Mersey), Paul Wunderlich and Japanese Shunga and graffiti and book jacket by Gallimard and Portuguese bullfighting posters from Turcifal. Excursions: sales post, *open air*, on the motorway from Lisbon to Sesimbra, to study 1 to 1 scale models of animals made from painted fibreglass, pigs and sheep particularly catching the group’s eye. Hospital dos Capuchos in the centre of Lisbon with its comprehensive collection of wax models of tumours, skin conditions and venereal ulcers which were made in the 1930/40s using plaster casts on the afflicted, among them many prostitutes. By all accounts, the artist was a refugee from Vienna. The patients’ skin colour was matched by introducing pigments to the wax, artists from the Lisbon Faculdade de Belas Artes were commissioned and the decorative painters from the luxury porcelain manufacturers Vista Alegre brought the ulcers to life with their attention to detail. In addition, visits to the entrances of multistorey apartment blocks from the 1960s (light fittings and decorative elements). A Belgian juke box collector in Vila do Rei, two hours north of Lisbon – involving detours there and back to avoid forest fires. The rendezvous is a US-style diner called *Fifty-Fifty* in the village run by the owner – we eat hamburgers and think of Hans Henny Jahn and Fichte’s urine sample.² Back in Lisbon, visit to the João Sampaio Lda. carpentry shop – with an ancillary metalworking and painters workshop for the fitters and display manufacturers for all of the larger museums in the Lisbon area. Not to mention visits to several advertising firms south of the Tagus. Food and petrol expenses are covered by the budget.

From the discussions: *Fifty-Fifty*. Not to get caught out when making art. Collage and de-collage. Fichte’s pin board in his apartment in the Elbchaussee in Hamburg from the Fichte and Mau exhibition catalogue at the Hamburg Deichtorhallen. The exhibition as a kind of *roman fleuve* with cryptic systems of cross-referencing. Concept of the game. Prêt-à-porter artists. Allowing connections to be felt without pointing them out. Caricature. Not a caricature of something but simply caricature – *Aboutness* as an issue in art – *not interested in Death or Life but in existence*; Fichte’s existence independent of his death; he lives on in the good parts. *We will not show a show showing Fichte, the show shows itself for eventually to discover Fichte in that through and about aboutness*. Cold and clinical. The temperatures of caricatures and exhibitions, not Buthe. The sound of an exhibition. Fichte is what he writes when describing banal details with explosive interruptions. The industrialisation of *aboutness* in today’s professional art as eye candy – art as trompe-l’oeil of its own political shortcomings and failure: Trump l’oeil. Art has to be critical, has to be creative, must be about something – or *about a non aboutness or nothing to say, say it more, say it louder*, to remain true to one’s own inner confusion – *I can’t live only on good meals, I need filths. No safe haven for Art. Fichte thinks socially and formally about life. Making a move for eventually discovering Fichte in it; we might discover Fichte in the aboutness or non-aboutness about Fichte... We have to protect ourselves on the level of the exhibition as well as in relation to Fichte. Beyond the status of conception, a joke, moving into a formal stage. Oh, you make a lovely painting, no; you drew him, no; is this your take on him, no, it is someone else saying something about him; it feels like painting in a mirror for creating a distance through which we can shake hands (with Fichte?).* The danger that an introductory text at the start of an exhibition might be better than the exhibition itself. *Super dry!* Or, to paraphrase Fichte, the exhibition as a jelly worm, which appears at the periphery of one’s field of vision alongside the increasingly fading impressions of the outside world and turns toward itself with a swivel of the eyeball.

¹ Harun Farocki is one of the locals at the Palette pub on the corner described by Fichte in his novel *Die Palette*; Fichte worked on the novel in Sesimbra and in which the locals, also referred to as deadbeats, were given pet names by Fichte. The ‘slanty’ aspect of the then young, gangly Farocki refers to his pointedly casual, cool posing in the bar. (*Die Palette*, p. 45)

² Hans Henny Jahn was a German novelist and playwright who had a prodigious influence on Fichte. Jahn developed a hormone therapy during his post-war years in Hamburg: based on urine tests and the number of hormones contained in the samples, he proposed that one could determine the sexuality of the person in question. According to this test, Fichte was *fifty-fifty*. (*Versuch über die Pubertät* [Essay on Puberty], p. 35 f.).