

ARTISTIC INTERVENTION PROJECTS AND CULTURAL MEMORY: EXPERIENCES FROM PORTUGAL'S CENTRE REGION

Claudia Pato Carvalho and Nancy Duxbury
University of Coimbra, Portugal

Abstract: In July and August 2013, O Teatrão, a Coimbra-based theatre company, presented the project *Arruinados*, comprising three theatre performances in three abandoned spaces ('ruins'), one in each of three cities in the Centre region of Portugal located along the Mondego River: Coimbra, Montemor-o-Velho, and Figueira da Foz. Developed through a community theatre approach, the artistic presentations were based on the collection of local memories, including local testimonies and other types of local materials from local, social, and economic history. The objectives of the project were to bring under reflection how different types of urban and rural ruins, understood as scars and tattoos of a country, may speak about the history of that country and, at the same time, may inspire the possible future transformations and possibilities of change. In parallel with this reflection, the artistic production embodies a strong commitment to build collective projects; a sense of a shared, common territory; and a network of people and things to explore and articulate, in a localized, concrete way, the history of Portugal between 1890 and 2020. The paper assesses the role and significance of *Arruinados* in the context of collective memory, community-based artistic interventions in public space, and the potential for local mobilization through the arts.

Keywords: artistic intervention, collective memory, local memories, ruins, public space

I. INTRODUCTION

Behold this ruin! 'Twas a skull
Once of ethereal spirit full!
This narrow cell was Life's retreat;
This place was Thought's mysterious seat!
What beautiful pictures fill'd that spot,
What dreams of pleasure, long forgot!
Nor Love, nor Joy, nor Hope, nor Fear,
Has left one trace, one record here.

– Anna Jane Vardill (Mrs. James Niven), in *European Magazine*, November 1816, with signature V.

The sensation of abandonment is compensated by a feeling of liberty, a hope for renovation, a desire of adventure...

– Performance brochure for
Arruinados em Três Atos (2013)

The Portuguese adjective *arruinado* means destroyed, lost, or bankrupt.¹ The Latin *ruīna*, from which the Portuguese noun *ruínas* and the English *ruins* orig-

inate, comes from the verb *ruere* – to rush headlong, fall, collapse. This archaic definition embodies a falling down, a “physical, moral, economic, or social collapse.”² The physical embodiment of this collapse is left as *ruins*, “the remains of something destroyed, disintegrated, or decayed.”³ The remains are of human-made architecture. The structures were once complete, but as time went by, they fell into a state of partial or complete disrepair due to lack of maintenance or deliberate acts of destruction.⁴

In the creation and production of *Arruinados*, the physical ruins – the architectural remains of local histories and fading memories – became inspirational sources of hope, change, adventure, and liberty. Within the context of the current moment of profound social and political crisis, local memories of ruins were invoked and artistically appropriated to contribute to reflections on past, present, and future collective actions. *Arruinados* thus adds to public reflection on the difficult situation of the social, political and cultural crisis currently being faced, and provides a moment to consider the possibilities or impossibilities of building a collective project, which might be extrapolated to the bigger context of society in its different fields of action.

In the *Arruinados* project, there was a strong commitment to explore the relations between citizens and the space – whether this was the public space of a city or of a historical monument, or the spaces of relation and interaction between the characters, as the work was a metaphor for thinking about contemporary interpersonal connections around a common project. While the recent-ness of the performances does not allow time to unfold to reveal specific impacts in the local communities, the production provides a focal point for considering and reflecting on the place of

artistic interventions in public spaces in the multifaceted and slow processes of activating, renewing, and even inventing collective memories as foundations for social change.

Arruinados incorporated extensive historic research, gathering local memories, and envisioning the ‘past lives’ embodied within the historic ruins that existed beyond ‘living memory’. It integrated ten local amateur theatre companies in the preparation, organization, and presentation of the performance, who also worked as collectors of local memories. The starting point for the artistic work was documentary practice in order to look for ways to create fiction about reality, which may give alternatives to hegemonic approaches that dominate the arts, the media, and publicity in general. That search aimed to tell stories and to show what is unspoken and invisible. From this perspective, it was important to occupy and reveal the ruins, the non-places, the super-places, and to expand the space of the community, the public space, designing new maps and making new trips, or re-making old cartographies and itineraries. Memory and identity were the focus of these practices and therefore emphasis was given to biographies and its techniques of construction as well as collective cultural repertoires. The performances integrated professional and non-professional actors, reflecting on the historical changes of these spaces, starting from local testimonies and interrelating them with different sources of the Portuguese literary patrimony. The testimonies were used to inform the artistic process, in terms of character building as well as the development of the plot and story.

The performances were realized within the context of a strong commitment to build collective projects, a common territory, and a network of people and things

to explore and articulate, in a localized, concrete way, the history of Portugal during a long twentieth century, between 1890 and 2020.⁵ Within these 130 years, the history and utopia of Coimbra and the centre region, as well as the e/migrations of these and other territories, are explored. *Arruinados em três atos* was preceded in recent years by O Teatrão's performances of *Repúblicas*, *Coimbra 1111*, and *Shakespeare no Castelo* – all developed in relation with local communities and bringing together the historical background of the spaces used and traversed in the performances and how the places are perceived by local communities today.

Keeping these dimensions in mind, this paper aims to understand the significance of this type of artistic intervention activity in two ways. First, conceptually frames and contextualizes the project *Arruinados* by weaving together some literature on public memory, community arts, and artistic intervention in public space. Second, it examines the processes involved in the creation and presentation of this project and, with an eye to future interventions within *Artéria 8*, aims to assess how artistic interventions/performances can move from being 'entertainment' that generates greater awareness of local history to potentially mobilizing collective action and social change. Historic and contemporary dimensions of the sites of ruins and the cities in which the performances were situated, and the general time period of the performances' creation and production – all contextualize and influence how the project processes are designed and play out, and the significance they carry. With this in mind, in closing, the paper reflects on how artistic projects involving local memories of ruins may contribute to reflections on past, present, and future actions, especially in

moments of profound social and political crisis, and potentially serve as an inspiration and source of political mobilization.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

The ruins of himself! now worn away
With age, yet still majestic in decay.

– Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book XXIV, line 271⁶

Memory plays a central role in Portuguese national identity and culture (Oliveira Martins, 2007), in relation with people's understanding and interpretations of history (see, e.g. Ricoeur, 2000) as well as contemporary issues. John Bodnar (1992) defines *public memory* as "a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present, and by implication its future" which are immersed within a communicative and cognitive process in which the focus is not the past, but "serious matters in the present" (15). In a complementary manner, Erll, Nünning and Young (2008) define *cultural memory* as "the interplay of present and past in social-cultural contexts" (2). It is from these perspectives that *Arruinados* was developed and presented. Through formal acts of recollection – such as this theatre work – "new experiences are aligned with past experiences and old, known verities" (sociologist Rob Shields, 1991: 15, cited in Irwin, 2013: 74-75), although more unintentional and implicit ways of cultural remembering may also occur (Erll et al., 2008).

Within processes of remembrance and reconsideration, specific physical places form potent touchstones and points of connection to memories *and* provide re-

sources with which to build new narratives. As Johnston and Ripmeester (2010) note, “local sites of memory continue to carry within them potential reactivations as new narratives recast the histories of these sites in new ways” (cited in Opp and Walsh, 2010: 9). On this path of progressively changing meanings, “places and memories are always in a state of becoming, of being worked on, struggled over, celebrated, mourned, and even, it bears repeating, ignored” (Opp and Walsh, 2010: 16).

Sites of historic *ruins* can be seen as dramatic examples of the types of vacant, ‘indeterminant’ spaces and sites that exist as “evidence of a colourful past and will serve another purpose in the future, although they remain ignored in the present and have no clear-cut public use” (Verschelden et al., 2012: 282). As fodder and inspiration for localized artistic practices, these sites “combine the history and former characteristics of the area with a temporal and future interpretation of the space and offer opportunities for reflection, encounter and action” (282).⁷

Artists can play special roles in this context. As Lucy R. Lippard (2013) writes,

What artists do best is persuade the places and their inhabitants to reveal themselves. ... Artists can seldom make huge changes in a neighborhood or city but they can tweak a place in one direction or another. The rest is up to the communities ...

Every landscape is a hidden story. Once it’s recognized, a certain evaluation is possible and even inevitable ... (5-6)

Site-specific artistic performances such as *Arruinados* consider the historical, political, social and material place of performance, as Jeff Kelley (1991) sug-

gests, “as a reservoir of human content” (34) and use these perspectives “to make dense the experience of performance in and through that place” (Irwin, 2013: 76). Carefully crafted artistic interventions allow “those physical spaces to speak” and create “conscious space for thinking and feeling the city [and the site] differently” (Šunde and Longley, 2013: 164).

Art *localized* in public space reflects the artists’ engagement in “profoundly embedding his or her project into the existing context” (Verschelden et al., 2012: 281). Localised art in public space is conceptualised as “an anchored, non-interchangeable, site-responsive practice” (281). The artwork serves as a reflecting mirror of public life in the locale and the contemporary social context with its shifting practices and conditions. It serves as “a trigger for a focus on things which are already present, rather than newly added values” (281).

Art localized in public space offers “different and more imaginative way of knowing and understanding, and opens up a stage for both personal experiences and those of others” (Verschelden et al., 2012: 281). Imagination is a powerful tool within arts-based work to encourage creative forms of civic dialogue, learning, and engagement (Clover 2006, 2007). As Clover (2007) argues, “the ability to imagine things being different may be the first step towards taking action to change them” (518).

III. DESCRIPTION OF THE PERFORMANCES IN THE THREE SPACES OF RUINS

While in the progress of their long decay,
Thrones sink to dust, and nations pass away.

– Earl of Carlisle, *On the Ruins of Pæstum*

A. Overview

Arruinados em três atos was presented in a cycle of three performances, held in Coimbra (Act I, in Colégio da Trindade), Montemor-o-Velho (Act II, in Quinta das Pretas, Verride), and Figueira-da-Foz (Act III, in the commercial port) (see Figure 1). Each act was presented four times in each location, with a brief time period between each act (Coimbra, June 3-6; Montemor-o-Velho, July 17-20; and Figueira da Foz, July 31 to August 3).



Figure 1. Poster for *Arruinados* at University of Coimbra, July 2013.

The works represent a triad in the history of 'Companhia Fantasma' (the 'Ghost Company'), the alter ego of O Teatrão's group of actors. The 'Ghost Company' of characters has been part of Teatrão's performances since the public space performance *Coimbra 1111*. The characters travel through time and are the central fo-

cus of the performances. Through them, we can understand what is happening and their reflective approach to the current state of affairs. In *Arruinados* the characters meet after a long time of absence and one of them wishes that the all group stays together. But most of them, now with new jobs in other areas, are not willing to do that. This is when the reflection begins concerning the options we take in life and how they may impact the world around us.

B. Development

The production could not have been done without the residents of the cities (Coimbra and Figueira da Foz) and village (Verride) involved. Local contacts and partnerships were made with local amateur theatre companies and choral groups, the students of O Teatrão's theatre classes, local bands, and other local associations. All of them became integrated into the performance as direct interventionists. In the specific case of the amateur theatre companies, they represent a long effort that has been made by O Teatrão over the years and which is currently creating the 'Plataforma do Mondego' (Mondego Platform), a local cultural effort coordinated by O Teatrão that envisions the development of different types of cultural dynamics in articulation with the amateur theatre companies.

Rehearsals took place locally in each location, trying to involve as much as possible the local citizens and organizations, not only in the dynamics of the performances, but also in the reflection processes that gave origin to the artistic creation. In terms of collecting local memories, several testimonies and interviews were taken from local people (for example, elder residents and workers) related to Colégio da Trindade,

Quinta das Pretas, and the Figueira da Foz commercial port about the history of each place and the people associated with those places. Some of this material was used to inform the artistic creation and to give substance to the fiction.

The history of the places and the people who inhabited them were used as a source of inspiration for artistic creation, including the ambiances and the type of characters created. Other local materials such as books, maps, and photos were also gathered to inform the artistic creation. These source materials were the basis on which to think about how these memories can contribute to reflecting on how these 'non-places' can help us rethink our (personal and collective) role and can also present to us inspiration and options for the future. Thus, both the process of developing *Arruinados* and the key messages in the work were guided by the idea that comparing past and present, memory and present facts, informs reflection on future projects, inspiring individual choices and the ability to dream further.

C. *Synopsis of the Acts*

Act I takes place at 'Colégio da Trindade', in the historic area of Coimbra now designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (see Figures 2-4). This building dates from 1552. It is currently unoccupied and in the course of a long process of restoration. Through the years, the site has hosted different functions: courthouse, convent, furniture store, tasca (the typical Portuguese pub), and student residence. For instance, dur-

ing the nineteenth century, the church and the claustrum of 'Colégio da Trindade' was Coimbra's courthouse (1835-1881). When this courthouse was integrated into 'Paços do Concelho' (a municipal space) and following the demolition of the building containing the offices of the Coimbra Academic Association (AAC), the AAC, the academic gym, and the grocery store 'Pereiras' occupied the space. It was in the church that the turbulent AAC general student meetings of the British Ultimatum of 1890⁸ and of the January 31st insurgency against the Ultimatum took place. During that time, the government closed the AAC. Later on, in the city plans to restore the University a women's student residence was planned for this building and after that a male student residence. However, this project was abandoned and by the end of the 1980s, one of the walls of the church collapsed on the street sidewalk outside.

Many lives have crossed this space, lives that now gain new life through the performance. When the character Saúl Coimbra (a former actor and law student at the university) asks to speak, the story starts and also his task of bringing together the theatre group 'Faunos do Rio'. Saúl Coimbra is a former law student and as the youngest in the troupe wishes to join everyone together so they become what they were before. But the lives of each character have changed, as well as their plans for the future. Through his eyes it becomes possible to see how the country and their people have changed and how it is important to continue resisting, even in difficult times, as the ones now experienced.



Figure 2. 'Colégio da Trindade', Coimbra. Photo: O Teatrão



Figure 3. The church within 'Colégio da Trindade'. Photo: O Teatrão



Figure 4. Characters in *Arruinados* at 'Colégio da Trindade', Coimbra. Photo: Carlos Gomes

In Act II, the setting changes to a rural area near Coimbra, a village called Verride. The performance takes place in Quinta das Pretas ('Pretas Farm'), in Verride (Figure 5). When religious organizations (*ordens religiosas*) were suppressed by the king of Portugal in 1834, the act marked the end of a multi-secular institution that had existed since the beginning of the Portuguese nation. Verride, containing many farmhouses that belonged to landlords from the Catholic Church, was 'destructured' and Quinta das Pretas was one of those examples. At the same time, a system that oppressed the farmers but also protected them, and shared a substantial part of the production and income, ended.

During the third part of the nineteenth century, a series of economic difficulties in the Coimbra and Montemor-o-Velho regions impacted several social groups. Indebtedness, the devaluation of the price of agricultural crops, and emigration were symptoms of a generalized crisis in this rural area. In Montemor-o-Velho (near Verride), the first agricultural cooperative in the country was founded. At the same time, emigration affected Verride, substantially reducing the population.

Here, two of the characters (Vilhermina Paga-Pão and Pêro Coimbra) prepare a big cultural event where Verride will appear again as a central cultural spot in the region. The local band (Banda Filarmónica), with more than 200 years' history, joins the celebration (Figure 6). A group from the Ministry is also invited to help create the celebration. A lot of work needs to be done, in particular to convince skeptics like Marta Manteigas (an ex-actress, now cowgirl) that they should be part of the reconfiguration of the new cultural role of the village.



Figure 6. Banda Filarmónica performing in *Arruinados* at Quinta das Pretas, Verride (Montemor-o-Velho). Photo: Carlos Gomes



Act III takes place between the beach of Figueira da Foz and the Portuguese ocean, between the reality of our lives and the dreams that we once had. Here, at the mouth of the Mondego River, the *Arruinados* story and also the story of the theatre group 'Faunos do Rio' comes to an end. Set in the commercial port (which has seen more active days in the past), the storyline focuses on emigration and how that affects people's lives (see Figure 7). The *ruins* dimension here concerns the past and present, but with a positive belief on what the future may bring. Destiny is decided by the options of each character and not by God's will: to emigrate or to stay. The sea, the ancient Portuguese scar, becomes the witness for this story. The sea marks the Portuguese past and is the most present ruin of perspectives on the future.⁹

This is the synopsis of the story, which provides a context for discussing the significance of the present state of affairs and the role of the individual in changing the 'destiny' present in everyone's lives. The situations created in the three acts present examples and reflections on how people react in situation of great stress, ruin, and difficulty. They suggest that even in difficult times, there is an attitude of resistance that should be adopted, independent from the situations. The spaces of ruins are a metaphor for the limit that people's lives can come to and how urgent it is, especially in difficult situations, to keep in mind that a positive role and resistant attitude may be adopted to overcome the situation and find new possibilities for changing the present state of affairs.

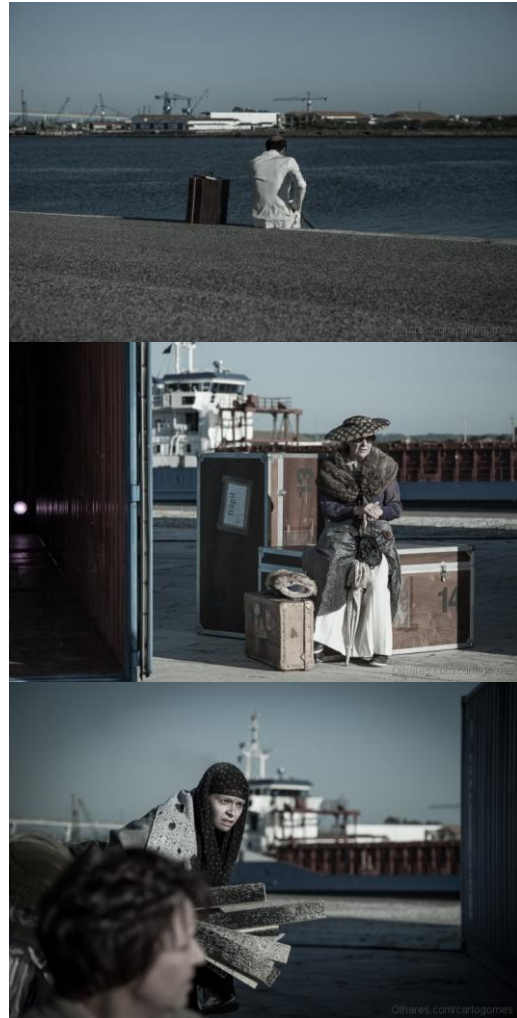


Figure 7. *Arruinados* characters at the Commercial Port of Figueira da Foz. Photo: Carlos Gomes

IV. REFLECTIONS

I do love these ancient ruins.
We never tread upon them but we set
Our foot upon some reverend history.

– John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*,
Act V, scene 3 (1612-13)

Should the whole frame of nature round him break
In ruin and confusion hurled,
He, unconcerned, would hear the mighty crack,
And stand secure amidst a falling world.

– Horace, *Odes* 3.3.7-8¹⁰

This paper explores the role and significance of *Ar-ruinados* in the context of collective memory, community-based artistic interventions in public space, and the potential for local public mobilization through the arts. The work of artistic practice is in itself a space of reflection on the need to artistically appropriate different spaces in order to reach different people and different communities. Furthermore, the artistic practice also becomes a way of reflecting about the present state of crisis. The 'ruins' represented by Colégio da Trindade (Coimbra), Quinta das Pretas (Verride), and the commercial port (Figueira da Foz) are understood as metaphors of the present day, as resources for a sociological reflection on the state of a country. They are in themselves 'monuments' that contribute a reflection on how the contemporary situation of a people is directly connected with their past and their projects for the future. In fact, the artistic project incorporates a desire to reflect on how the ruins of a country may also be its promise of future.

Ar-ruinados calls attention to a few places/sites that no one seems to even notice today and, with these places and through artistic practice, build a reflective context about contemporary life. The ruin is not only what is experienced physically, but is also a powerful

dimension of the Portuguese imaginary and landscape. Portuguese history is full of ruins, which can be understood as scars in our development as people, scars that somehow represent and configure our lives and make sense of it. How can we deal with those scars and make them part of our lives? How might we manage the contradictory state of events that, on one hand, bring to us positive opportunities to evolve but, on the other hand, also give visibility to physical and psychological ruins, like the ones experienced by the characters, the spaces that they inhabit in these three cities, and their relations with these urban public spaces? How can we grapple with those ruins nowadays and make them a source of reflection for individual and collective future projects?

Ruins have the duality of having both negative and positive impacts, and they somehow represent the duality that characterizes us all. It is within this tension that individual and social projects may be built, an especially resonant dimension to recall during uneasy times that tend to emphasize the negative aspects and leave no hope for positive individual and social development. But these are also times that create opportunities to build knowledge and offer a space for reflection, internally and externally in our relation with others. Individual and community lives are given an opportunity to be revisited and understood from different perspectives.

The process of mining cultural and historic memories and exploring their possible re-articulation to the present and to evolving future possibilities can be facilitated and guided by imaginative strategies. Localized art practices can build new approaches to unearthing and understanding what those 'cultural memories' represent today and how they affect peoples' lives. These artistic practices can create public spaces to consider how individual and cultural memories may be useful to rethinking present rela-

tions and future possibilities. Artistic activity has the ability to (re)connect past memories and present concerns. It enables the re-interpretation of those individual and collective memories, can build new or dormant links among them, and can transform them into what may be the fuel for positive transformations.

V. CONSIDERATIONS AS PROLOGUE FOR THE PROJECT
ARTÉRIA 8: O CENTRO EM MOVIMENTO

History fades into fable; fact becomes clouded with doubt and controversy; the inscription moulders from the tablet: the statue falls from the pedestal. Columns, arches, pyramids, what are they but heaps of sand; and their epitaphs, but characters written in the dust?

– Washington Irving, *The Sketch Book, Westminster Abbey* (1819-20)

The *Arruinados* initiative represents a prologue for the project *Artéria 8: O Centro em Movimento*, which is developing both artistic and academic initiatives in conjunction with a group of local agents (municipalities, universities, artistic agents, and art schools) in order to develop an artistic, social, and academic network among the cities of the Centre region of Portugal: Coimbra, Montemor-o-Velho, Aveiro, Leiria, Guarda, Castelo Branco, Belmonte, and Viseu. In each city, the network will help catalyze local projects of artistic intervention. This project aims to create a regional dynamic with concrete local social impacts, proposing a new paradigm of cultural relations in the region based on the cultural memories of local communities, their material and immaterial ruins, and possibilities for future reinvention. The project *Arruinados* is a prelude for the artistic intervention work that is being prepared in these different cities. The artistic activity provides a catalyst for the pos-

sibility of the people of these communities to reconnect with and re-articulate their relations with the spaces, places, and memories that are part of their daily lives.

Ultimately, the project will contribute to reflections on how to articulate and express individual and collective identities, which find themselves under the undeniable pressure of globalization, transition, and consumer processes, and to propose new understandings of how communities may reinvent their own future identities. It is about building a connection between artistic projects and the local communities where they are implemented, their memories, and possibilities of joint reflection for future projects. Starting with their memories of local spaces and people, strong articulations will be developed in order to integrate people and communities as main participants of the artistic practice. Field work to culturally and socially know the local terrain has been underway for a year now, resulting into the construction of a web platform where a cultural mapping of these communities is provided and will be continually updated. This platform aims to serve as an instrument for individuals and communities to reconnect with their local spaces and what they have to offer, creating an ongoing dialogue with each communities' cultural and social resources.

The project aims to recover and valorize existing relations with local culture while, at the same time, to reinvent communities' cultural memories by providing shared information on cultural resources that may create open possibilities for community projects to occur. Renewed approaches may be assimilated in order to rebuild local connections with those places and prepare the community residents with strategies for the future. Development is understood as a community participation project, where past, present, and future need to be integrated into reflections on the cultural and social agendas for different possible futures of a specific community.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Arruinado: Destruído, perdido. / Falido. Source: <http://www.dicionarioinformal.com.br/arruinado/> (29.07.2013).
- [2] <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ruin> (29.07.2013).
- [3] <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/ruin> (29.07.2013).
- [4] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruins> (29.07.2013).
- [5] The time period spanned by the work is part of the fiction that was created: the first part of the characters' story takes place in 1890, and they then travel through time. This is how the story is unveiled.
- [6] Translation by Alexander Pope, 1726.
- [7] For more information on the development of "ruin aesthetics" in contemporary art, see Dillon (2011).
- [8] The British Ultimatum of January 11, 1890 was a 'memorandum' from the British Government to the Portuguese Government that demanded Portugal withdraw its military forces from a territory between colonies of Mozambique and Angola (in current Zimbabwe and Zambia), an area claimed by Portugal. Portugal ceded to British demands, but this act resulted in the immediate collapse of the Portuguese government. The transfer was formalized on August 20 with the Treaty of London between Portugal and Britain, defining the boundaries of Angola and Mozambique. The events triggered by the British ultimatum of 1890 indelibly marked the politics of Portugal, triggering a chain of events that would lead to the end of constitutional monarchy and the establishment of the Republic on October 5, 1910. See: http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ultimato_britânico_de_1890 (in Portuguese).
- [9] For more information on the importance of the sea in the Portuguese imaginary and identity, see Peralta (2008).
- [10] Translated by Joseph Addison.
- [4] Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning and Sara B. Young (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin; New York: Gruyter, 2008.
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- [9] Griet Verschelden, Elly Van Eeghem, Riet Steel, Sven De Visscher and Carlos Dekeyrel, "Positioning community art practices in urban cracks," *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 31:3, 277-291, 2012.
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- [15] Brian Dillon, *Ruins*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011.
- [16] E. Peralta, *A Memória do Mar : Patrimônio, Tradição e (Re)imaginação Identitária na Contemporaneidade*. Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas, 2008.

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