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Monuments, Public Memory, and Artivism: From Colonial Exhibitions to Contemporary Artistic Interventions

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Abstract

This article examines how colonial exhibitions held in Portugal during the Estado Novo, specifically the *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* (First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition, Porto, 1934) and the *Exposição do Mundo Português* (Portuguese World Exhibition, Lisbon, 1940), functioned as central propaganda instruments of the Salazar regime and contributed to the construction and dissemination of an imperial narrative. Through historical contextualisation, the article analyses the processes of creation, reconfiguration, and relocation of the Monumento ao Esforço Colonizador Português (Monument to the Portuguese Colonising Effort) and the Padrão dos Descobrimentos (Monument to the Discoveries). These monuments were initially installed as temporary structures in "Praças do Império" (Empire Squares) and later reconstructed in permanent materials and reinscribed into urban public spaces in Porto (1984) and Lisbon (1960), respectively. By tracing these developments, we show how the colonial ideology promoted by the exhibitions was transferred to and embedded in public space, reinforcing a deeply rooted imperial memory. Drawing on literature on colonialism and public space, the analysis argues that these monuments continue to function as symbolic structures that shape collective memory while silencing or marginalising alternative historical narratives and experiences. The article also examines contemporary artistic interventions in these spaces that critically challenge these legacies: *A Descoberta* (The Discovery) by Kiluanji Kia Henda, the InterStruct Collective's actions, the work of Bárbara Neves Alves, and *A Petrificação dos Cravos* (The Petrification of the Carnations) by Apolo de Carvalho. These examples show how artivist practices reconfigure memory landscapes, foreground disputes over the colonial past, and create opportunities for alternative forms of inscription, appropriation, and contestation of public memory in contemporary Portugal.

Keywords

colonialism, collective memory, monuments, public space, artivismy

Monumentos, Memória Pública e Artivismos: Das Exposições Coloniais às Intervenções Artísticas Contemporâneas

Resumo

O presente artigo examina o modo como as exposições coloniais realizadas em Portugal durante o Estado Novo — a *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* (Porto, 1934) e a *Exposição*

do Mundo Português (Lisboa, 1940) — funcionaram como dispositivos centrais de propaganda do regime salazarista, contribuindo para a construção e difusão de uma narrativa imperial. A partir da contextualização histórica desses eventos, analisamos os processos de criação, reconfiguração e deslocamento do Monumento ao Esforço Colonizador Português e do Padrão dos Descobrimentos, originalmente instalados como estruturas efémeras em "Praças do Império" e posteriormente reconstruídos em materiais permanentes e reinscritos no espaço público urbano, no Porto (1984) e em Lisboa (1960), respectivamente. Ao acompanhar esses processos, discutimos de que modo a ideologia colonial promovida pelas exposições foi transposta e sedimentada no espaço público, contribuindo para a naturalização de uma memória imperial profundamente enraizada. Em diálogo com a literatura sobre colonialismo e espaço público, argumentamos que esses dispositivos continuam a operar como estruturas simbólicas que participam na configuração da memória coletiva, ao mesmo tempo que silenciam ou marginalizam outras narrativas e experiências históricas. Por fim, o artigo analisa um conjunto de intervenções artísticas contemporâneas realizadas nesses mesmos espaços, que tensionam criticamente esses legados no espaço público: *A Descoberta*, de Kiluanji Kia Henda; as ações do coletivo InterStruct Collective e o trabalho de Bárbara Neves Alves; e *A Petrificação dos Cravos*, de Apolo de Carvalho. A partir desses exemplos, discutimos de que modo práticas de artivismo reconfiguram essas paisagens memoriais, evidenciando disputas em torno do passado colonial e abrindo espaço para formas alternativas de inscrição, apropriação e contestação da memória pública no contexto português contemporâneo.

Palavras-chave

colonialismo, memória coletiva, monumentos, espaço público, artivismo

1. Introduction

The so-called post-colonial societies show us that colonial legacies did not come to an end with the formal dismantling of European empires. As historical structures of power and systems of meaning-making, empires persist, manifesting in discourses, social practices, and power structures that extend across time and are rearticulated in post-colonial contexts. In this sense, following De L'Estoile (2008), we can speak of colonial legacies that remain active in the present, in both material and immaterial forms. It therefore becomes essential to question how representations and practices associated with imperialism survive the formal end of colonial administration, and to understand the transformations in the national self-representations of former imperial centres as they become post-imperial societies.

In the Portuguese case, this issue takes on specific contours, since the colonial experience spanned a particularly long period, from the conquest of Ceuta in 1415 to the transfer of Macao to China in 1999. This prolonged historical trajectory contributed to the sedimentation of a deeply rooted imperial narrative in the construction of national identity, whose effects persist today, particularly in how the past is remembered and represented in public space (Almeida, 2000; Castelo, 1999; Khan, 2024).

Starting from a conception of collective memory as a social process, produced through the inscription and legitimation of narratives and incorporated into shared practices, symbols, and experiences, through which identities are constructed and negotiated,

this article analyses colonial traces in public space as mnemonic devices that participate in the production, fixation, and contestation of meanings about the past. Within this framework, it engages with the tradition inaugurated by Halbwachs (1925), who understands memory as socially shaped by collective frameworks, as well as with Assmann's (2011) notion of cultural memory, which emphasises the role of symbolic media and institutions in transmitting memories over time. As several authors have stressed, memory does not preserve the past as such; rather, it reorganises it in light of the present's frames of reference. In this way, collective memory operates in two directions: it reconstructs the past and, simultaneously, shapes present experience and expectations for the future (Assmann, 2011; Liu & Hilton, 2005).

Urban landscapes are spaces densely marked by inscriptions of collective memory. Monuments, museums, and heritage devices function as technologies of memory officialisation, contributing to the construction and legitimisation of national narratives. In this sense, the modern city can be understood as a space filled with markers of national identity that celebrate the past and project the future (Peralta, 2013).

Within this framework, it is productive to mobilise Peralta's (2018) concept of a "memory complex" to conceptualise memory not as a linear narrative but as an open, dynamic, and heterogeneous set of elements continually updated in the present. Peralta (2018) emphasises how these complexes structure common-sense understandings of the past, combining resistance to change with the capacity for adaptation, and sustaining relatively stable identities through a shared emotional tone. Various authors have highlighted the role of emotions in collective memory and have demonstrated, through comparative empirical studies, phenomena of emotional polarisation, particularly concerning the memory of the so-called "discoveries", colonialism, and liberation struggles (Cabecinhas et al., 2006; Jodelet, 1992; Lins et al., 2025; Vala & Saint-Maurice, 2004).

Applied to the urban context, the concept of a "memory complex" helps us understand cities such as Lisbon and Porto as spaces where multiple material and symbolic inscriptions of a historicity associated with the Portuguese colonial empire are condensed (Peralta, 2013). This presence manifests in both the materiality of the built landscape and more diffuse dimensions, such as imaginaries, affects, and commemorations that refer to the colonial past. Portugal built one of Europe's longest-lasting colonial empires. However, the empire's end and the democratisation process initiated in 1974 did not dissolve Portugal's self-image as an imperial nation (Cabecinhas et al., 2006; Peralta, 2011). The national narrative remains largely anchored in an exceptionalist view of Portuguese colonialism, associated with Gilberto Freyre's lusotropicalism, selectively appropriated by the Estado Novo to legitimise the idea of a more benign form of colonialism and a supposed Portuguese universalist vocation (Almeida, 2000; Anderson et al., 2019; Castelo, 1999). Recent studies show that these lusotropicalist imaginaries persist in public discourse, contributing to the reproduction of forms of racialisation and discrimination (Cabecinhas, 2023; Valentim & Heleno, 2018).

Colonial exhibitions held in Portugal throughout the twentieth century played a central role in constructing and disseminating this imperial narrative[1]. In particular, the *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* (Porto, 1934) and the *Exposição do Mundo Português* (Lisbon, 1940) were grandiose, enduring devices for staging the empire. Organised under the Estado Novo regime (1933–1974), these exhibitions served as powerful instruments of propaganda and legitimation for the colonial project, mobilising rhetoric based on civilisational hierarchies and a supposed humanitarian mission (Cunha, 2001; Marroni, 2016; Matos, 2023). To consolidate Portugal as a pluricontinental, imperial nation, they used discursive and visual devices that silenced the violence of colonialism, projecting a harmonious representation of relations between the metropole and the colonial territories (Galvão, 1935).

Central to these exhibitions were the so-called "Praças do Império", conceived as symbolic spaces to represent this narrative (Milheiro, 2014). In both cases, at the *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* and the *Exposição do Mundo Português*, the spaces were structured around monuments erected specifically for the event, initially conceived as temporary installations. However, despite their ephemeral nature, these monuments were later reconstructed in permanent materials and reinscribed in the urban space, becoming part of the memorial landscape of Lisbon and Porto to this day.

Within this framework, the present article examines how certain material devices, namely the Monumento ao Esforço Colonizador Português (Monument to the Portuguese Colonising Effort) and the Padrão dos Descobrimentos (Monument to the Discoveries), together with the landscapes in which they are situated, participate in the maintenance of an imperial memory in public space, as well as how contemporary artistic interventions have come to challenge and reconfigure these memorial landscapes.

2. The *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* (1934)

The *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* took place from 16 June to 30 September 1934 in the gardens of the Palácio de Cristal in Porto. The event, which involved constructing around 400 pavilions over five months, received financial support from local actors, including the business sector and the Church, which played a central role in mobilising audiences through organised excursions and its institutional presence at the exhibition (Alves, 2021).

[1] The Porto colonial exhibition (1934), although designated as the *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* (First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition), forms part of a broader tradition of Portuguese participation in and organisation of international and colonial exhibitions since the nineteenth century. The country was represented at international events such as Paris (1855, 1867, 1878), London (1862), Vienna (1873), Philadelphia (1876), and Amsterdam (1883), while also organising exhibitions on national territory, notably in Porto (1861, 1865) and Lisbon (1863, 1882), among others. Also noteworthy are the *Exposição Insular e Colonial Portuguesa* (Portuguese Insular and Colonial Exhibition; 1894), the *Exposição Internacional de Lisboa* (International Exhibition of Lisbon; 1897), held as part of the commemorations of the fourth centenary of the arrival in India, and the *Exposição Colonial de Produtos* (Colonial Exhibition of Products; 1906), organised by the Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa (Lisbon Geographical Society). These initiatives formed part of a broader movement of imperial exhibition in the European context, in which the colonial element played a central role (Matos, 2023).

The exhibition took place amid the political and legal transformations that marked the consolidation of Portuguese colonialism under the Estado Novo. A decisive moment in this process was the promulgation of the Ato Colonial (Colonial Act; 1930), which institutionalised the so-called "Portuguese Empire" by defining the historical vocation of the nation as possessing and colonising overseas territories, while simultaneously legitimising a legal order based on the distinction between "citizens", "assimilated" people, and "indigenous" people (Alexandre, 2000; Castelo, 1999). Within this framework, the *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* was conceived as a propaganda instrument intended to disseminate the imperial project among the Portuguese population and encourage emigration to the colonies, presented as spaces of progress and economic opportunity (Cunha, 2001). In the words of its director, Henrique Galvão, it was "the first lesson in colonialism given to the Portuguese people" (Galvão & Malta, 1934, p. 16).

The exhibition space was conceived as an immersive, sensory environment that combined scenographic and pedagogical elements. The Palácio de Cristal was transformed into the "Palácio das Colónias" (Palace of the Colonies), with an artificial Art Deco[2] façade, while a series of structures simulating the overseas territories was installed in the gardens. Inside, exhibitions on Portuguese expansion since 1415 were presented, while outside, visitors were invited to traverse an imperial cartography, with streets evoking colonial territories and reproductions of emblematic monuments, such as the Viceroy of India's Arch and the Guia Lighthouse in Macao. The public experience was complemented by entertainment and leisure facilities, including theatre, cinema, and spaces for consumption, which constituted a pedagogy disseminating imperial myths and ideologies and served as a political basis for the construction of national unity — or, using a concept from the period, "imperial resurgence" (Marroni, 2016, p. 78).

Colonial administrations mobilised to organise these stagings: in 1933, the then Minister for the Colonies, Armindo Monteiro, asked the governors to send to Porto men, women, and children who could be installed in "villages" representing their contexts of origin. In total, more than three hundred people from different territories — including Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique, India, Macao, and Timor — were put on display to the public, in a device that combined spectacle, pedagogy, and control (Vicente, 2013).

As Vicente (2013) observes, the exhibition let the public temporarily occupy the coloniser's point of view, promoting a form of looking deeply shaped by power relations. Visual mediation, through photography, the press, and propaganda objects such as postcards, played a fundamental role in disseminating these representations and consolidating a colonial imaginary.

The power of this propaganda apparatus is also visible in the exhibition's well-known poster, entitled "Portugal Não é um País Pequeno" (1934), which, by superimposing the map of the Portuguese colonies onto the map of Europe, sought to symbolically

[2] Architectural language associated with modernity, technological progress, and the great international exhibitions of the 1920s and 1930s (Benton et al., 2003).

assert the size and significance of the Portuguese empire in the international context. This type of representation reinforced the idea that Portugal, despite its small European territorial size, belonged among the major colonial powers.

With around 1.3 million visitors, the *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* served as a powerful communication device for the Estado Novo. By transforming the empire into an object of desire — exotic, available, and potentially appropriable — the exhibition contributed to the eroticisation and naturalisation of colonial relations, obscuring the structural inequalities that sustained them, while simultaneously inviting visitors to enact, albeit momentarily, the role of colonisers (Alves, 2021).

3. The Monumento ao Esforço Colonizador Português

At the *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa*, the first version of the Monument to the Portuguese Colonising Effort became a central element of the so-called "Praça do Império" (Empire Square) in front of the Palace of the Colonies. Created by Lieutenant Alberto Ponce de Castro and sculptor José de Sousa Caldas, the work took the form of an approximately ten-metre-high Art Deco-inspired obelisk, with a central pillar surrounded by six base volumes, each supporting an allegorical figure representing the Portuguese colonial enterprise. These figures — the missionary, the military man, the merchant, the doctor, the farmer, and the woman — carry symbols associated with their roles: the cross, the sword, the caduceus, the serpent, and the ear of wheat. Their hands connect them, with clenched fists touching and gazes directed upward.

While the male figures are defined by specific roles within the colonial project, identifiable through the working instruments they carry, the female figure is reduced to her gendered condition, represented through the exposure of her breasts (Salema, 2021). This asymmetry highlights a symbolic dimension that associates masculinity with action, technical expertise, and the civilising mission, while femininity is associated with reproductive capacity, functioning as a metaphor for the colonial territory itself as a space to be appropriated.

Such a representation belongs to a long tradition of gendered metaphors in Portuguese colonialist discourse. As Vicente (2013) observes, colonial spaces were imagined as feminised and wild, constituted by a disorderly nature that European imperial masculinity would control, bringing territorial and sexual domination into proximity through a vocabulary of conquest.

Beyond its iconographic dimension, the Monument to the Portuguese Colonising Effort also incorporated textual elements that reinforced its commemorative function, including inscriptions paying tribute to the Portuguese colonial endeavour and, in its initial version, an enumeration of historical figures associated with imperial expansion (Alves, 2021). Originally installed at the entrance to the Palácio de Cristal during the 1934 exhibition, the monument was made from ephemeral materials, staff (plaster and hemp fibre), and dismantled at the end of the event. However, it was reproduced in granite at the same location in 1935 for the celebrations of the Restoration of Portuguese

Independence on 1 December of that year, becoming incorporated into the national commemorative repertoire. From the 1940s onwards, however, requests emerged for the monument to be relocated, leading to its dismantling[3] in the early 1950s and its removal from public space for three decades (Matos, 2023).

In 1984, 10 years after the Carnation Revolution, the monument was reinstalled in Praça do Império, in Foz do Douro, following a decision by the then councillor Paulo Vallada. This new location, with toponymy evoking the imperial past, helped reactivate its meaning as a memorial device. As Pinheiro (2008) observes, the relocation of the monument also entailed the transfer of its "place of memory" (p. 305), now reinscribed within a toponymic network that articulates references to the empire, the discoveries, national affirmation, and State symbols[4] — thus conferring upon it a semiotic framework that extends and rearticulates the ideological meanings already present in the context of the *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa*.

In recent years, the Monument to the Portuguese Colonising Effort in Porto's public space has become controversial. The year 2018 was paradigmatic in this regard. That year, the monument was subjected to graffiti, including the inscription of the word "oppressor" and the painting of the figures' hands red, evoking the violence associated with the colonial past. The following year, it was used as a setting for celebrations by the Partido Nacional Renovador (National Renewal Party), a far-right party, which commemorated the anniversary of the Restoration there, reiterating its association with nationalist discourses (Salema, 2021). These episodes show how the monument continues to serve as a focus of symbolic contestation, challenged and resignified by different social actors.

Beyond these interventions, the monument has also been incorporated into institutional initiatives aimed at promoting heritage, such as the Mapa de Arte Pública do Porto (Porto Public Art Map), launched in 2017 to promote the city as an open-air museum (Matos, 2023). The monument is framed as an artistic and heritage object, depoliticised, even though it still carries the tensions inherent in its origins.

The trajectory of the Monument to the Portuguese Colonising Effort — from its creation in the exhibition context to its enduring reinscription in public space — illustrates the effort to keep alive representations that legitimise Portuguese colonisation (Matos, 2023). Its permanence within the contemporary urban fabric demonstrates the continuity of the colonial legacy in memorial landscapes, while simultaneously creating space for its contestation and reinterpretation.

[3] The record of the dismantled monument appears on the cover of a record by Adriano Correia de Oliveira released by Orfeu in 1973 (Alves, 2021).

[4] "Praça do Império is connected to Avenida Marechal Gomes da Costa, which commemorates the leader of the military coup that gave rise to the Estado Novo. Rua D. Nuno Álvares Pereira also begins at Praça do Império. In this way, another pillar of national identity during the Estado Novo is commemorated: the assertion of identity in relation to Castilian hegemony. It is also connected to Rua Bartolomeu Velho, Rua Diogo Botelho, Rua João de Barros, Rua Gil Eanes, Rua de Diu, and Avenida do Brasil — which carry the memory of the Discoveries. Finally, Rua Henrique Mendonça and Rua Alfredo Keil are also located here, commemorating the creators of one of the most important national symbols: the anthem" (Pinheiro, 2008, p. 305).

4. The *Exposição do Mundo Português* (1940)

Between June and December 1940, six years after the *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa*, the *Exposição do Mundo Português* was held in Lisbon. The architect Cottinelli Telmo coordinated the urban planning project, which covered an extensive area linking the Mosteiro dos Jerónimos, restored for the occasion, to the Torre de Belém in the riverside area of Restelo. António Ferro, Secretary of National Propaganda, played a central role in conceiving the event and in its strong media impact. The event brought together modernist artists and intellectuals from across the political spectrum, who designed temporary pavilions articulated with permanent elements such as the garden and the illuminated fountain in Praça do Império (Matos, 2006).

The exhibition took two years to build and profoundly transformed the city's western part, turning it into a symbolic space for celebrating national history (Matos, 2006). Praça do Império, at the centre of the exhibition, was built in this context, reinforcing a narrative of national cohesion. The Monument to the Discoveries, built on the banks of the Tagus, symbolised the starting point of Portuguese voyages of exploration. Like the *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* in Porto, the Lisbon exhibition was conceived as a political instrument to legitimise the regime and assert an idealised, mystical Portuguese identity associated with maritime expansion and a civilising vocation.

Organised into the historical, regional, colonial, and miscellaneous sections, the exhibition constructed a narrative around three dates — 1140, 1640, and 1940 — referring to the foundation of the nation (1143), the Restoration of Independence (1640), and the celebration of Portugal (1940) in its past, present, and future (Matos, 2006). The colonial section included streets named after regions of the empire, with inhabitants of the colonised territories living in simulated environments, as in Porto, but on a smaller scale. The exhibition omitted the slave trade, as it had in the *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa*. As Henrique Galvão himself alluded to in the exhibition catalogue, the different materials brought together and organised according to a particular logic were intended to construct a "fiction" (Matos, 2006, p. 227).

With around three million visitors, the exhibition was one of the Estado Novo's most important propaganda devices (Matos, 2006). Despite its temporary nature, the exhibition left a lasting mark on Lisbon's landscape. Although a 1941 storm destroyed parts of the structures and led to their gradual demolition, various elements remained, shaping the Belém landscape to this day. As Vicente (2025) observes, unlike later projects such as EXPO'98, which created a "new city", the *Exposição do Mundo Português* dominated and mapped Belém's urban space by regularising the riverfront and imposing a historical and symbolic reading of the territory.

5. The Padrão dos Descobrimentos

Among the most emblematic devices of the *Exposição do Mundo Português* of 1940 was the Monument to the Discoveries, located in Belém's riverside area, next to Praça do

Império. Designed by architect Cottinelli Telmo in collaboration with sculptor Leopoldo de Almeida, the monument was originally built from ephemeral materials for the exhibition, with the intention of dismantling it afterwards. This took place in 1943, after it had been partially destroyed by a storm.

As with the Monument to the Portuguese Colonising Effort, the Monument to the Discoveries' trajectory is marked by a subsequent process of monumentalisation. In 1960, amid growing international pressure on Portuguese colonialism, the Estado Novo revived the narrative of the "discoveries" to mark the 500th anniversary of Infante D. Henrique's[5] death, promoting the monument's reconstruction on an enlarged scale and in durable materials. The monument takes the form of a caravel's prow, projecting toward the Tagus. At its front, the figure of Infante D. Henrique stands out, facing the river, followed by a group of figures associated with overseas expansion — navigators, cartographers, missionaries, warriors, and other agents of the imperial project — arranged along two lateral ramps. Symbolic elements, such as historical weapons and a sword suspended at the rear, reinforce the association between power, Christian faith, and territorial expansion. Around the monument, the stone paving features a compass rose and a world map, donated by South Africa during the apartheid regime (Monteiro, 2022; Vicente, 2025).

Like the Monument to the Portuguese Colonising Effort, the Monument to the Discoveries contributes to the historical and identity narrative the Estado Novo regime sought to reinforce. By focusing on heroic figures and the maritime epic, the monument helps produce a selective memory that privileges a glorified view of Portuguese expansion, obscuring the violence and inequalities inherent in the colonial process. In this sense, its 1960 reconstruction can be read as a symbolic response to international criticism, reaffirming Portuguese identity as an imperial nation.

With the independence of the former African colonies in 1975, the monument became, for a time, a space marked by the presence of the so-called "retornados" (returnees), whose belongings accumulated in large containers on the banks of the Tagus, in an image that highlighted the contrast between the monument's celebratory narrative and the concrete consequences of decolonisation (Alves, 2021). In 1985, the monument was redeveloped with the creation of the Centro Cultural das Descobertas (Discoveries Cultural Centre), an annex that includes a viewing platform, auditorium, and exhibition room.

Today, the monument is managed by Lisbon City Council and forms part of the city's tourist and cultural circuit. According to Lança (2019), the exhibition programme developed there has increasingly incorporated critical reflections on its own history and symbolism, signalling an institutional openness to critically assessing the building's connotations[6].

[5] Infante D. Henrique (1394–1460), a prince of the Avis dynasty, participated in the conquest of Ceuta (1415) and is traditionally celebrated by Portuguese historiography as the main driving force behind fifteenth-century maritime expansion. During the Estado Novo, he was appropriated as one of the principal symbols of Portugal's imperial vocation (Vasconcelos, 2022).

[6] The exhibition *Sombras do Império — Belém — Projetos, Hesitações e Inércia 1941–1972* (Shadows of the Empire — Belém — Projects, Hesitations and Inertia 1941–1972) was held at the Monument to the Discoveries in 2022 and revealed urban and architectural plans the Estado Novo developed for the Belém area. The exhibition presented projects, many of which were never implemented, that sought to monumentalise Praça do Império following the Exposição do Mundo Português of 1940.

Like the Monument to the Portuguese Colonising Effort, the Monument to the Discoveries exemplifies how structures initially conceived as ephemeral elements of colonial exhibitions are later reinscribed in public space as memory devices. Its permanence and materialisation carry narratives of the imperial past into the present, while it has increasingly become a subject of dispute and contestation.

In addition to this monument, other traces of the *Exposição do Mundo Português* remain, including the Museu de Arte Popular (Popular Art Museum), the Espelho d'Água (Reflecting Pool), the sculptural representations of different ethnic groups of the so-called Portuguese world in the Jardim Botânico Tropical (Tropical Botanical Garden)[7], and the coats of arms in the garden of Praça do Império, among others. These elements, dispersed and sometimes unnoticed, show that the legacy of 1940 persists in fragmented form, both in the urban landscape and in the narratives that continue to legitimise it.

6. Artivism and Interventions in Public Space

Memorial devices such as the Monument to the Portuguese Colonising Effort and the Monument to the Discoveries actively shape public memory and collective identity. In recent years, their permanence in Portuguese public space has been questioned because they reproduce certain narratives and power structures.

Alongside direct political interventions, such as those at the Monument to the Portuguese Colonising Effort in 2018, decolonial artistic practices have played an important role as powerful forms of critique and imagination. Through different forms of expression, various artists have contested and created counter-narratives to colonial memory, inscribed in monuments and urban landscapes. This section analyses several projects that intervened in the symbolic spaces where the colonial exhibitions in Porto and Lisbon took place, contesting this official memory and proposing new narratives.

The year 2017 represents a turning point in the public debate surrounding imperial and colonial memory in Portugal (Peralta, 2018). Various controversies brought the colonial past to the centre of public discussion, revealing tensions that had previously remained latent. Among them, the project to create a museum of the discoveries stands out, drawing persistent criticism from academics and Afro-descendant associations and ultimately leading to its suspension. In the same year, the inauguration of the statue of Padre António Vieira in Lisbon prompted political protests organised by Afro-descendant and other collectives (see, for example, Peralta, 2018).

In this context, initiatives have emerged to reinscribe other narratives in urban space. Projects such as *A Presença Africana em Lisboa* (African Presence in Lisbon), promoted by the Batoto Yetu association (https://batotoyetu.pt/), propose guided routes that make the city's African historicity visible, while the Djass – Associação de Afrodescendentes

[7] Since 2015, the Jardim Botânico Tropical, which houses an extensive collection of plants associated with Portuguese colonial expansion, has been part of the University of Lisbon's heritage, managed by the Museu Nacional de História Natural e da Ciência (National Museum of Natural History and Science). Between 2019 and 2021, the site underwent extensive rehabilitation and landscape redevelopment.

(Afro-descendants Association; https://djass.pt/) has been mobilising efforts to create a memorial dedicated to enslaved people, to acknowledge Portuguese involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and honour its victims.

At the same time, a young generation of artists has brought historically marginalised histories and perspectives to the centre of the debate. As noted above, the Monument to the Portuguese Colonising Effort has become a site of contestation and intervention since 2018. That same year, artists, activists, and researchers founded the InterStruct collective (https://www.facebook.com/InterStructCollective/) to rethink spaces of colonial memory in Porto through a critical lens.

Among its projects is an interactive map that identifies and problematises places in the city associated with the glorification of the colonial past. In the jardins do Palácio de Cristal, the collective developed a digital installation that imagined alternative monuments to the existing one, proposing speculative exercises in the reconfiguration of memory. These initiatives culminated in the exhibition *Desenterrando Memórias* (Unearthing Memories; https://www.rampa.pt/event/unearthing-memories/), presented at the cultural association RAMPA, which offered a critical reading of colonial legacies in the city of Porto. In parallel, the collective organised a route as part of the *Porto Design Biennale*'s satellite programme.

This work's relevance led to the *ATLAS III* project, carried out in 2021 as part of the PING! programme, promoted by the Galeria Municipal do Porto (Porto Municipal Gallery). Through a workshop and a tour of the gardens, the collective proposed constructing a "relational cartography between images, words and concepts relating to the *Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* and its legacy" (Galeria Municipal do Porto, n.d., para. 1).

Between 2018 and 2019, the designer Bárbara Neves Alves carried out a series of artistic experiments around the Monument to the Portuguese Colonising Effort, which led to the creation of silicone moulds of its surfaces. Through the study of its communication ecologies, Alves investigated different ways of inhabiting and looking at the monument, seeking to open "a space for speculation on how to interfere with how memory is activated in the present, in the hope of disrupting sedimented narratives" (Alves, 2021, p. 28).

Through the silicone moulds, the artist proposes a play between presence and absence, mobilising them as a spectral strategy of reinterpretation (Alves, 2021). In their materiality, the moulds function as objects that are simultaneously concrete and incomplete, reproducing fragments of the monument while also revealing the silences that it incorporates. By generating negative spaces, these forms open new possibilities for appropriation and interpretation, in contrast to granite's fixity and monumentality.

Like InterStruct, Bárbara Neves Alves was invited to the programme "Um Elefante no Palácio de Cristal" (An Elephant at the Crystal Palace), an initiative of PING! promoted by the Galeria Municipal do Porto, in which she led a public workshop. The proposal focused on research, experimentation, and critical practices aimed at reinscribing the monument in public debate and urban space, based on its history and materiality (Galeria Municipal do Porto, n.d.).

Turning to Praça do Império in Lisbon, we focus on the floral coats of arms in its garden of Praça do Império, which have recently become controversial. Originally conceived for the *Exposição do Mundo Português* of 1940, the Praça do Império garden was later ornamented in 1960 with floral coats of arms representing the Portuguese overseas territories, as part of commemorations of the 500th anniversary of Infante D. Henrique's death. These decorative elements embodied the imperial ideology of a unified, pluricontinental Portugal, expressed in the slogan "Portugal, uno e indivisível do Minho a Timor" (Portugal, one and undividable from Minho to Timor; Matos, 2006; Peralta, 2013).

Decades later, these representations became controversial. In 2016, a proposal to remove the colonial coats of arms provoked strong opposition from nationalist groups. In response, the Lisbon City Council opted to permanently install 32 coats of arms, including those of the former colonies, in stone through a Portuguese *calçada* paving project carried out by a Cape Verdean stone paver (Filho, 2023). The decision reopened public and institutional debates over how to manage the colonial legacy in Lisbon's urban landscape (Filho, 2023; Lopes, 2023). The official reopening of the garden in January 2023, in the presence of the President of the Republic, was another symbolic gesture by the State to celebrate and legitimise Portugal's imperial legacy.

In this context, Apolo de Carvalho's[8] critical intervention *A Petrificação dos Cravos* (The Petrification of the Carnations) emerged, in collaboration with Vânia Puma Andrade[9]. Integrated into the *IN LOCO* project (https://inloco.art/), of the Terceira Pessoa platform, the work forms part of a series of site-specific creations conceived for different locations in Portugal and accessible through a digital interface. In this project, each work is activated at the site that inspires it, inviting a situated experience for the public.

A Petrificação dos Cravos takes the form of a performance that inscribes itself as a counter-colonial political gesture. In it, the performer Vânia Puma, embodying voices associated with African liberation struggles and the Revolution of 25 April 1974, establishes a dialogue with the stone materiality of the space. As described in the project, it seeks to evoke stones as things and as bodies, the stones of crushing, hunger, and empire, in a gesture that imagines the dismantling of monuments and their return to the earth, "in a continuum of creative destruction" (Teatro do Bairro Alto, 2023, para. 12).

In *A Descoberta* (The Discovery; 2007), Kiluanji Kia Henda[10] offers a critical reading of the Monument to the Discoveries and its symbolic setting. The artist photographs a group of young Afro-descendants on one of the monument's ramps, interacting with the

[8] Apolo de Carvalho, of Cape Verdean descent, is an artist and researcher, a member of Afrolis and the Djidiu — História e Memória Negra project (Djidiu — Black History and Memory; Teatro do Bairro Alto, 2023).

[9] Vânia Puma is a poet and performer of Cape Verdean descent and co-founder of the Mulheres Negras Escurecidas (Black Women Darkened) collective (Teatro do Bairro Alto, 2023).

[10] Kiluanji Kia Henda is an Angolan visual artist whose work spans photography, video, and installation, critically exploring the legacies of colonialism, memory-making, and historical narratives in post-colonial contexts. Kiluanji won the international competition to create the Memorial às Pessoas Escravizadas (Memorial to Enslaved People) in Lisbon, with the proposal *Plantation*. The memorial has faced successive institutional, administrative, and political obstacles that have delayed its implementation.

historical figures that comprise it. These bodies disrupt the monumental narrative by juxtaposing contemporary Black subjects with a celebratory representation of Portuguese expansion. The work was produced in partnership with an association in Lumiar, in northern Lisbon.

The title contains an irony: it refers to the "discoveries" the monument celebrates and to the "discovery" of that space by young people from Alta de Lisboa, an area marked by the presence of Afro-descendant communities. By occupying the monument, these bodies inscribe themselves in the memorial landscape, pressuring the authority of the official narrative it embodies.

> We need to rethink what we intend when we glorify certain periods of history and how far that can become offensive to people who also inhabit the same city. History is made up of different perspectives, and the attempt to glorify this period of discovery as foundational to Portuguese identity to this day ultimately reflects a reluctance to acknowledge the African presence and its contribution to what the city is today (...). So, we need openness when we approach the past. And today this is increasingly important. Through my work, I try to democratise representation in public and exhibition spaces. (Kia Henda, interviewed by Soares, 2021, para. 23)

The work's circulation in exhibition and media contexts helped broaden this debate. In 2017, it was presented in the exhibition *Racismo e Cidadania* (Racism and Citizenship), held at the Monument to the Discoveries itself, which sought to reflect "through images, on the tension between racism and citizenship that characterised Portuguese expansion in the world from the fifteenth to the twentieth century" (Padrão dos Descobrimentos, 2017, para. 2). In 2020, the Empresa de Gestão de Equipamentos e Animação Cultural, the municipal company responsible for the monument, acquired the work for inclusion in the collection of the Monument to the Discoveries and for its future incorporation into the contemporary art collection of Lisbon City Council, with part of the proceeds being allocated to the association linked to the young people portrayed.

Within this context, it is important to situate the practices analysed here within the field of artivism, a concept used to designate forms of intervention that articulate artistic creation and political action in public space. The term has been mobilised by different authors to understand aesthetic practices oriented towards social transformation, in which artistic production operates as a form of expression, participation, and political action (Aladro-Vico et al., 2018; Sandoval & Latorre, 2008).

In Portugal, Raposo (2015) characterises "artivism" as a still-consolidating concept that brings together art and politics and highlights artistic creation's potential as an act of resistance and subversion. The author proposes understanding it as a set of dissident practices, developed by individuals or collectives through poetic and performative strategies that articulate aesthetic production and political intervention in public space.

In the works analysed in this article, this political intervention targets disputes over public memory, aligning with what Gutman and Wüstenberg (2022) call "memory activism". These practices seek to intervene critically in how certain narratives about the past are produced, legitimised, and socially mobilised. As the authors emphasise, memory activism is not necessarily limited to counter-hegemonic initiatives; it may also be mobilised to reaffirm dominant narratives or preserve the *statu quo*. In this sense, the interventions analysed can be understood as forms of memory artivism, insofar as they use artistic strategies to reinscribe silenced colonial memories and contest the regimes of memory that structure the Portuguese urban landscape.

7. The Memorial Landscape as Arena and Performance

Memory regimes are malleable constructions, continually reconfigured in response to social and identity transformations (Assmann, 2011; Cabecinhas et al., 2006; Liu & Hilton, 2005). The trajectory of certain memorial structures conceived in the context of the colonial exhibitions in Porto and Lisbon and re-erected decades later reveals that these traces of Portuguese colonialism, originating during the Estado Novo, operate as active mediators of collective memory, shaping how narratives about the historical past and certain structures of power are appropriated in the present.

The monuments analysed, marked by dismantling, relocation, and reconstruction, reveal the material inscription of the "imperial mystique" (Domingos & Peralta, 2013) during the Estado Novo, as well as the active processes of symbolic reaffirmation that sustain it. As Cardina (2016) points out, a Luso-tropicalist matrix continues to traverse Portuguese public space, privileging a celebratory reading of expansion and minimising the structural violence of colonialism and its enduring consequences. In this context, public memory operates as a field of dispute: a process through which certain versions of history are naturalised while others are marginalised or erased.

Viewed through a prolonged historical trajectory, the colonial monuments analysed show that the legacies of colonialism concern not only former colonies but also how metropolitan space itself and national identities were historically constituted. In this sense, Quijano's (2024) notion of coloniality allows us to understand colonialism as an enduring matrix of power, knowledge, and the production of subjectivities that continues to structure imaginaries, hierarchies, and forms of representation. The monuments and narratives discussed reveal how the imperial experience remained inscribed in Portuguese political culture and identity, producing what Stoler (2016) terms "imperial durabilities".

Memory can thus be understood as a mechanism through which ideology is materialised (Terdiman, 1993), inevitably shaped by political disputes and competing interpretations. The past persists in light of present conditions, revealing the intrinsically political nature of remembering and forgetting. Within this framework, the artistic interventions analysed become particularly relevant. By bringing historically marginalised perspectives

into public space, these practices contribute to interrupting dynamics of forgetting and silencing, reopening the debate around national identity, colonial heritage, and contemporary inequalities. These interventions help break what Assmann (2010) calls "dialogical forgetting" by bringing marginalised perspectives into public debate and engaging with debates on national identity, migration, and social justice.

The dialectic between remembrance and forgetting occurs within broader social and political structures, materialising in symbolic inequalities and asymmetries (Pereira et al., 2020). Social representations of the past shape interpersonal, intercultural, and international relations, influencing identity formation and mobilisation, whether to maintain existing hierarchies or challenge them and expose their illegitimacy (Cabecinhas, 2023). In this context, the critical interrogation of the colonial past by a new generation — often descended from African and diasporic experiences — reveals a sociological and ideological shift marked by the assertion of a moral and political awareness of the persistence of colonial legacies within the social, political, and economic structures of post-colonial European spaces (Khan, 2024).

The analysis of these artivist practices can also be further developed through the concept of "memorial landscapes", developed by Dwyer and Alderman (2008), who propose three analytical metaphors for understanding places of memory. First, the text metaphor allows monuments to be read as devices that articulate specific historical narratives, making certain versions of the past visible while silencing others. Second, the arena metaphor highlights how these spaces function as sites of dispute, where different social groups compete to define the meanings of memory and the legitimacy of their interpretations. Finally, the performance metaphor highlights the role of bodily practices, rituals, and artistic interventions in activating and resignifying these places, recognising the body itself as a place of memory.

The works analysed mobilise these three dimensions in different ways. Apolo de Carvalho's interventions (*A Petrificação dos Cravos*) and Kiluanji Kia Henda's (*A Descoberta*) operate primarily in the register of performance, activating the monument through the body's presence and action and introducing dissonant temporalities and narratives into public space. By contrast, Bárbara Neves Alves and the InterStruct collective approach the monument primarily as an arena, exploring it as a field of symbolic and discursive dispute while also incorporating the performative dimension, whether through creation processes or through devices such as guided tours and situated actions. These artivist practices transform these memorial landscapes into arenas of contestation, destabilising dominant narratives and proposing counter-memories.

8. Concluding Remarks

This article analysed how colonial monuments and contemporary artistic interventions help produce and contest public memory of Portuguese colonialism. The analysis showed that monuments function as mnemonic devices that helped construct and naturalise a particular imperial narrative in public space. Their successive reconstructions,

relocations, and recontextualisations reveal that colonial memory remains a subject of ongoing negotiation, reflecting transformations in the political and social contexts in which these monuments exist.

By bringing these monuments into dialogue with artistic practices developed over recent decades, the article shows that the dispute over the colonial past is not limited to preserving, removing, or resignifying existing heritage. As Cabecinhas (2023) argues, "mnemonic activisms challenge us to think about the histories that structure public memory, their uses and abuses, as well as their interconnections with power relations, within and beyond the nation" (p. 766). Read through the metaphors of the arena and performance (Dwyer & Alderman, 2008), places of memory cease to function merely as supports for an official narrative and become spaces of confrontation between different regimes of memory, where historically sedimented silences, exclusions, and hierarchies become visible.

In this sense, the artistic interventions analysed show that reinscribing memory in public space also symbolically reinscribes collective identities. As Sobral (1999) notes, "the production of identities is the production of memories" (p. 83), which are not limited to oral and written forms but also encompass their inscription in space — in the case of nations, in territory as the material and symbolic support of collective memory.

Building on the conception of collective memory as a social process produced through the inscription and legitimisation of narratives, the interventions analysed demonstrate that the meanings of the past are continually produced, negotiated, and contested in public space. By displacing memory regimes and creating space for dissent, these practices help construct and renegotiate collective identities in contemporary Portuguese society.

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