

# Life is Serious; **ART SERENE**

## **Biography**

José Capela, architect, PhD earned with the dissertation *Operating conceptually in art. Operating conceptually in architecture*. He works as a teacher at University of Minho since 2000, where he currently lectures in architecture and theatre. He was Head of the PhD course and is a researcher at Lab2PT. With Jorge Andrade, he is co-founder (2003) and co-artistic director of *mala voadora*. He is responsible for the company's stage designs. Over the last few years, he also collaborated with Ballet National Company, Opera National Theatre São Carlos and Gus Van Sant; he designed the permanent exhibition of Porto's new Port Wine Museum and a set/installation for the public spaces of Teatro do Bairro Alto. He is the author of the installation *Windows*, which represented Portugal at the 2019 Prague Quadrennial (Countries and Regions), and presented his work at World Stage Design Calgary 2022. Together with Cláudia Taborda, he curated the international conference *Architecture [in] Jout[ Politics* for the 2010 Lisbon Architecture Triennale. He is the author of the stage design catalogues *Ways of Doing Nothing*, and, with José Carlos Duarte, *W : JC + JCD*; and the chapter 'A bottle of Coca-Cola and two greenhouses: internal politics in the arts and architecture' of the book *Aesthetics and Politics in the Arts* (Edições 70). He was the chairman of the board of the Portuguese Association of Scenography from 2016 to 2018. A two-time nominee to the Prémio Autores as 'best scenographic work' in 2012 and 2017, he received this award in 2016 for *mala voadora's Pirandello*.

# DOMESTICITY AT PLAY: A HOUSE LITERALLY MADE OUT OF PHOTOGRAPHS

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## **Abstract**

This text is a reflection on a scenography project carried out for the artist Raquel André. It's an installation made from a large number of photographs depicting a series of encounters the artist had over several years with a wide variety of people: a *Collection of Lovers*. The installation recreates a (fictional) house, entirely made up of photographs of people inhabiting (real) houses, so it provides an opportunity to discuss: (1) the difference in status between mundane photographs and artistic photography; (2) the difference between inhabiting a space and observing it; and (3) the difference between architecture and scenography. It is argued that the awareness of being in a situation that can be observed as art prevents what we call "inhabiting" from taking place. Finally, an attempt is made to dilute these dualities in the light of Bernard Tschumi's theory on the "architecture of pleasure".

**Keywords:** scenography, photographic installation, everyday life photography, vertigo of images

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2021, I was invited by the artist Raquel André to design a set to exhibit her *Collection of Lovers*. For several years, Raquel met for an hour with people (known or unknown) who responded to a public advert. The meetings always took place in the intimacy of a home and the two people could chat, have a drink, eat, hug or do anything else they both felt like doing (André, 2022). Each meeting was always recorded with a few photographs. My task was to design a space that was also 'domestic' (a set) from these photographic records: the *Collection of Lovers* would give rise to the *Exhibition of Lovers*. This installation was meant to be visited by two people at a time, who entered through different doors and were audio-guided so they meet.

So, I had to do (almost) an architect's job: designing a house (albeit a theatrical one). I had to design a *fictional* house to show the experience of multiple *real* houses, and the raw material available were images that portrayed this experience. Everything was built or produced with images: walls, floors, furniture, curtains, sheets, plates, napkins, etc. I worked with my colleague and friend António Faria on this project.

What I'm proposing here is to look at this installation from a certain distance, in an analytical way. But I'd like to make it clear that, at the time, this work was above all a pleasure for me. I really had fun doing it. I didn't think about any theoretical issues, nor did I adopt a theme on which I was doing a practical experiment. I don't claim the 'practice as research' model for myself. The one who conceived the scenario and the one I am here analyzing that work are not quite the same person.

## 2. THE FUNCTION OF PHOTOGRAPHS

The photographs of Raquel's meetings have no artistic quality in themselves. They are informal, or 'amateurish'. They are mainly affective in nature, like the photographs people take at family or friend gatherings. However, they exist in an artistic context. They are part of an artist's work. I ask: How can we define their artistic function?

Essentially, the photographs are testimonies to Raquel's encounters. They are 'memories' of a moment of sharing. But they are more than that. They can be included in the category of records that began to be used when art freed itself from the preponderance of the object; and actions, happenings and performances were invented. In this sense, Raquel's photographs are hybrids, between the objectivity of recording an artistic event and the affectivity of personal photographs that record gatherings of friends. Art mixes with life.

But there is more to say about the images from the moment they are inserted into the installation. If they originate from an artistic event (the meetings), now the photographs are reintegrated into a new artistic product. They are returned to an artistic context. And in this transit, two types of displacement can be distinguished: (1) the displacement of certain portions of life into the context of the installation – a displacement for which the photograph serves as a vehicle; and (2) the displacement into the artistic context of photographs that, in themselves, had no artistic quality, a bit like a readymade.

The images are both the *support* of a displacement (the displacement of what happened in the meetings) and the *object* of a displacement (the displacement of mundane photographs, as artefacts of representation, to this new artistic context).

## 3. THE CONTENT OF THE PHOTOGRAPHS

The testimony that the photographs give us is very partial to what actually happened at the meetings. Firstly, photographs are only visual in nature. The experience of the protagonists and the space where they met are reduced to their visual aspect to the exclusion of the other senses. Secondly, they only capture a few moments, representative of a time that lasts approximately one hour. That's the condition of the images. They are suspended. They capture the moment in which an event can be concentrated – the *punctum temporis*. Finally, images are confined. They exist within a certain framework that includes some things and excludes many others. What we see in the installation is the result of a choice made by the protagonists of the meeting, who turned the camera on themselves. Despite the spontaneity of the photographs, they nevertheless reflect this choice, more or less intentional, of a frame; and framing is an act that generates meanings.

According to Roland Barthes, the simple act of framing a piece of reality implies an intellectualization of our

relationship with the world (Barthes, 1977). The self-reflexivity of representation derives directly from the act of framing and from the 'intellectual' nature of this act: the frame *knows* how to represent. For Barthes, the process of defining a particular frame is common to theatre, cinema, painting and even literature – arts that he classifies as *dioptric*<sup>1</sup>.

So, although the photographs of the meetings are spontaneous, if we look at them in the light of Barthes' statements, it becomes clear that they imply an ideological program. And this program is constructed through the presence of Raquel and the person she meets, but also through the presence of domestic spaces. And when it comes to presenting spaces, it's interesting to compare these images with those that are usually used to publish architectural projects and, in particular, houses. In these images, there are usually no people. Nor are there any signs of domestic life, such as newspapers next to the sofa, condiments in the kitchen or shampoo bottles in the shower. Often, there is no furniture at all. The phenomenon we call 'dwelling' is eclipsed. The vicissitudes of everyday life are thus consigned to the realm of adversity. We dream of a pristine world. Ideologically, these photographs have a formal rigor that excludes the mundanity of life. They are puritanical. Or authoritarian. These photographs are not only *authorial*; they are also *authoritarian*.

On the contrary, Raquel's photographs depict houses as they are: as supports for what happens in them. We can see spaces being used for eating, bathing, sitting or lying around chatting, for intimacy, for fun. They are behind what happens.

I make these statements, but I'm an architect myself. When I started doing scenography, I was already an architect. I believed that the two activities couldn't be confused, not so much because there is a difference when it comes to artefacts, but because the attitude of those who occupy the spaces is different. The audience has an intensely attentive perception, unlike the common inhabitants of the spaces who don't necessarily have a keen awareness of their metric or material characteristics. Walter Benjamin refers to a 'distracted perception' (Benjamin, 1968). As opposed to the abstract way in which architects deal with space, distracted perception is characteristic of the mundane experience of spaces by people in their daily lives.

I think this difference can be applied directly to architectural photographs and to Raquel's photographs. In architectural photographs, the viewer concentrates *on the space*. That's what there is to see. In photographs like Raquel's, what you see is above all *what is happening in the space*, to the detriment of the space itself. In other words, the two attitudes you can have when you're in a space – attentive perception and distracted perception – apply to those who see the space through the intermediary of photography.

#### 4. THE HOUSE OF PHOTOGRAPHS

My task was therefore to create an installation – which, being in the artistic sphere, is subject to an attentive gaze – from a set of photographs in which the space is simply being inhabited. The *attentive* perception of the installation's visitors was directed towards images of the *distracted* lives of the people in the photographs. But the situation becomes more complex if we consider that the visitors to the installation were going to inhabit that house themselves, namely when they become the protagonists of a meeting. In this sense, the installation fulfils an ambiguous function, between being *contemplated* and being *inhabited* – between being an artistic setting *like those made in theatres* and being a setting to be inhabited *like architecture*. In this circumstance, the visitor is ambiguously inside and outside the situation, simultaneously an observer and an inhabitant.

And the question isn't just about the beholder. The photographer can also be considered. For those photographing architecture, the space is external to them, even if they are physically in it. They are not inhabiting it. They are voyeurs, like someone peering through a keyhole (the camera lens). And in Raquel's case? This is where the difference between architecture and scenography becomes difficult. On the one hand, Raquel's photographs are taken by people who are actually inhabiting the space. You could even say that the act of photographing is part of 'inhabiting'. But that's no longer true when Raquel knows she's being photographed. *She knows that she is going to be the object of the public's attentive perception and,*

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1 Dioptrics is the branch of optics that deals with the phenomena of light or image refraction.

*at least at that moment, the house she is in is a theatre set.* This is the answer I propose to give to the theme of this conference, i.e. the difference between *art* and *life* in terms of the spaces in which their respective performativities operate. Architecture is made to be inhabited, and inhabiting has a functional aim that is autonomous, and not dependent on “being seen for an artistic purpose”. Spaces that are designed or used for “events intended to be seen as art” belong to the realm of scenography (or set design, or performance design, or stage design, or...). Performers are by definition unable to ‘inhabit’ from the moment their behaviour is subjected to a gaze that transforms it into art.

## 5. ARCHITECTURE OF PLEASURE

In the theory of architecture that Bernard Tschumi produced in the 1970s and 1980s, he also identifies a split between the objective nature of architectural space and the presence of people in this space (Tschumi, 1999a). And among the various considerations he has made on this subject, I would like to emphasize two that could be related to the installation I designed for Raquel.

One has to do with the hegemony of order, a hegemony that Tschumi claims dominates the entire history of architecture. I can't say that the installation doesn't obey an order. On the contrary, for ease of assembly and disassembly, I used a modular system for the construction and layout of the walls of the ‘house’. However, this order is not apparent. On the one hand, the panels have been arranged in such a way as to create a labyrinth. The house is a labyrinth. I thought it would be interesting for visitors to discover the spaces progressively. On the other hand, the possibility of understanding an order doesn't survive the profusion of images either. The configuration of the space is diluted by the presence of the images, as if we were inside a photo album rather than compartments. In fact, there are so many images that it's impossible to grasp them all in one visit. The eye drifts through the images, movement which is itself contrary to any order. I think the excess of images causes a vertigo effect - a *vertigo of images*.

Secondly, Tschumi uses the expression ‘architecture of pleasure’ and states that “The architecture of pleasure is to be found where the concept and the experience of space abruptly coincide.” (Tschumi, 1999b) I would like to believe that the house I designed for Raquel could be close to being an ‘architecture of pleasure’. After all, it's about exhibiting a collection of lovers.

## 6. CONCLUSION

If the possibility of an art that blends with life is a little over 100 years old, bringing theatre closer to reality is almost as old as theatre itself. The fact that theatre is an art in which people can act in a way that is similar to the way they act in their lives has meant that it has always been a particularly ‘realistic’ art. But I think that this proximity between art and life only makes the difference between the two evident. The more theatre resembles our daily lives, the more we realise that it is not daily life. A readymade artwork only highlights how the artistic context modifies what comes from life, removing the mundanity of life from these objects. The form is the same (it coincides), but the thing is not. The same happens in theatre. (1) What an actor does is denaturalised by the social device called ‘theatre’, and even what appears to be ‘dwelling’ becomes a performance, meant to be seen. The actors know that what they do acquires meaning to the extent that it is observed. (2) The forms created or adopted to contextualise the performance, even if they have a previous existence (a ‘real’ existence, in the context of everyday life), become scenographic. What Tschumi imagines when he thinks of an ‘architecture of pleasure’ is that an architect can produce spaces in which this disjunction between their free and unconscious enjoyment (spaces that are the target of distracted perception) and conscious enjoyment (the target of observation) is broken. In the *Exhibition of Lovers*, I also tried to deal with this disjunction: on the one hand, the checkered matrix of spaces; on the other, the labyrinth and the vertigo of images.

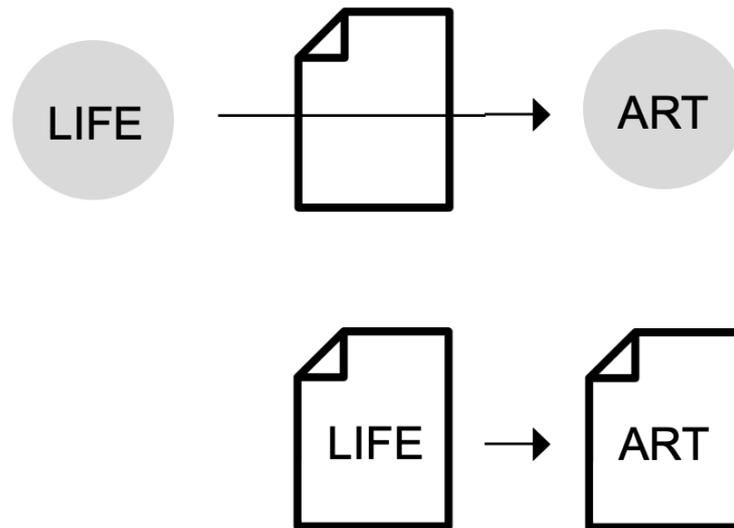


Fig. 1. *The dual function of the Exhibition of Lovers photographs: (1) photography as a vehicle for moving a portion of life into the realm of the installation; (2) banal photographs moved into the artistic realm as a readymade.*

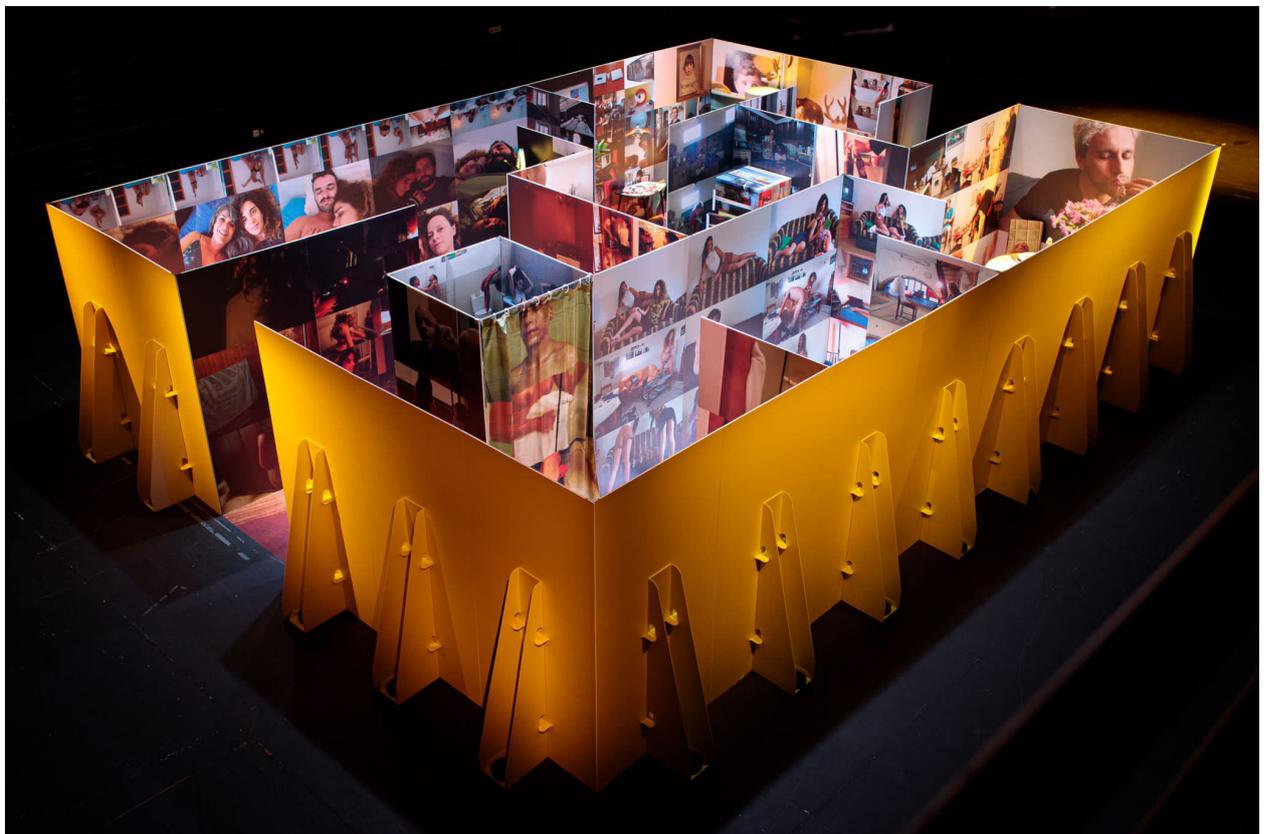


Fig. 2. *Exhibition of Lovers: top view (photo: TBA / Tiago de Jesus Brás)*



Fig. 3. *Exhibition of Lovers*: dining room (photo: TBA / Tiago de Jesus Brás)



Fig. 4. *Exhibition of Lovers*: bedroom (photo: TBA / Tiago de Jesus Brás)

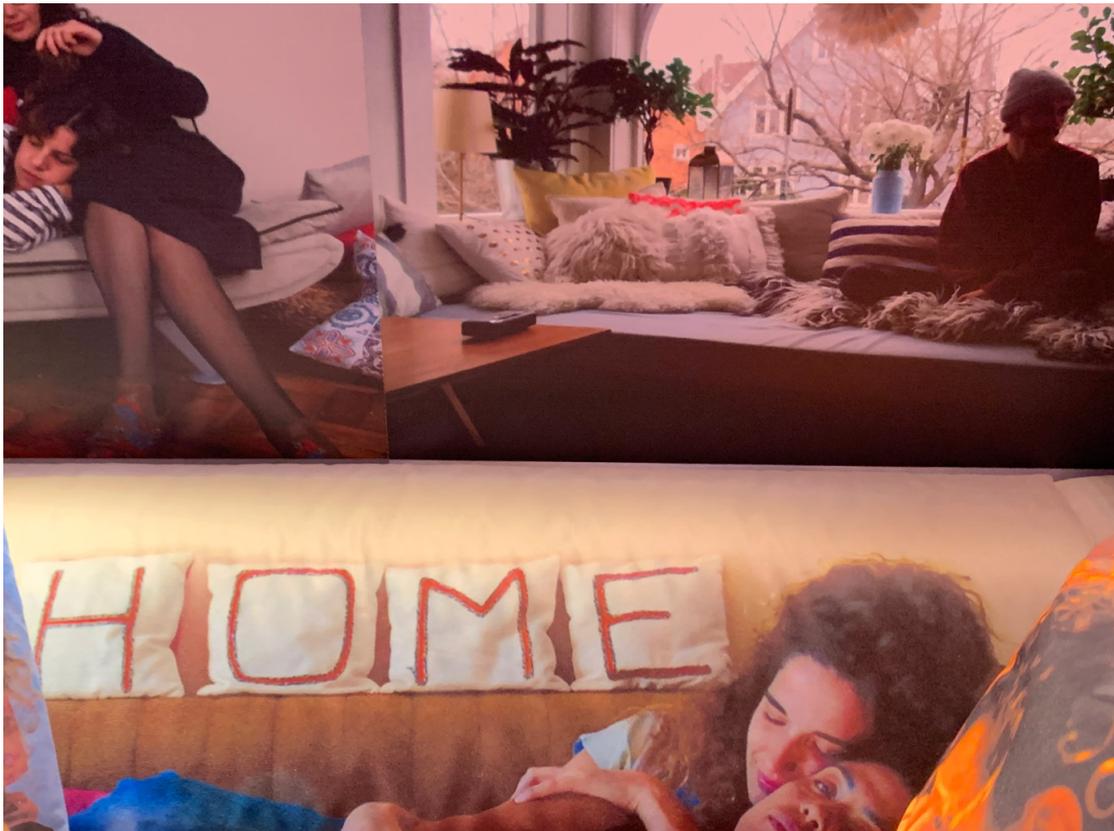


Fig. 5. *Exhibition of Lovers*: living room – back of sofa and wall (photo: TBA / Tiago de Jesus Brás)

### ARTISTS, PRODUCERS AND INSTITUTIONS

Conception: Raquel André

Scenography: José Capela, with the assistance of António Pedro Faria

Light Design: Carin Geada, with the assistance of Ana Carocinho

Music: Odete

Artistic Collaboration: Leonor Buescu

Production: Missanga

Video Communication: Afonso Sousa

Dufusion: Mikado Blue

Co-production: Teatro do Bairro Alto (TBA)

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