

Salette Tavares and Experimental Portuguese Poetry

Rui Torres

Experimental Portuguese Poetry, known as PO.EX,¹ is an avant-garde poetry and therefore rejects classifications and any corresponding integration into canons. Although its characteristics might be unstable, it is currently well documented² and available for consultation.³ Following the path marked out by inventive schools of poetry in the second half of the twentieth century, it forms part of an international movement, largely due to the merits of its adherents, who always possessed the communicative initiative needed to take their work beyond Portugal.

Although certain remote idealisations and creations that could be seen as aesthetic and material forerunners of experimental poetry have been identified and studied (from the seventeenth and eighteenth-century visual texts studied by Ana Hatherly and Melo e Castro to the typographical experiments carried out by futurists and dadaists that lean towards visuality), Portuguese literary experimentalism between the 1960s and 1980s (the period in which Salette Tavares was active in the movement) is specifically characterised by the concepts of information and structure. From the beginning, it was a form of poetry that revealed a semiotic understanding of both text and textuality.

- 1 E. M. de Melo e Castro proposed this acronym for the exhibition PO.EX/80 (Galeria Nacional de Arte Moderna, Lisbon).
- 2 See the book Ana Hatherly, E. M. de Melo e Castro (eds.), *PO.EX: Textos teóricos e documentos da poesia experimental portuguesa*, Lisbon: Moraes Editores, 1981.
- 3 The entire historical output of PO.EX is currently available online at the digital archive of PO.EX (www.po-ex.net). Also available in bookshops and libraries is the book Carlos Mendes de Sousa, Eunice Ribeiro (eds.), *Antologia da poesia experimental portuguesa: anos 60 - anos 80*, Coimbra: Angelus Novus, 2004.

Concurrent with the emergence of concrete poetry in the late 1950s, some of PO.EX's publications are also based on the constellatory spatialisation and arrangement of signifiers, thereby encouraging the superseding of verse as a rhythmic-formal unit (as proposed by the Brazilian group Noigandres in São Paulo). However, iconic relations between writing, sound, images and meaning would also allow this 'group' of authors⁴ to branch out into other fields and bring about a cross-pollination of different materialities. Examples of this branching out include: the use of the potential offered by computers as creative machines in cybernetic and electronic poetry; intersemiotic processes encouraging the confluence and integration of kinetic and performative signs inscribed in a three-dimensional and/or objectual materiality identified in performance, installation and spatial poetry; a focus on the expressivity of the phonetic aspects of language and the vocal processes by which sound is emitted in relation to phonetic and/or sound poetry; and the blurring of the boundaries between literary and visual genres, activating the link between words and visual and plastic elements in the manner proposed by visual poetry.

This range of approaches justifies and lends some consistency to the term PO.EX, which is deliberately wide-ranging and was adopted by Portuguese poets because the term 'experimental poetry' seemed to indicate the context of semiotic hybridization and interdisciplinary convergence that characterises the adopted practices.

From the very start of her career, which now forms part of literary history, Salette Tavares (1922-1994) was one of the most active participants in the work carried out by

4 There is no consensus over the existence of a 'group' or even a 'movement' in the context of Portuguese experimental poetry. For this reason, this term is used here to refer to the group of poets who worked together on collective publications of experimental poetry, specifically those in which Salette Tavares also took part. The writers participating in *Poesia experimental: 1º caderno antológico*, a journal edited by António Aragão and Herberto Helder (Lisbon, 1964), were António Aragão, António Barahona da Fonseca, António Ramos Rosa, E. M. de Melo e Castro, Herberto Helder and Salette Tavares. In addition to the participants listed above, *Poesia experimental: 2º caderno antológico*, edited by António Aragão, Herberto Helder and E. M. de Melo e Castro (Lisbon, 1966), involved the following participants: José-Alberto Marques, Luiza Neto Jorge, Jorge Peixinho, Álvaro Neto (Liberto Cruz) and Ana Hatherly. In addition to the aforementioned authors, *Antologia da poesia concreta em Portugal*, which was edited by José-Alberto Marques and E. M. de Melo e Castro (Lisbon, Assírio & Alvim, 1973), received contributions from Abílio-José Santos, Alberto Pimenta, José Luís Luna, Alexandre O'Neill, Jaime Salazar Sampaio, Luís Pignatelli and Silvestre Pestana. The volume *Poemografias*, edited by Fernando Aguiar and Silvestre Pestana (Lisbon, Ulmeiro, 1985), includes works by the new authors Antero de Alda, António Barros and Fernando Aguiar as well as statements by Jorge Lima Barreto and Egidio Álvaro. Lastly, the recent publication *Antologia da poesia experimental portuguesa: anos 60 - anos 80*, edited by Carlos Mendes Sousa and Eunice Ribeiro (Coimbra: Angelus Novus, 2004), includes works by António Dantas, António Nelos, Armando Macatrão, César Figueiredo, Emerenciano and Gabriel Rui Silva in addition to the authors already mentioned.

this 'group'. Salette Tavares was already a published poet when she arrived at PO.EX and had also carried out pioneering work in the field of performance. In addition, she had made extensive studies in the fields of aesthetics and philosophy, particularly in France and Italy with Mikel Dufrenne and Gillo Dorfles, respectively. She was also knowledgeable about structuralism and information theory applied to the study of works of art.⁵ In harmony with the very activity that it denotes (experimental poetry is a poetic work in progress – a *poiesis*), the route taken by Salette Tavares was one of the factors that allowed her to incorporate a self-reflexive, interventional and even pamphleteering trend into her poetic work, although the last of these elements manifested itself more in the aesthetic domain than in the field of politics *per se* (although the boundary between the two is clearly difficult to locate). In her *Letter to Pedro Sete*, Salette Tavares wrote that '[the] manifestoes are the poetics that accompany poetic production through which critical awareness of this new process is revealed. The poem itself becomes a manifesto'⁶. Although experimental Portuguese poetry did not leave behind a manifesto summarising any theoretical stance that the group might have held,⁷ this stance is indicated by several positional texts. It could even be said that the poems themselves are arranged as a possible form of aesthetic theorization. In this respect also, Salette Tavares puts forward an unusual criticism of academicism.⁸ Theory made into poetry, expressing and staging in its structure the aesthetics that were emerging at the time, the project (the 'work') of Salette Tavares largely involves the conceptualisation of this '*dialectics of*

- 5 Although, for reasons of space, it is not possible to include a detailed biography of the author here, it is worth mentioning that in 1943, when Salette Tavares enrolled on the Historical-Philosophical Sciences course at the University of Lisbon, she was already preparing the initial outlines of happenings with Maria Violante Vieira. In the meantime, she visited museums in several countries and was particularly impressed by a 1964 trip to New York with the poet Frank O'Hara, when she also visited several private art collections. It was at this time, for instance, that she discovered Marcel Duchamp's great collection in Philadelphia. Equally relevant is the fact that she began teaching aesthetics at the Sociedade Nacional de Belas Artes in 1965, having published the corresponding lessons without illustrations in the journal *Bro-téria*. A book containing the complete collection of these same lessons, entitled *A Dialéctica das Formas*, was put together in 1972 but never published.
- 6 Salette Tavares, *Obra Poética 1957-1971*, Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda, 1992, p. 169.
- 7 Mention has been made of a text written by António Ramos Rosa which Salette Tavares rejected but which was lost ('Textos teóricos', 169-170).
- 8 As José-Alberto Marques said of PO.EX, 'the texts / objects / interventions themselves possessed an implicit theoretical component with which (linguistic) analytical discourse could not compete' ('O tempo não tem espaço', 89).

forms' that she studied: the possibility of artistic form being transformed and updated in its own creative potentiality (virtuality).⁹

Moreover, Salette Tavares' poetic experience quite naturally brought her work closer to experimentalism, above all through the wordplay (the awareness of the text) and humour (the relationship with society) that unites and characterises it. Countering the rigidity and formal seriousness of all poetics, Salette Tavares always responded with implacable and subtle irony. Her varied interests, – ranging from art to contemporary music – also spilled over into that open space of graphic and spatial production that now constitutes her legacy (her 'work'). According to Picchio, 'Salette Tavares' true vocation was poetry: poetry as an aesthetic practice, as creation – the discovery of poetic forms that are resistant to contingency'¹⁰. In a time of convergences and interdisciplinarity, experimental poetry in general and the work of Salette Tavares in particular have become essential compasses, guiding new readers of the digital generation along their liquid experience, once again resisting the contingency of the banal.

Still, although her poetry has been published in dozens of Portuguese and international anthologies and her visual poetry have been exhibited in museums in several countries, Salette Tavares' work has essentially been neglected.¹¹

To simplify matters, Tavares' poetry can be divided into two distinct modes of production: predominantly verbal works that lean towards a poetics of meaning and are written in accordance with traditional forms of verse and rhyme while subtly and intelligently anticipating the dissolving of these same forms or at least their expansion into

9 Besides the studies that she made of information theory, structuralism and aesthetics, Salette Tavares also stood out for the interest and concern that she showed for Portuguese historical heritage, particularly the Romantic Gardens of Sintra. She also studied the work of Vieira da Silva, Paula Rego, Menez, José de Guimarães, Esmeraldo and Pancho Guedes.

10 Luciana Stegagno Picchio, «Brin-cadeiras para Salette Tavares», Prefácio, Salette Tavares, *Obra Poética 1957-1971*, Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda, 1992, p. 10.

11 Mention should be made of the reviews of *Lex Icon* and *Obra Poética* by the poets António Ramos Rosa and E. M. de Melo e Castro, respectively, as well as the interest shown by Ana Hatherly in the author's work. Two articles have also been written by friends of Salette Tavares: Gillo Dorfles' preface to the Italian edition of *Lex Icon* (Milan: Vanni Scheiwiller, 1977), which was translated and reproduced in *Obra Poética*, and a preface written in 1990 by Luciana Stegagno Picchio for publication in the same *Obra*, a piece entitled 'Brin-cadeiras para Salette Tavares'. The remaining articles about her were published only after her death. One of these few articles, 'Salette Tavares e a poesia portuguesa de vanguarda', by Irina Bajini, was published in the journal *Colóquio-Letras* in 1994. The author of this article published parts of her doctoral thesis ('Salette Tavares e a Poerática da Poesia Experimental Portuguesa', University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002) in various articles and national and international journals, which can be consulted at PO.EX's digital archive (www.po-ex.net).

other systems of representation;¹² and visual production, which is closer to her concern for the signifier as well as for the expressiveness and materialities of the objects on which it is (re-)inscribed, where, in this sense, it becomes a full plane of expression that is open in its purport and can be formalised in the various substances of which it is composed.

To speak of Salette Tavares' relationship with Portuguese Experimental Poetry is to speak of this second category – visual production – since her spatial, graphic and performance poetry is the most visible facet of her participation in the publications associated with PO.EX.

In this respect, we will consider here the collective publications and exhibitions produced by the group of poets who worked under the aegis of experimental poetry, identifying the contributions made by Salette Tavares and excluding from our references those magazines, activities and interventions in which she did not take part.

Published in 1964 and edited by António Aragão and Herberto Helder, the first issue of the journal *Poesia Experimental*¹³ was the collective publication that sparked off PO.EX. In addition to the editors' background works and texts, it includes works by António Barahona da Fonseca, António Ramos Rosa, E. M. de Melo e Castro and Salette Tavares. Other texts were also published by Luís de Camões, Ângelo de Lima, Mário Cesariny de Vasconcelos, Emilio Villa and Quirinus Kuhlmann under the name 'Anthology'.

Salette Tavares' contribution includes typeset poems such as *Aranha*, *Os efes*, *Quel Air Clair*, *O menino Ivo*, *Mer de lyriques*, *Les murmures des mures mûres*, *Falo* and the kine-tophonic works *Taki Taki* and *Ri M Ri Ri*. This notebook of Tavares', ironically entitled *Brin Cadeiras*¹⁴, already made reference to the reflexive ability of poems and, in this case, required knowledge of Abraham Moles' ideas on aesthetic and semantic information (among other things), without which, as Tavares states, 'the experiments that I carried out, which aim to take a poetic-semantic or purely aesthetic approach with a very strict

12 If only her published work is considered, this category would include: *Espelho Cego*, Lisbon: Ática, 1957; *Concerto em Mi Maior para Clarinete e Bateria*, Lisbon: s.n., 1964; *14563 Letras de Pedro Sete*, Lisbon: Livraria Fomento de Cultura, 1965; *Quadrada*, Lisbon: Moraes, 1967; *Lex Icon*, Lisbon: Moraes, 1971; *Obra Poética 1957-1971*, Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda, 1992.

13 Also known as 'Notebooks of Experimental Poetry', in reference to all of the contributions that were reproduced in individual notebooks. In the catalogue of the Porbase – Biblioteca Nacional, they appear as *Poesia experimental: 1º caderno antológico* and *Poesia experimental: 2º caderno antológico*.

14 Translator's note: 'Brincadeiras' (games/jokes) is split in two to give 'brin' + 'cadeiras' (chairs).

delimitation of repertoires of symbols, cannot be properly understood¹⁵. In these poems, semantic work is abandoned at the expense of aesthetic merit since she is chiefly interested in questions of sound. In fact, the poem *Os efes* inspired the author to write a theoretical text that was published in the *Antologia da Poesia Concreta em Portugal* (eds. Melo e Castro and José-Alberto Marques). This text used 'irony against the classic and ridiculous idea of dividing a work of art into form and content'¹⁶. *Aranha*, which was originally drawn with a fine-nibbed pen, reflecting her taste for handwriting, was also published in this notebook, although, as the author pointed out, the version that appeared was an inferior one¹⁷. In *Les murmures des murs müres*, *Quel Air Clair / Éclairer l'air* and *Mer de lyriques*, the poet produces creative plays on words in which new relations of meaning are proposed at the level of their acoustic and visual image.

The cold critical reception earned by these *Cadernos* can partly be explained by the socio-political context of Portugal in 1964: the country was in the grip of censors working under a fascist dictatorship, a general climate of creative stagnation prevailed, and innovation was rejected as a result of this repressive environment.

Another activity carried out by the experimental poetry group in which Salette Tavares actively participated was the collective exhibition held at the Galeria Divulgação under the title *Visopoemas*. Opening on 6 January 1965, it featured contributions from the central group of poets who appeared in the first volume of *Cadernos antológicos da Poesia Experimental* and included visual and spatial poems as well as objects, paintings and posters that highlighted these artists' interest in discursive intermediality. Salette Tavares' poems found their ideal home in this exhibitivite and performative space. Interpreted (and travestied) in wire, sheeting, pottery and paper, they are poem-objects and object-poems.

The day after the opening of this exhibition, a happening took place that is equally relevant to understanding the importance of Salette Tavares in the context of Portuguese experimental poetry. Salette Tavares came from a cultural (and family) background marked by gatherings of musicians and avant-garde painters in which performances and events sometimes spontaneously broke out in true dada style. The very title of this happening – *Concerto e Audição Pictórica* – highlights the intersecting of language

15 Salette Tavares, «Teoria da Informação e Abraham A. Moles», *Brotéria*, Lisbon, Vol. LXXXIV – (Fev. 1967), p. 169.

16 Salette Tavares, «Transcrição da Carta de Salette Tavares para Ana Hatherly», *Salette Tavares. Poesia Gráfica*, Lisbon: Casa Fernando Pessoa, 1995, p.17.

17 *Ibidem*.

es whose boundaries it aimed to break down in an integrating and synaesthetical sense similar to that proposed by concrete poetry, starting with James Joyce: verbi-voco-visual(ity). Salette Tavares' contribution, her *Ode à Crítica*,¹⁸ was one of the most striking performances at the event, reinforcing the role played by humour in the context of her artistic work. According to Tavares, this 'Concerto' was a 'scandal for many fools'¹⁹. Ana Hatherly, who wrote music criticism for the literary supplement of the *Diário Popular*, explained in more humorous terms that the 'Concerto was intended to cause a sensation and a stir and it fully achieved its aims'²⁰.

Supplementing the contributions made by the musicians Jorge Peixinho and Mário Falcão, Salette Tavares' *Ária à crítica* is, as the programme indicates, another of the author's jokes (a 'gibe', she would say the following year). It would be performed only if 'there were encores'. This *Ode à Cri... cri... cri... tica... da nossa terra*²¹ makes ironic reference in its title to the academic discourse of criticism, using onomatopoeia to reiterate the chant of those who speak a great deal but say little.

The second issue of *Poesia experimental*, published in 1966, saw Ernesto de Melo e Castro join the team of editors alongside Aragão and Helder (with a cover designed by Ilídio Ribeiro and a text by Lewis Carroll on the back cover) and featured experimental poems by the editors as well as by José-Alberto Marques, Luiza Neto Jorge, Salette Tavares, António Barahona da Fonseca, Álvaro Neto and Ana Hatherly. In addition, it included the off-print 'Music and Notation' by Jorge Peixinho, as well as contributions from the international guests Henri Chopin, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Mike Weaver, Pedro Xisto, Pierre Garnier, Haroldo de Campos, Emilio Villa and Edgard Braga.

Although some authors, particularly Salette Tavares, complained about the poor graphical quality of the reproductions of their poems in these journals, these *Cadernos* currently constitute important examples of a prolific process of graphic-visual exploration to which Salette Tavares contributed.

18 Also referred to as *Ária à Crítica* or as *Ária à Cri cri cri tica* (a title that reveals the sense of humour with which the poet ironically referred to the state of Portuguese literary criticism).

19 Salette Tavares, «Transcrição da Carta de Salette Tavares para Ana Hatherly», *Salette Tavares. Poesia Gráfica*, Lisbon: Casa Fernando Pessoa, 1995, p. 18.

20 Ana Hatherly, E. M. de Melo e Castro (eds.), *Po.Ex: Textos teóricos e documentos da poesia experimental portuguesa*, Lisbon: Moraes, 1981, p. 98.

21 Translator's note: *Ode to the cri... cri... cri... tics of our country*.

In the case of Tavares' contribution, which was entitled *Brincade iras / Brincade irras / B irras*²² in response to those who did not like 'brin cadeira' in the first notebook, an aleatory poem entitled *Parlapatisse* was also included in addition to *poemas em -al, Algar ismos Alfinete* and *Álvaro Alberto*.

The poem *Parlapatisse* is an example of a work put together according to combinatory and aleatory laws. In this respect, it is 'a bridge between the baroque of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the neo-baroque of today', as Melo e Castro explains²³. The poem's subtitle is another of Tavares' many, very interesting, creative errors ('irrar' instead of 'errar', 'sigarro' instead of 'cigarro', 'fexar' instead of 'fechar', etc). In this case, she writes 'composição aliatória'^{24,25} thereby accentuating the sound value of the 'i'. Consisting of forty circles containing variations of the syllables that make up the five-syllable word 'par-la-pa-ti-sse', it is accompanied by an 'algorithm [algorithmic] scheme' for reading which proposes different combinations of numbers ranging from 1 to 5 and from 5 to 1, respectively.

As Tavares explained, *Algar ismos Alfinete* was in turn a 'political gibe which, lately, I have always placed upside-down as the cunning censors would turn the pages backwards but did not remember to turn them upside down when reading crazy poems'²⁶.

Tavares' contribution is also supplemented by another of the author's peculiar jokes. It is a drawing of two loudspeakers that emit the sound (onomatopoeia) of a car beeping its horn (pó-pó) and are framed in a biblical text that is recontextualised and transferred by humour to the era of mechanisation: 'Remember, man, that you are / [pó-pó]²⁷ / and / unto / [pó-pó] / you will return'. The sound 'pó' is also subjected to a play on words that transforms it into 'POP': 'POPOP'.

These founding moments in the development of Portuguese experimentalism found continuity in the retrospective exhibitions PO-EX/80 (Galeria Nacional de Arte Moderna, Lisbon) and PO-EX/99 (Museu de Serralves, Porto) as well as in the

22 Translator's note: *Brincadeira* can be translated as 'play' and the title could approximately be translated as 'Play anger / play damn! / T antrums!':

23 E. M. Melo e Castro, «Visões do Espelho Cego», *Jornal de Letras*, Lisbon, 27 April 1993, p. 9.

24 Translator's note: this is a misspelling of 'aleatório' [aleatory].

25 *Parlapatisse* is published in the *Cadernos antológicos* as a 'composição aliatória' and in *Antologia da Poesia Concreta em Portugal* as a 'composição alieatória'.

26 Salette Tavares, «Transcrição da Carta de Salette Tavares para Ana Hatherly», *Salette Tavares. Poesia Gráfica*, Lisbon: Casa Fernando Pessoa, 1995, p.18.

27 Translator's note: 'pó' is the Portuguese word for dust. Also, 'pó-pó' is both the sound produced by a car's horn and a children's word for car.

various itinerant exhibitions featuring the respective collections. Besides enabling new authors to appear, these exhibitions allowed several authors to update and even revisit their works by approaching them in new ways.

However, in the ten years following the poems that were published in the two *Cadernos* and exhibited at *Visopoemas*, Salette Tavares mainly devoted herself to writing the book *Dialéctica das Formas* and the poetry books *O fazer da mão* and *Lex Icon*, only returning to visual and spatial poems for the solo exhibition *Brincar*. Later, the collective volume *Poemografias* (eds. Fernando Aguiar and Silvestre Pestana) appeared as a way of revisiting and especially renewing Portuguese experimentalism.

Salette Tavares' contribution to *Poemografias* consisted of a theoretical text and a poem that dealt with the code of language at its most basic level: the alphabet as a phonetic and visual entity. The title given to this contribution – 'Brincando brincando'²⁸ – is once again ironic, entangling the serious with the humorous. The theoretical text, which was written in Spanish but had a Portuguese title, ('Texto teórico sobre as perspectivas da poesia visual para os anos oitenta'²⁹) is followed by the aforementioned poem *Alfabeto*. Once again linking together theorisation and poetic practice, Salette Tavares notes in the theoretical text that, at a certain point, people begin to read the alphabet in a different way from that which Tavares learnt.³⁰ This change that she notes corresponds to a change of mentality and Tavares appears not so much to want to criticise it as to comment on it ironically. Speaking to an imaginary referent whom she calls Señora Poesia Visiva, she recalls a time when she could sing the Portuguese alphabet, lamenting that no one understands her anymore: 'By singing I taught a nephew to say 'éfe' and 'vê' but he can't distinguish between them now because he reads 'fê' and 'vê' and nothing at all can be understood'. This sort of synaesthesia between visuality and orality that is so important for Salette Tavares is finally materialised in the poem *Alfabeto*, in which she ironizes about the materiality of the letter. This visual alphabet is drawn in print with outlines that make the letters three-dimensional. Incorporated into a musical 'stave', they can also be sung in the different ways mentioned in the 'theoretical text'.

Salette Tavares' final contribution to the collective publications of Portuguese experimental poetry was her 'curriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiculum vitae', which also appeared in *Poemo-*

28 Translator's note: 'Playing playing'.

29 Translator's note: 'Theoretical text on the future of visual poetry for the nineteen-eighties'.

30 The consonants 'f', 'l', 'm', 'n' and 'r', which Tavares reads as 'éfe', 'éle', 'éme', 'éne' and 'ére', are read in a new way: 'fê', 'lê', 'mê', 'nê' and 'rê', respectively.

grafias. This text, which Stegagno Picchio saw as being both ironic and pained, is a good example of the poet's characteristic sense of humour. In it, Picchio identified a 'cry of protest against the bureaucracy of *curricula vitae*'³¹ in the iteration of the stressed syllable.

A key work in the context of PO.EX – may it live and be relived now at the exhibition held by the Modern Art Centre of the Gulbenkian – Salette Tavares' visual, graphic and spatial poetry is on the move. Long may it live!

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31 Luciana Stegagno Picchio, «Brin-cadeiras para Salette Tavares», Prefácio, Salette Tavares, *Obra Poética 1957-1971*, Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda, 1992, p. 8.

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