INSPIRING PLANTS, INSPIRED PLANTS

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Abstract

Casa da Cerca is a Contemporary Art Centre based in Almada, with an artistic project centered on the dissemination of contemporary art, mainly on the study of drawing. Through the Botanical Garden – Chão das Artes, a unique project in Europe and, as far as we know, in the world, whose specificity is having a collection of plants whose components are raw materials for the plastic arts, Casa da Cerca manages to establish a close relationship between art and science.

Charcoal made of the vine branches, oak’s wood, walnut tree ink, oil of poppies and paper made of cotton are some of the uses we find among the hundreds of plants in this collection. The relationship that the Art Centre establishes in its artistic and botanical curatorial programme is close and constant, both by curating theme exhibitions in which the Garden invades the exhibition rooms, and by developing exhibition projects in the Garden, in close relationship with the art programme. Not having an art collection of its own, Casa da Cerca has, nonetheless, a live collection - the plants of the Botanical Garden. Working with it, and working around “Inspiration” as this year’s theme, we developed a project addressing this particular kind of “museum”: ”Plants inspiring, inspired plants”.

This educational, creative and curatorial project crossed scientific knowledge with artistic experience, combining art schools and the Contemporary Art Centre. The project meant to challenge the educational community to scientifically, historically and creatively approach the plants to create (new) art objects. Building from a scientific (with botanical, ethno botanical and artistic content) and documental exhibition, groups of various arts education levels studied and created a wide range of ceramic plants that, while still inspired by those depicted in the documental exhibition and on the living specimen blooming in the garden beds, produced fantastic new species, that now stand with the natural plants and enrich the whole curatorial project.
Some thoughts on the experiment

This project was born of two dreams: the first was having a "garden of intentions", i.e. using make believe plants to stand for the real ones, when the latter are not available, due to the plants lifecycles. Such objects would solve a practical problem, keeping the garden beautiful yet informative and educational. In other words, we wanted an equivalent to the presence of photography in a museum when an original artwork is removed for restoration.

In the second case, it gave voice to an old desire of working with artistic schools. We wished to provide schools a possibility of using Casa da Cerca and especially its garden as a classroom, aiming to address a gap in formal education, particularly at the artistic level: the connection between schools and cultural institutions.

To make it happen, we approached six schools with a ceramics department and invited them to participate. We could, indeed, have extended the project to other schools, but we wanted to observe an educational and artistic experimental approach to future artists and creators. In fact, we did not merely mean to raise awareness of art, but to help students reflect and create. From these six schools, three decided to accept the challenge – a fine arts college and two secondary schools.

Initially, students made a group visit to our Botanical Garden, focusing on the Greenhouse, where such exhibition projects take place, and where their future artworks would be, along with the real life plants. The students investigated their chosen plant (sunflower, rose, pansy, poppy, corn and carnation) and then worked to create site-specific artistic plants to be placed alongside the natural ones.

The actual work was done in the school premises, following a methodology defined by each institution. The final work, set in place by the students themselves, will be on exhibit until the end of 2016.

This experiment has enabled us to achieve two fundamental goals:
1) As for the students, by providing them an experience of designing and organizing an exhibition;
2) As for the public of the Casa da Cerca, it allows the general visitor to have a wider and clearer understanding of the garden’s concept, its inner link between art and science.

We believe that this will be a major first step in our engagement with art schools. Although a pilot project, it is meant to be continued. Naturally, it will suffer some adaptations, responding to the annual theme of Casa da Cerca and also to the pedagogical needs of the schools involved.
Such projects, with their inter-relational nature, are a great possibility to rethinking the museum today. They provide the educational community an informal yet scientifically rigorous education tool. Similar ventures allow students and teachers to use the art center as a laboratory and display cabinet.

This dialogue mode garants a win/win situation. Everybody gains from such experiments, even those not directly involved, such as the general public. Indeed, the regular visitor benefits from the outcome, as it provides a more comprehensive way of enjoying and understanding our scientific and artistic project.