

Galeria **Francisco Fino**

João Penalva

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João Penalva

The Exhibition Experience and the Mechanics of Suggestion – An Itinerary

Bruno Marchand

The success [of João Penalva] comes from a careful articulation of presences and absences, stimuli and omissions, references and allusions; its unity depends closely on the precise calculation of the distance between fragments, the exact measure of their contamination, and the sensitive negotiation of their respective weights within the narrative structure. No detail [is] left to chance, except those that belong to it inherently and participate in the reactive game in which the artist invests and whose rules he has determined.

If there were any doubts about the complexity of exhibition systems, the almost pornographic description that Bruce W. Ferguson provides of the mechanics underlying them would quickly dispel them. In fact, there is no such thing as an innocent exhibition. Every exhibition act is an elaborate exercise in induction, whose success largely depends, in most cases, on its ability to become completely transparent to the viewer's eyes. Resulting from a sharp critical sense towards many of the instances involved in curating an exhibition, Ferguson's enumeration reveals how these are prone to manipulation that serves, on one hand, the construction of a certain internal dynamic—the focus or the underlying theme of an exhibition—and, on the other, the stabilization and maintenance of a cultural model deeply rooted in the discursive economy of institutions and their policies.

The history of artists engaging in the manipulation of exhibition mechanisms that shape and support the exhibitions we visit is a long one. Beyond the contributions of figures like Abraham van der Doort, El Lissitzky, or Marcel Duchamp to the field of curatorial practice as we understand it today, it is within proposals as distinct as those advanced by the Dada movement, Minimalism, Conceptual Art, Happening, or Institutional Critique that the exhibition act, in all its dimensions, is understood as an object in itself and, consequently, capable of being transformed into a fully-fledged artistic medium. For the past two decades, João Penalva (Lisbon, 1949) has given particular attention to the exhibition experience, its mechanisms, and the devices that sustain it. Some of the works he has produced during this period appropriate the exhibition apparatus to establish contexts where narratives are suggested, whose effectiveness depends as much on the spectator's willingness or complicity with what is presented to them as on their autonomy and ability to take responsibility for guiding their own experience.

A possible genealogy of this aspect of João Penalva's work takes us back to 1990, when the artist presented a series of paintings in an exhibition at the Centro de Arte Moderna of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon. Having focused his entire production on painting since completing his studies at Chelsea School of Art in the early 1980s, the works he developed throughout that decade functioned as a repository of a wide variety of expressions and tendencies in modern painting history. In his compositions, figurative and abstract elements coexisted without hesitation, all filtered through a deliberately anti-narrative and anti-symbolic approach to painting¹, stemming from the influence that the American choreographer Merce Cunningham exerted on João Penalva's artistic program.

Indeed, the objectivity, rationality, and concrete status he sought for his paintings were rooted in the seminal influence of Cunningham's work, which had left a lasting mark during Penalva's years as a professional dancer²:

"As you know, after classical ballet, I studied Cunningham technique, and today I would say that this rational system came to define the rest of my life as an artist. For Cunningham, dance is simply movement in space and time, and nothing more. There is no narrative, no plot, but that does not mean there is no emotion—it is there, in the dancers doing what they do: dance; and in what exists between the spectator and the performer."³

The influence of Cunningham's program on João Penalva's work was not merely tutelary. Its concrete effects could be observed in how the artist employed a wide range of technical devices and combined disparate elements—decorative motifs, geometric patterns, stylizations of objects, gestural markings, abstract surfaces, or calligraphic motifs—

without compromising a deliberate strategy of contrast and disjunction. Through this method, he consciously leveled the signs that converged in his paintings, transforming pictorial space into a field free from material, formal, and perceptual hierarchies. As Pedro Lapa noted in an important text on the artist, in these works, pictorial signs are understood "not as independent units but as elements within a system that fosters dialogues between distinct paintings or even between different images within the same painting"⁴.

In this exhibition—which was exemplary in revealing João Penalva's pictorial strategies and programmatic choices—one work stood out for the way it contrasted with the others. Titled *Coleccionador* (1990), it took the form of a panel composed of 14 canvases of different formats, grouped and overlapped to form an irregular shape, both in its two-dimensional and three-dimensional expression. Uniformly painted in a chocolate-brown tone, without any other inscriptions on their surfaces, the only elements that disrupted the stability of this composite monochrome were small white and red paint marks indicating the locations of the metal plates that joined the canvases, ultimately providing the structure and stability of the entire composition.

A dual movement seemed to emerge from this work: on one hand, the reduction of João Penalva's pictorial program to a single color and identical surface treatment across all 14 canvases emphasized the idea that, once integrated into a collection, disparate elements undergo an erosion of their individual identity in favor of the collective identity they now form⁵. On the other hand, the visible presence of the joining plates directed the viewer's attention to the artificial nature of the gesture that forces these elements to coexist, as well as to the gaps between them—precisely the space where the foundational identity of any collection takes shape.

The contrast between *Coleccionador* and the other works in this exhibition became even more pronounced due to the pictorial economy that characterized it. Unlike the rest, this piece was marked by an apparent muteness, an almost total absence of references, seeming to negate any (potential) declarative function. The discomfort or perplexity that this type of work still provokes stems from a deeply ingrained expectation that envisions the artistic experience as a phenomenon free from any projective maneuvering—an issue that was particularly relevant in another exhibition, this time held at Galeria Atlântica in Porto in 1993.

Titled *7 Pinturas* (7 Paintings), this exhibition consisted of a large set of works presenting variations of the famous Rorschach inkblot test⁶. Responding to a challenge posed by the artist, a group of people—including curator Andrew Renton and artists Paula Rego and Ana Jotta—produced versions of these inkblots, which were displayed alongside the ten original ones used in the psychological test and seven additional ones created by João Penalva himself. While the other inkblots were exhibited in the gallery space, Penalva's seven paintings were represented solely through black-and-white photographs, accompanied by a label stating that the works had been removed from the exhibition and that visitors seeking further information should go to Galeria Nasoni, located across the street.

For those who followed this unexpected suggestion, the gallery staff would inform them that the paintings were accessible on another floor of the gallery, where visitors would find them surrounded by the photographic equipment used to reproduce them.

Among the multiple issues raised by *7 Pinturas*, two stood out clearly: first, the interpretative and projective operations prompted by the



Detail of *Moth-eaten pair of trousers. Never used.*, João Penalva, 2010

viewer's confrontation with explicitly ambiguous visual structures; and second, the themes of chance inherent in the production of the inkblots, the status of documentation, the proactivity required from visitors in responding to the challenges presented, the dilution and fragmentation of authorship, and even the transformation of a significant part of the artistic intervention into a curatorial practice. By breaking away from the pictorial construction strategies that had occupied him in the previous decade, this exhibition was already symptomatic of the profound shifts that João Penalva's work would undergo in the years to come.

Later that same year, João Penalva participated in the II Jornadas de Arte Contemporânea (2nd Contemporary Art Symposium) in Porto. For this event, he was given space in the city's old Customs House—a vast warehouse filled with years of bureaucratic archives—where he developed the works *Arquivos* (Archives) and *Café*.

This marked the first time João Penalva applied strategies that drew from the specificity and history of a place to develop an extraordinarily diverse set of interventions that supported or suggested narratives—perhaps the greatest departure from the pictorial program he had previously employed.

In *Arquivos*, the archives themselves (another type of collection) became the raw material for a work that largely consisted of the redistribution of furniture and countless piles of documents and forms that filled the space. Subtly punctuated by the introduction of discreet elements suggesting recent human activity—such as a basin with water and a towel—this intervention disrupted the heavy silence of a dead archive with fleeting traces of human presence, a subtle manifestation of an ongoing story with no clear beginning, purpose, or end.

By restricting movement and blocking access to certain areas, the situation constructed by the artist forced the viewer to experience the installation from a calculated distance, preventing full spatial engagement and reducing the encounter to a purely visual experience—as if, through this restriction, the space became an image of itself. This idea was reinforced by the presence of a book at the entrance to the installation, containing a visual essay composed of black-and-white photographs capturing details and views of the space. Though this was not the first time João Penalva had used photography in his work, it was certainly the first instance in which photography assumed a decisive role in his practice as a vehicle for artistic creation.

Meanwhile, *Café* took the form of a habitable space. Extending the existing café inside the Customs House into an adjacent corridor, the installation mimicked that space by enlarging its original tables and counter. Added to this were framed posters related to the II Jornadas de Arte Contemporânea and *A Pasta de Walter Benjamin*⁷, alongside various documents, photographs, emblems, playing cards, and other objects that seemed to reference the history of the building's use. Additionally, a textual description of the materials used in the construction of this work (printed in adhesive vinyl on the wall) and a television displaying a live feed of the clock on the building's façade (albeit with a slight delay) were also present⁸.

A clear result of thorough research conducted by the artist, the memorabilia assembled in *Café* proclaimed its own status as a selection among a vast range of possibilities left unseen. At first glance, these objects functioned as illustrative instances of a suggested but ultimately hidden narrative. The deliberate juxtapositions forced by the artist—placing historical documents alongside emblems—created a collision between the supposed evidentiary quality of the former

and the allegorical nature of the latter, establishing a dialectic that oscillated between these two poles.

At this point, it is worth noting how the presence of a glass of water placed on a shelf unusually high above eye level strongly referenced the famous 1973 work by British artist Michael Craig-Martin, *An Oak Tree*.

In fact, rather than a mere resemblance, this piece was an exact replica of Craig-Martin's work—executed with the artist's consent to ensure absolute accuracy—except for the deliberate omission of one key element. In the original version of *An Oak Tree*, alongside the glass and shelf, there is a text presented in dialogue form, in which an argument is developed to expose the belief system that underpins any artistic experience⁹.

Based on the concept of transubstantiation—the phenomenon by which one body is perceived as another (such as the Eucharist, where the host is understood as the body of Christ, or in this case, a glass of water perceived as an oak tree)—this reference to Craig-Martin's piece discreetly introduced the mechanism of citation as a tool for generating meaning in João Penalva's intervention. Moreover, it established a fundamental doubt regarding the volatile and arbitrary nature of truth, objectivity, and representation when framed within artistic processes¹⁰.

The issues explored in *Arquivos* and *Café*, along with the methods the artist employed to investigate them, marked a definitive turning point in his practice. Although he did not abandon painting entirely, from 1993 onwards, João Penalva's work expanded to incorporate an increasingly broad range of media (including photography, video, and the written word) and diversified processual strategies aimed at creating narrative-driven situations. His methodology also came to involve

extensive research phases, during which he gathered documents, memories, testimonies, stories, and other materials that outlined a vast informal universe. Within this framework, João Penalva intervened by establishing connections, provoking new interpretations, and introducing additional elements.

These efforts often culminated in elaborate installations where various media interacted and influenced one another, creating an ambiguous space between reality and fiction.

In *The Ormsson Collection* (A Coleção Ormsson), an exhibition presented by João Penalva at the Pavilhão Branco of the Museu da Cidade in Lisbon in 1997, these strategies were applied on an unprecedented scale.

Right at the beginning of the exhibition, a text displayed in the first room introduced the viewer to the biographical note of the collector referenced in the title—Loftur Ormsson, an Icelander—which read:

“A collector since the age of 17, his collection eventually comprised, according to his own accounts, 987 objects, spanning crafts, painting, sculpture, architectural and engineering drawings, manuscripts, photographs, books, furniture, etc. As a collector, Loftur Ormsson distinguished himself from others by the peculiarity of his collecting purpose: the desire to find, for each acquired object, its pair.”

As visitors moved through the exhibition, they encountered various such pairs, chosen and arranged by João Penalva throughout the space. The only common feature among these objects was that one or both had been acquired in Portugal. These pairs included a set of 16th-century Portuguese water wheels and a sculptural piece by Pedro Cabrita Reis; an 18th-century Flemish engraving depicting a view of

Lisbon during the 1755 earthquake and a painting by Harold Ripplingham portraying Alfred Wegener, the first proponent of the theory of continental drift; or a typewritten page by Hanne Darboven alongside a paper wrapper with an arithmetic sum written on its surface, attributed to a local grocer, D. Dolores.

Since the logic behind Ormsson's selection of these pairs was never revealed, any instructive or didactic ambition was deliberately avoided, leaving the viewer alone with the implicit invitation to develop purely subjective associations between the displayed objects.

For most visitors, unless they reached the end of the exhibition—whose layout had been strategically defined by João Penalva—the experience would unfold according to what was presented to them. Under the institutional authority of the Museu da Cidade, these were the objects collected by the mysterious Loftur Ormsson, and João Penalva's role appeared to be limited to carefully presenting these pieces and precisely orchestrating the micronarratives that emerged from them. A task that, in essence, seemed curatorial.

Only at the end of the visit, and through the possible reading of the exhibition's artwork list—also available in the space—could the visitor realize that the pieces actually originated from a wide range of private and institutional collections. This revelation indicated that the entire structure upon which the exhibition was built—Ormsson, his collection, and the logic of the pairings—was purely fictional.

Of course, for this realization to take place, visitors not only had to read the list of works but also accept it as truthful over all the other information provided. More than that, they had to recognize how all the elements supporting the exhibition's construction—from its title to

the wall texts, down to the pre-defined path for the viewer—had been manipulated by the artist solely to sustain a double fiction: the fiction of the Ormsson collection and the fiction of curatorial practice itself. That this work could “reinsert doubt where the institution functions as a guarantor of certainty”¹¹ would likely be an effect realized only later; just as the resolution of an artistic experience, lived in two distinct moments—the moment of fiction and the moment of discovering the fiction—would also be deferred.

¹ Regarding the scope of this conception, see “João Penalva in conversation with Ruth Rosengarten,” in José Sommer Ribeiro et al., João Penalva, exhibition catalog, Lisbon: Centro de Arte Moderna – Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1990, p. n.

² In this context, special mention should be made of João Penalva's collaboration with the companies of Pina Bausch and Gerhard Bohner, as well as his partnership with choreographer Jean Pomares, in whose activities he took on roles such as set designer, costume designer, and wardrobe supervisor.

³ João Penalva, “Dialogue between João Fernandes and João Penalva,” in João Penalva, exhibition catalog, Porto: Fundação de Serralves, 2005, p. 12.

⁴ Pedro Lapa, “João Penalva, repetition against the law,” in João Penalva, Lisbon: Ministério da Cultura – Instituto de Arte Contemporânea, 2001, pp. 24-25.

⁵ Regarding the issues surrounding the practice of collecting, it is recommended to consult Susan Pearce, *On Collecting – An Investigation Into Collecting in the European Tradition*, London/New York: Routledge, 1995, and Joseph Alsop, *The Rare Art Traditions – The History of Art Collecting and its Linked Phenomena Wherever These Have Appeared*, New York: Princeton University Press, Harper & Row Publishers, 1982.

⁶ The Rorschach inkblots are the basis of the projective test developed by Hermann Rorschach in the early 20th century, whose purpose is to map the individual's psychological dynamics through the analysis of their responses when confronted with the ambiguous nature of the inkblots. More information at www.rorschach.com.

⁷ Exhibition curated by Andrew Renton, presented at the Fábrica de Moagens Harmonia, in Porto.

⁸ For a detailed description of the components of this installation, see Pedro Lapa, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 50-61.

⁹ “I considered that in An Oak Tree I had deconstructed the artwork in such a way as to reveal its most basic and essential element: belief; that is, the artist's conviction in their ability to speak and the viewer's willingness to accept what they have to say. In other words, belief is at the foundation of all our art experience [...]” Michael Craig-Martin, *Landscapes*, exhibition catalog, Dublin: Douglas Hyde Gallery, 2001, pp. 19-20.

¹⁰ In this regard, it is worth adding that one of the most extreme and provocative examples of this strategy can be found in the famous portrait of the gallerist Iris Clert, created in 1961 by Robert Rauschenberg – another important reference for João Penalva – which consisted of a telegram containing the text “This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so.”

¹¹ João Penalva, “So, you still don't believe me... A conversation between João Penalva and Andrew Renton,” in João Penalva, exhibition catalog, Lisbon: Centro Cultural de Belém, 1999, p. 59.

João Penalva

Moth-eaten pair of trousers. Never used., 2010

Pigment print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Bright White
310g paper mounted on Dibond, card, Plexiglass,

waxed oak frame

130 x 97 cm

Ed. 3 + 1 AP



Moth-eaten pair of trousers. Never used.



Detail of *Moth-eaten pair of trousers. Never used.*, João Penalva, 2010

João Penalva

Deaf boy's bone, 2010

Silver bromide print on Ilford Warm Tone Glossy fibre paper and pigment print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Bright White 310g paper mounted on Dibond, card, waxed oak frame and Plexiglass

205 x 152 x 6 cm



The photograph behind the 'Deaf' is a composite of two images. The one on the left is a silver bromide print of a long bone, the one on the right is a pigment print of a human figure. The photograph is a composite of two images. The one on the left is a silver bromide print of a long bone, the one on the right is a pigment print of a human figure. The photograph is a composite of two images. The one on the left is a silver bromide print of a long bone, the one on the right is a pigment print of a human figure.

Works with Text and Image

CAM - Centro de Arte Moderna

Maria Beatriz Marquilhas

The fusion of word and image is one of João Penalva's signature elements. This union is fully balanced, as neither does the word explain or reveal the image, nor does the image merely illustrate the word. Instead, we are presented with a textual universe and a visual universe that, through a kind of tacit agreement, form the foundation of works that cannot be classified as purely textual or visual. Rather, both dimensions merge, giving rise to a new, more complex entity, unrestricted by the conventional limitations often imposed in the art world.

The title of João Penalva's exhibition on display at the Centro de Arte Moderna of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation takes on an anthological character, focusing on the work the artist has developed over recent decades, with particular emphasis on pieces where this dialogue between text and image is most striking.

I. Image

"In the beginning was not the Word, but the images, even before men."¹ By creating images, human beings create doubles, sometimes even icons, bowing before them in reverence to their ethereal nature—perhaps the most beautiful thing Humanity has ever brought into the world. The primacy of the image over any other human creation has been a millennia-old debate, and art has always been placed on a pedestal, ascending, image after image, in its aspiration to the sacred and the eternity that human existence relentlessly denies.

"I draw endless consequences from the idea that without images, we are merely playthings of 'forces' that erupt from all directions, bending everything in their path."²

The way we connect with the world is mediated by images, as they are vital to us. Art takes this even further, sometimes abandoning this connection to the world altogether, creating the non-existent and shaping worlds we can occasionally escape into—a naïve yet proud "lie" that Oscar Wilde so enthusiastically celebrated in his writings on art.

II. Word

According to Martin Heidegger's theory of experience, human beings are *Dasein*—that is, beings radically situated in the here and now. We live through an experience of strangeness and inauthenticity, having been thrown into a world that is not inherently ours. Thus, our first existential task is to create a world of our own, reclaiming our authenticity—a task that must always be carried out through language.

Based on this theory, there is no human phenomenon that is not historical and linguistic. The word is undeniably intrinsic to human experience, serving as both a primary means of expression and creation. Like the image, it also conveys Humanity's constant aspiration to eternity.

Two generations had believed the ‘dust cloth’ was covering an old radio until the attic was cleared out and it was discovered that it wasn’t an old radio but a bone — a whale vertebra, said Hespeth, who hadn’t seen it or thought of it in many years. She remembered right away the deaf boy from up the road. The first time he saw the bone in her house he hugged it tenderly with both arms and pressed his ear against its dark patch as if he could hear something within, and he would not tire of doing it again and again and of stroking all its surfaces every time he came to visit. It was still known in the family as ‘the deaf boy’s bone’ long after he and his parents had left for Australia. She never heard from them again.

Detail of *Deaf boy’s bone*, João Penalva, 2010

“The Library exists ab aeterno. No reasonable mind can doubt this truth, whose immediate corollary is the future eternity of the world.”

However, throughout history, the word, as an artistic creation, has tended to be confined to literature, rarely associating itself with the visual arts—despite the countless allusions and the mutual symbolic and mythological influence that fine arts and fine letters have always exerted on each other.

III. Read Images, Contemplate Words

When we engage with both art forms, which is more real to us—the Tower of Babel painted by Brueghel in the 16th century, or the myth described in the Bible through words?

The longstanding rivalry between word and image seems, at last, to lose all meaning, for we cannot escape the conclusion that we use

mental language when contemplating an image, just as we create a sequence of images when processing words. They seem to function as the two faces of Janus, and no matter how much we try to separate and distinguish them, they remain intertwined within the same core of perception and understanding that defines human experience.

In João Penalva’s artistic work, this conclusion feels self-evident.

The way he establishes a dialogue between word and image ensures that the spectator does not perceive them as separate entities, but rather as a singular whole—one that invites us into the act of perception and interpretation that any artwork demands.

The exploration of a Japanese universe of purity and mysticism is evident in a textual and visual language that evokes the formal simplicity of a haiku. The series centered on Master Nanyo, developed between 2006 and 2010, consists of five simple images of a childlike

beauty, accompanied by short texts narrating everyday stories and moments of various characters—real or fictional—which allude to the images, adding not only information but also inviting us to engage with them in a particular way. Through this, the images gain a sense of familiarity, bringing us closer to them and the moments they depict. *Talking to the Wild Plants of Hiroshima* (Conversando com Plantas Selvagens de Hiroshima, 1997) references Japanese territoriality through natural elements, placing the viewer before an herbarium that maps the space. The work consists of samples of Japanese plants, photographs, and notes written in Japanese, alongside the plants' Latin names.

It Is Said in Japan (Diz-se no Japão, 1997) is another work that delves into Japanese cultural mentality, presented as a series of framed texts that, in a rough draft-like manner, contain Japanese beliefs and proverbs. These inscriptions reflect Japan's mystical traditions and the harmonious relationship that its people seek to establish with nature.

When Saturday Came (Quando Chegava o Sábado, 2007) is a work in which words take center stage. A long text inscribed on the wall tells a childhood story, suggesting a possibly autobiographical element from the artist—as if a wave of melancholy had given birth to an artwork. However, a small black-and-white photograph of a scenic viewpoint is included, allowing us to see the object of a child's desire: every Saturday, he would wait for the coin that, for just one minute, would allow him to see both farther and closer.

"That's when I learned what a minute feels like without having to count to sixty, and that stayed with me for the rest of my life."⁴

A sense of the mundane and sometimes even a moral undertone characterizes João Penalva's works, where words and images transmit sensations and reflections that are simple and everyday, yet at times philosophical and poetic.

Camisola Comida pela Traça (Moth-eaten Sweater, 2010) exemplifies João Penalva's focus on simple, ordinary objects that, through

accompanying text, appear to tell a story, encapsulating an inanimate memory. Penalva employs a literal voice that defines all the elements in the work: what we see in the image is, indeed, a simple sweater with moth-eaten holes, accompanied by a textual description of it:

"Men's cashmere sweater. Front view. Tobacco-colored. Six buttons in the front. Patch pocket on the left. Moth-eaten. Birthday gift. Never worn."

To this simplicity, João Penalva contrasts works that demand more complex and ambiguous reflection, often questioning social and cultural issues.

Encoberto (Veiled, 1991) consists of a found folding screen—old and seemingly neglected—behind which words are arranged from newspaper and magazine clippings pasted onto paper, forming the following message:

"Every day I walk past men and women lying on the street. I don't know if they are sick or sleeping or in pain or drunk or dead. I don't know because I don't stop."

The folding screen here functions as a metaphor. It is we who place it there, hiding all that we see but pretend not to, in a society marked by problems that we often choose to ignore—just as we hesitate to read the text hidden behind the screen in the work, because we are fully aware of its uncomfortable truth.

Arcada (Arcade, 2000) is a work that gains prominence not only due to its scale but also for how it encapsulates the exhibition's title and purpose. Within a long corridor, two sequences of framed photographs appear on opposite walls—one to the left, the other to the right—each accompanied by a handwritten textual description placed beneath.

The images themselves seem highly diverse, with no apparent connection between them. However, there is a predominance of photographs of public clocks in marketplaces and other urban buildings, with simple captions such as "One and nine on the clock above a fabric shop." There are also numerous spatial references to *The Rite of Spring*,

the orchestral work composed by Stravinsky in 1911. In these cases, the textual descriptions turn the images into memorial testimonies. For instance, when we first see what appears to be a simple window on a building, the caption beneath it reads:

“One of the many windows of the building where, on the top floor, Stravinsky composed *The Rite of Spring* in 1911.”

This revelation fundamentally alters our perception of the window.

Through this technique, João Penalva demonstrates the power of words in shaping our experience of images in a simple yet profound way.

Reading and looking are, fundamentally, the actions that João Penalva’s works demand of us, requiring an interpretation that is complex precisely because of its hybrid and ambiguous nature. At times, the text contradicts the image; at other times, the image contradicts the text; sometimes, they harmoniously complement each other. However, these two elements always establish a dialogue between themselves before allowing space for the viewer to engage with the work.

¹ Bragança, José Bragança de, *Corpo e Imagem*. Lisboa: Vega, 2008, p. 8.

² Bragança, José Bragança de, *Corpo e Imagem*. Lisboa: Vega, 2008, p. 23.

³ Borges, Jorge Luis, *Ficções*. Lisboa: Biblioteca Visão, Coleção Novis, 2000, p. 51.

⁴ Penalva, João, in *Quando Chegava o Sábado*, 2007.

João Penalva

Kichiya Japanese paper doll, 2018

Solarised silver gelatine print dry-mounted on Dibond,
museum board, typed paper, oak frames, glass

84 x 64 cm





Detail of *Kichiya Japanese paper doll*, João Penalva, 2018

LONG HANGING TRESS

XX

The hair is tied by a flat paper braid in the middle, between the fore lock and the long hanging tress. The paper braid is a tie used for tying up the ^{XX}long ~~XX~~ the hair top not. It was used ^X~~XX~~ in ancient times. In the nineteenth ~~XX~~ century it was made of thread and twisted paper string. The flat paper braid used paper instead of cord, as it is now. The **QBI** tying is called the **KICHIYA knot**. The **Playing card knot** is tied deep with ~~weight~~~~XX~~ weights attached to each tip. This is the one created ~~by~~~~XX~~ at the end of the seventeenth century in Kyoto by Uemura Kichiya, the famous **KABUKI** actor of female parts, and seems to have been the fashion at the time.

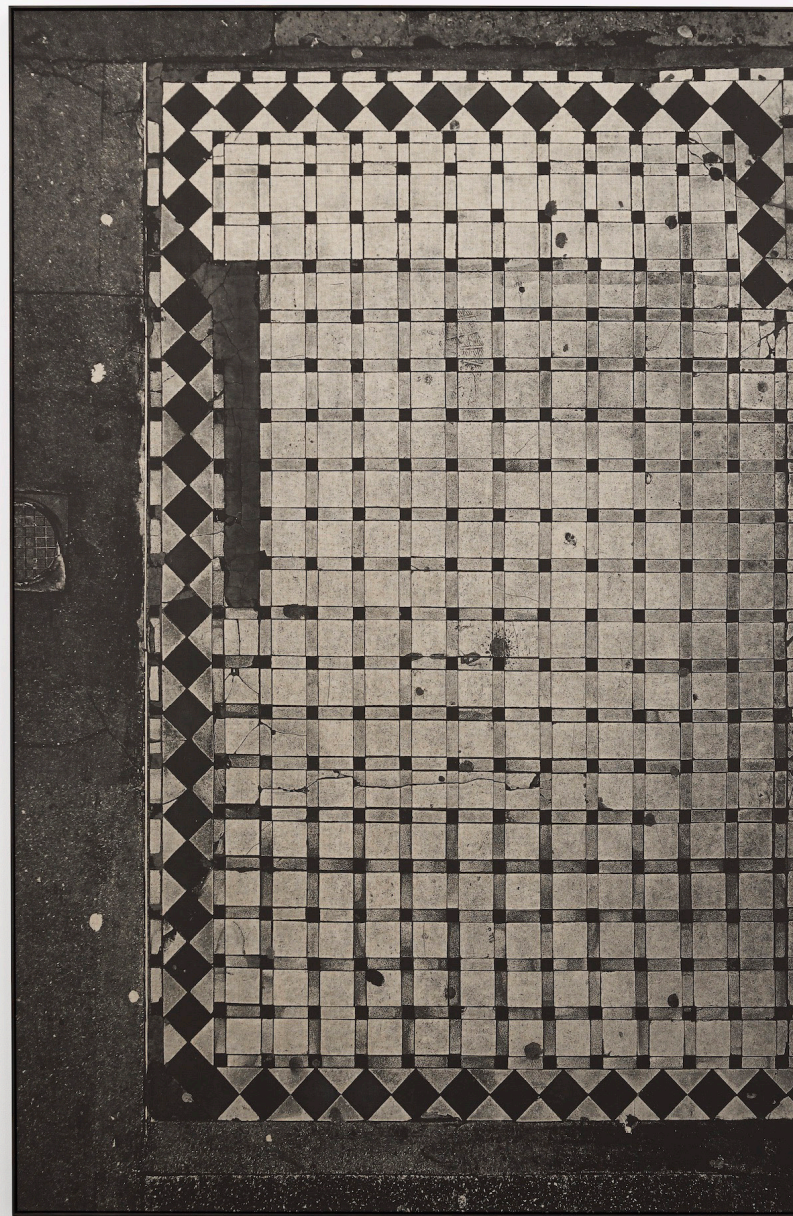
João Penalva

W1W 8QN, 2015

Archival pigment printing on linen dry-mounted on

Alu-Dibond

226 x 150 cm



João Penalva

The Ephemeral Language of the Street

Afonso Dias Ramos

The unpublished photographs in this Portfolio were taken in 2015 in London, where João Penalva had lived since 1976, after enrolling at Chelsea School of Art following an international career as a dancer, working with choreographers such as Gerhard Bohner, Pina Bausch, and Jean Pomares. Since then, he has established himself as one of the most recognized contemporary visual artists, with a body of work that resists simple categorization, encompassing installation, image, text, voice, performance, dance, and film. By exploring the various narrative possibilities of these media through a blurring of fact and fiction, he systematically engages with chance, the role of the spectator, the mechanisms of perception, and the instability of interpretation—constructing a palimpsest of memories, events, and stories.

The series reproduced in these pages presents an intricate network of arabesques, a tangle of scratches and cuts, geometric traces, or accidental markings, in monochromatic tones that immediately suggest abstract paintings. However, these are in fact a series of black-and-white digital photographs that João Penalva took during his daily walks between his home and studio in southeast London, traveling the same bustling streets that connect Marble Arch to Bermondsey, just as thousands of others do.

The accumulation of scuffs and patches, stains and smudges, traces and marks on the city's surface reveals an infinite morphological diversity, offering itself to the artist as a series of ready-made compositions. "I would say that I found paintings on the streets," João Penalva remarked¹.

The fortuitous encounter with these markings recalls the canvases of American Abstract Expressionists such as Jasper Johns or Robert Rauschenberg, whom Penalva had previously identified as key references when he first began painting—both of whom, not coincidentally, were also associated with the choreographies of Merce Cunningham, embracing a shared notion of artistic process as creative freedom and presence in the world.

This spontaneous recognition of art in London's sidewalks is reminiscent of John Cage's epiphany in New York in 1944, when he was waiting for a bus after visiting an exhibition where Mark Tobey had presented abstract paintings inspired by Asian calligraphy:

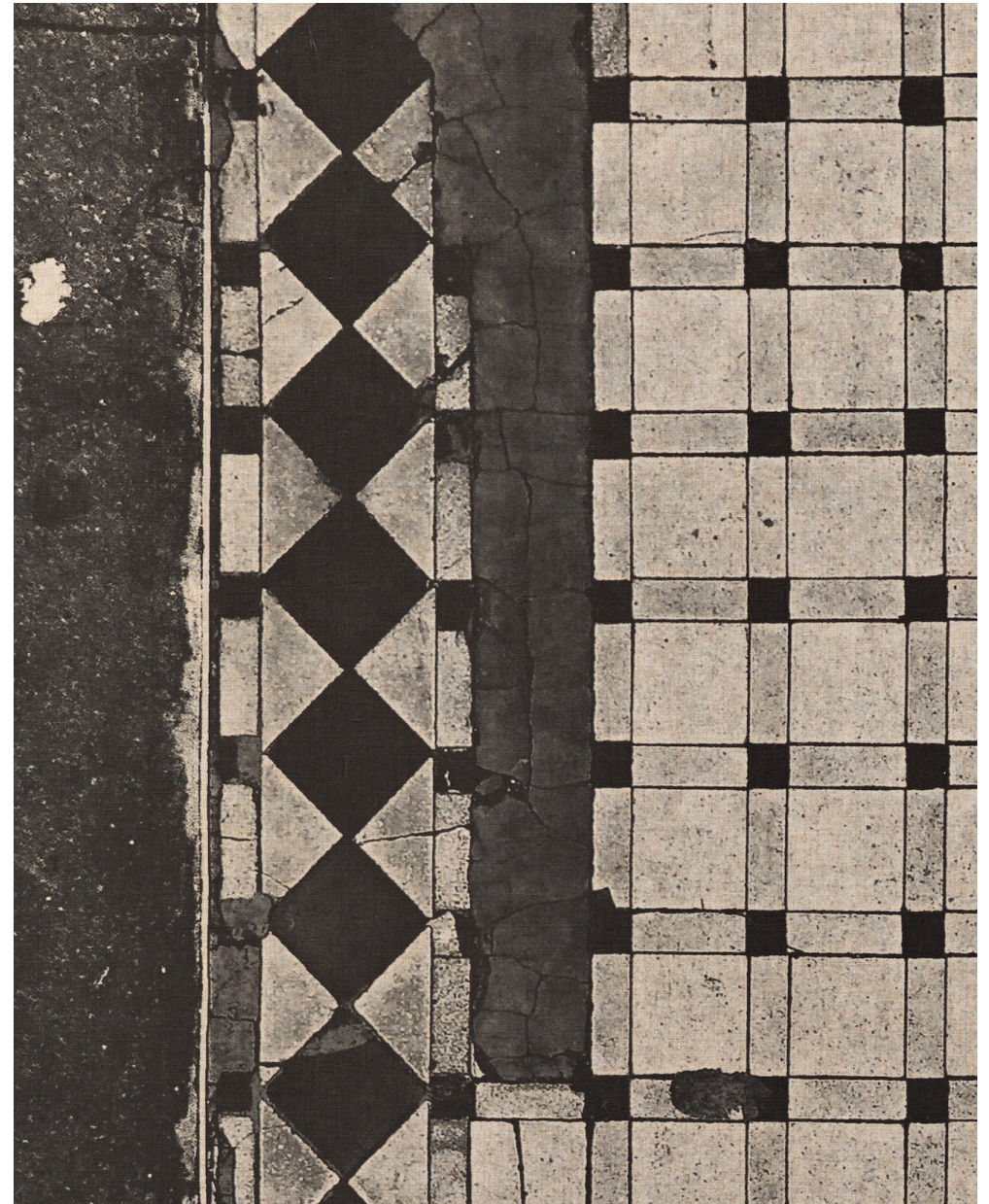
"By chance, I looked down at the sidewalk and realized that the experience of looking at the sidewalk was the same as looking at a Tobey. Exactly the same. The aesthetic pleasure was just as intense."²

Cage would later return to this revelation, refining it into a poetic observation:

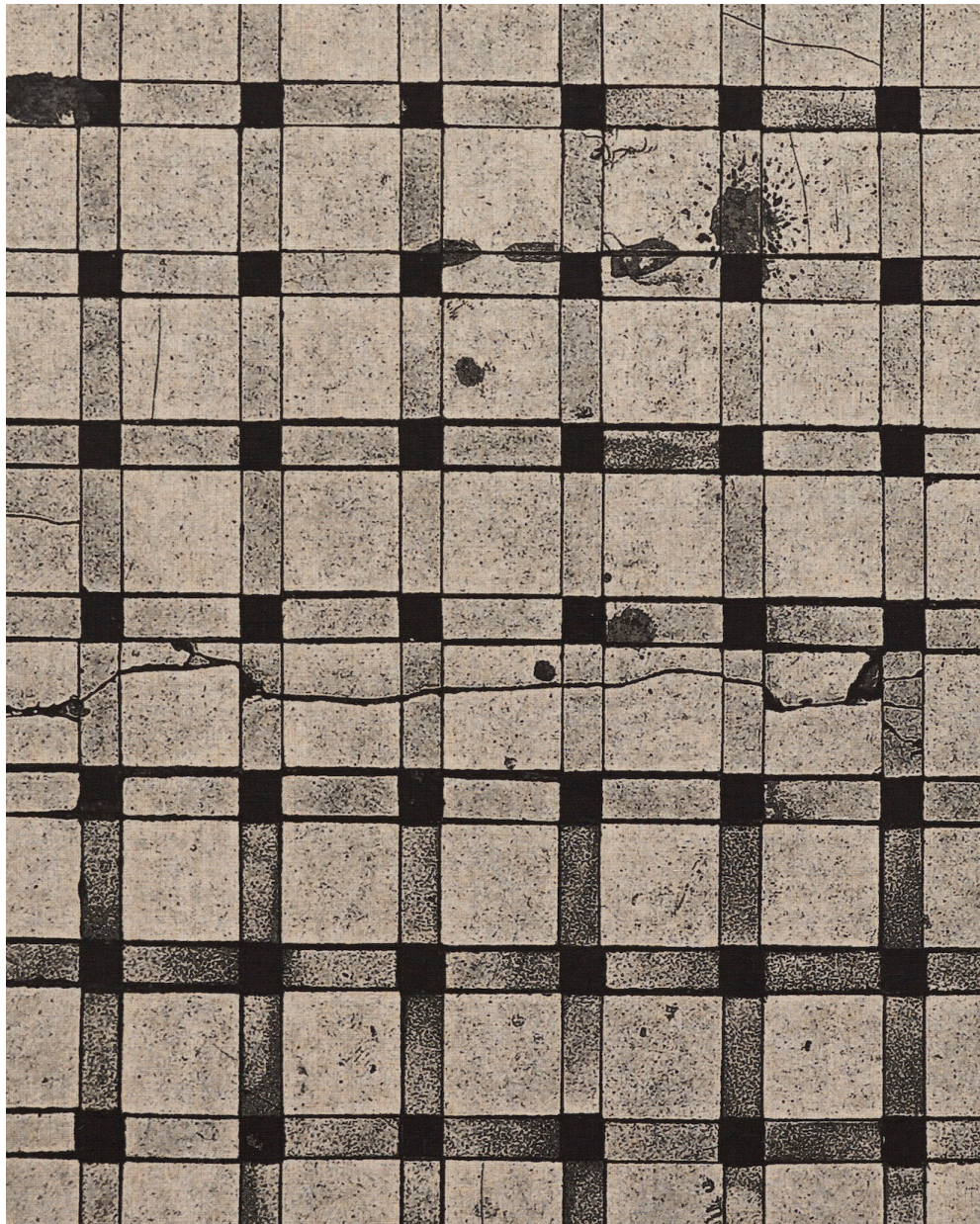
“While waiting for the bus, we witness a concert. Suddenly, we find ourselves standing on a work of art—the sidewalk.”³

Equally informed by attention to everyday objects, in Penalva’s photographs, this intimate relationship with painting is not only tied to the verticalization of the image in space, but it also seems to evoke the appearance of reproductions of abstract expressionist canvases in the catalogs in which they initially circulated around the world. In another series, Penalva printed photographs similar to these on linen canvases prepared for oil painting, life-sized, using the privileged support of abstraction and emulating that language through geometric cracks, calligraphic stains, or the smudges left by chewing gum (a motif also present in the work of Gilbert & George). The confusion of supports here establishes a transitional state between painting and photography, reconciling, on one hand, a very precise formal framework, but on the other, the contingency inherent in the image, which, like the sidewalks, is made of mistakes and accidents.

This downward gaze could be contrasted, in João Penalva’s work, with the upward gaze of an earlier work created in Japan, *Looking up in Osaka* (2006), where, wandering through the city, he began pointing the camera upward. The resulting rectangle captures a dense tangle of electrical wires, tethering poles, high-voltage cables, or street lamps, which, cut out against the sky, and without identifiable geographic markers, form masses, volumes, or lines like colorful silhouettes that lean more toward geometric abstraction. In the case of the images in the British capital, the downward gaze emphasized, on the contrary, not only a kind of microscopic attention to the pavement but also the



Detail of *W1W 8QN*, João Penalva, 2015



Detail of *W1W 8QN*, João Penalva, 2015

quality of an expressionist inscription surface constantly redone by the movement of bodies and things in a state of flux. Although the images are all meticulously geo-referenced in the title, situating the postal code of the adjacent building, the space is never an abstract area, but rather a inhabited place made of the sediments of passage. Originally conceived as a uniform and discreet urban structure, the pavement now appears as a unique and unpredictable mosaic of debris, fractures, gaps, splashes, and reliefs, that is, as a mutant result of everyday practice.

In a sense, this is a procedure for approaching the city, a way of relating to the place, common to experimental photographic practices in contemporary art—ranging from Sophie Ristelhueber’s scarified landscapes, which focus on trauma inflicted by history, to the forensic mark surveys in desert landscapes with Rut Blee Luxembourg, to the peripatetic records of walking art with Francis Alÿs, or the erratic urban space mapping with Gordon Matta-Clark. In Penalva, the anchoring in the pictorial tradition does not refer to the foundational place of the promenade in Renaissance painting, fixing the illusion of depth or modulating perspective, but rather imitates the idiosyncrasies of composition and style in abstraction, imprinting asymmetry and disorder. The promenades thus take on the role of a stage for meeting and discovering the body—the same paths later traversed by the artist no longer preserved any of the remnants or visible traces found in these images, reinforcing the idea of a screen in which, according to João Penalva, “everything, everyone leaves their mark.” As a space for the inscription of the body and matter, this metamorphosis of urban space resembles a literary text in that it, as Manuel Gusmão stated, exposes us to the evidence that we are “singular historical bodies, traversed by a tangled writing, a written, inscribed, and ex-scribed voice—tattoo and palimpsest.” It is well known Michel de Certeau’s analogy between language and the city—“The act of walking is for the urban system

what the act of discoursing is for language.” But João Penalva’s work highlights another additional dimension of this psychogeography, which Rebecca Solnit recently referred to: “Certeau’s metaphor suggests a frightening possibility: if the city is a language spoken by walkers, then the post-pedestrian city will not only be mute, but may risk becoming a dead language.” The idea of tattooing and palimpsest—thus contrasting with the revolutionary cry of the students in May 68, “Under the pavement, the beach!”—leads us to a rediscovery of the everyday in its most banal unity, in that dimension which Georges Perec called the “infra-ordinary,” the careful scrutiny of the neglected and accumulated surface of the city’s asphalt, which, by interrupting the familiar sense of everyday spaces, teleports us to another position from where something extraordinary can emerge.

Thus, the images belong to an experimental moment between the humanities and the arts in the interrogation of spaces, as an intensive description that does not seek explanation, cultivating intimacy with what goes unnoticed, encouraging slowing down and stopping, counteracting the accelerated pace of the days. To a large extent, these approaches oppose the dominant ways of invoking a place in the first half of the last century, between regional geography and local history, in the compulsive temptation to draw lines of contact between territory and identity. In the aftermath of phenomenology, which demonstrated that human experience always exceeds attention itself, meeting the supposed indifference of things, a kind of topological thought emerged in philosophy—Walter Benjamin, for example, was one of the first to start with the where, not the usual what, how, or why—and a critical tradition of the city as choreography was consolidated, in the wake of Michel de Certeau, Jane Jacobs, and Henri Lefebvre. In this series of images by João Penalva, the cracks and fissures in the asphalt and cement, the stains and scrape marks, tectonic plates in constant

mutation, inscribe themselves within this important theoretical and aesthetic lineage. With impeccable pride and formal elegance, they rescue the prosaic surface of the everyday city for a prolonged gaze and an appeal to the imagination, singularly transfiguring ordinary things in an evocative and immeasurable way. As W. H. Auden wrote, “The crack in the teacup / Opens a passage to the land of the dead.”

¹ Private communication with the artist. I thank João Penalva for the conversations and his kind availability.

² “John Cage: Conversation with Joan Retallack,” *Aerial* 6/7, 1991, pp. 107–108.

³ John Cage, *X: Writings ‘79–’82*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983, p. 140.

⁴ Manuel Gusmão, *Tatuagem e Palimpsesto*, Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim, 2010, p. 10. (Italics in the original.)

⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 13.

⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, New York: Penguin, 2001, p. 213. I thank Martim Ramos for these two last references.

⁷ Georges Perec, *L’infra-ordinaire*, Paris: Le Seuil, 1989.

⁸ Tim Cresswell, *Maxwell Street: Writing and Thinking Place*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2019.

⁹ David Kishik, *The Manhattan Project: A Theory of a City*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017.

¹⁰ W. H. Auden, “As I Walked Out One Evening,” *Another Time*, New York: Random House, 1940, p. 43.

João Penalva

Namba-naka 2 cho-me (#4), 2005-06

Looking up in Osaka Series

Archival pigment print on Innova Smooth Cotton High
White 315 gsm paper, dry-mounted on Alu Reynobond,
acrylic glass, oak frame

203 x 153 x 6 cm





Detail of *Namba-naka 2 cho-me (#4)*, João Penalva, 2005-06

João Penalva

Minamisemba 1 cho-me, 2005-06

Looking up in Osaka Series

Archival pigment print on Innova Smooth Cotton High
White 315 gsm paper, dry-mounted on Alu Reynobond,
acrylic glass, oak frame

203 x 153 x 6 cm





Detail of *Minamisemba 1 cho-me*, João Penalva, 2005-06

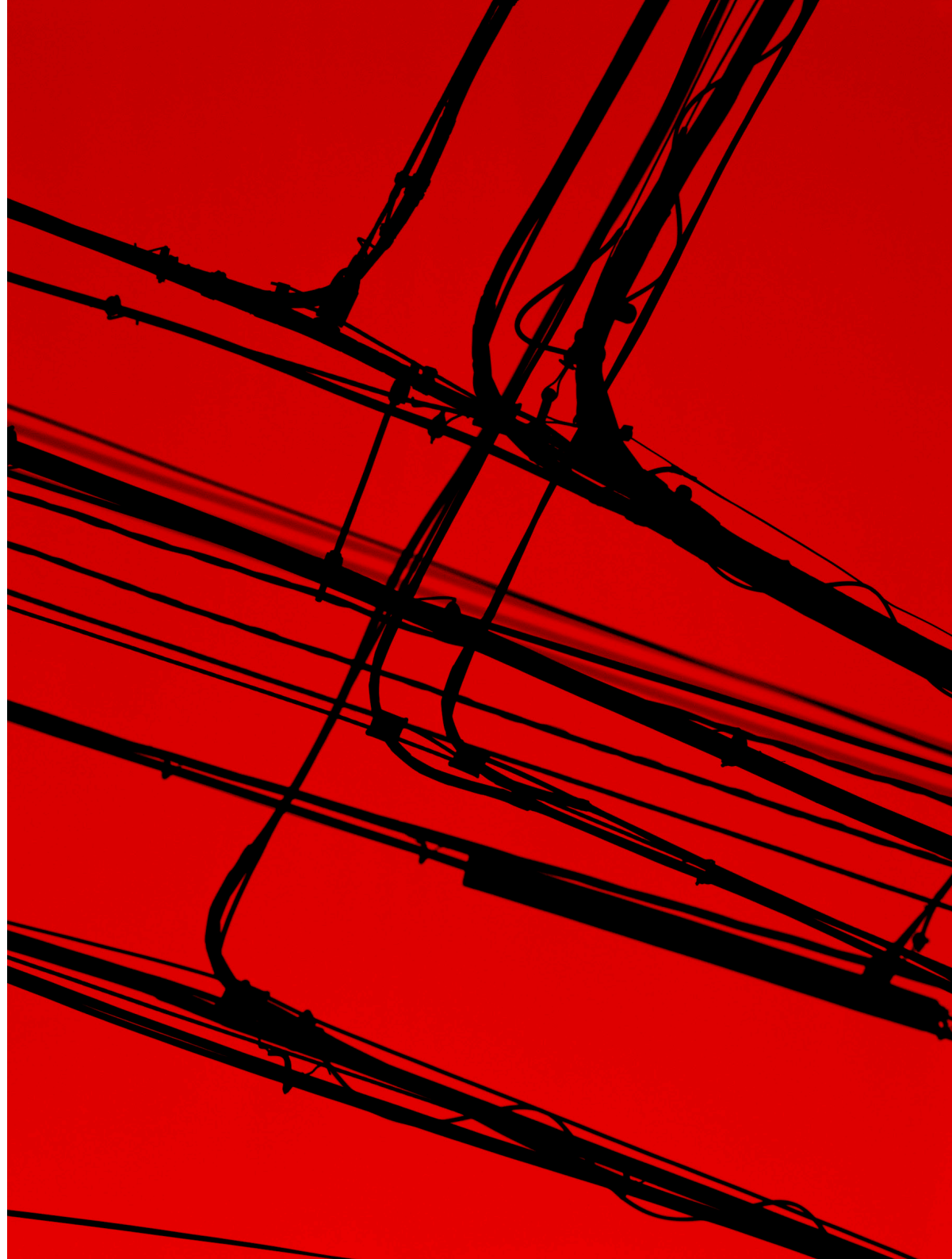
João Penalva

Namba-naka 2 cho-me (#3), 2005-06

Looking up in Osaka Series

Archival pigment print on Innova Smooth Cotton High
White 315 gsm paper, dry-mounted on Alu Reynobond,
acrylic glass, oak frame

203 x 153 x 6 cm



João Penalva

João Penalva was born in Lisbon in 1949. He lived in London from 1976 to 2021, and in Lisbon from 2021 to the present.

After starting his career in contemporary dance from 1968 to 1976, including a period with Pina Bausch's company (1973-74) and co-founding The Moon Dance Company with Jean Pomares (1976), he moved to London. There, he received a scholarship from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to study at the Chelsea School of Art (1976-81). Initially focused on painting, his practice expanded in the 1990s to include various media such as film, photography, and installation. His body of work integrates text and imagery as foundational elements. Drawing from diverse sources like literature, found objects, and archival materials, his work often involves deep research that integrates the final piece. One of the core aspects of his work is exploring communication in its many forms, blending both formal and theoretical approaches within complex narratives that combine reality and fiction.

Penalva represented Portugal in the 23rd Bienal de São Paulo and in the 49th Venice Biennale. He also exhibited in the 2nd Berlin Biennale and the 13th Biennale of Sydney.

Solo exhibitions include: Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon; Camden Arts Centre, London; Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius; Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck; Tramway, Glasgow; Rooseum Center for Contemporary

Art, Malmö; Institute of Visual Arts, Milwaukee; Power Plant, Toronto; Serralves Museum, Porto; Ludwig Museum Budapest; Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; DAAD Gallery, Berlin; Mead Gallery, University of Warwick, UK; Lunds Konsthall, Lund; Berlinische Galerie, Berlin; Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon; Brandts Kunsthallen, Odense, Denmark; Trondheim Kunstmuseum, Norway; LOGE, Berlin; Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg; Culturgest, Porto; Lumiar Cité, Lisbon; Appleton Square, Lisbon.

Group exhibitions include, among others: Haus der Kunst, Munich; Museum Folkwang, Essen; K20 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf; Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden; Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne; National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul; Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei; Bombas Gens Centre d'Art, Valencia; Tramway, Glasgow; Wellcome Collection, London; South London Gallery, London; Lunds Konsthall, Sweden; Hayward Gallery and Tate Modern, London.

Penalva was awarded the DAAD Berlin Artist's Residency in 2003; the Bryan Robertson Award in 2009; The Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award in 2020.

[More about the artist](#)

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