Conversation with JOÃO MOURÃO AND LUÍS SILVA, Kunsthalle Lissabon — Part I of III
What’s in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The / is for Institute website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA’s history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein, Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber (CHE’60) Curator, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania

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Conversation with
JOÃO MOURÃO AND LUÍS SILVA,
Kunsthalle Lissabon — Part I of III

João Mourão and Luís Silva are the co-directors of Kunsthalle Lissabon, a contemporary art institution located in Lisbon, Portugal.

With Alex Klein and Gee Wesley

ALEX KLEIN
One of the inquiries that has led us to this project is a questioning of institutional language and how it functions. We had gone through our 50th anniversary at ICA and done all of this archival exhibition research to think critically about the narrative of who is shown, why they’re shown, and who has been involved. Afterwards, it felt necessary to take a step back and think more broadly about what an institute means, how we were formed, what the initial conception of ICA was, and where we might be now. What does an institute mean? When people hear “Institute of Contemporary Art,” do they have a preconceived idea? What kind of buttons does that phrase press? Are we actually an institute? We started thinking critically about how language becomes a kind of architecture. And of course, when we started to think about who we might want to think more deeply
about these things with, you both came to mind immediately. Let’s start with how you began and then, the name.

LUÍS SILVA

It’s funny. And I’m going to reverse things a bit because as you were speaking, I thought about something that has been important for us in recent years, as opposed to when we started, which is the shift that we’re trying to move from the noun “institution” to the verb “to institute.”

AK
Yes.

LS

Which is really interesting when we think of your situation, in which you have institute in the name and this project: “I is for Institute.” It’s interesting to think what would happen if that word stopped being a noun and began being a verb. What would you be instituting? Language and words are very important to us. João comes from a communications background, and I come from social sciences, from psychology. So, we’re very, very mindful of what words we bring to a discussion. Words can summon up ghosts and we need to decide what ghosts we want to keep as company. Kunsthalle Lissabon was simultaneously the result of a desire to create the working conditions that we could stand for, but it was also this reflection on the power of language when it tries to institute something. The name Kunsthalle Lissabon functions as this kind of verbal marker—this signifier that immediately activates a bunch of expectations and modes of working, or modes of inhabiting our community—and it felt very appealing to us because it allowed us to go deep into a critical approach of institutions and ask: “What is an institution? What does it mean to institute? What are the consequences—ethical, political, curatorial—of being an institution?” Those questions came from what we felt in the local context, in which there was no reflection around those issues.

There is this very basic assumption in the social sciences, for instance, that discourse creates reality. And if we think of Kunsthalle Lissabon as a social experiment of sorts, then its first years were just trying to see if that was the case or not. If discourse, through words, through naming, of course, but actually through how we talk about it, how we describe it, how we enact it...

JOÃO MOURÃO

Through communication.
Could actually create reality.

AK
Right. So, using language to create the actual thing.

Yes.

AK
I think in our case at ICA, we are working backwards in a way. Because we're conscious of institutionalization, in a sense, we are trying to dismantle that or backtrack. How might our Institute have become institutionalized? What would it mean to rethink what an institute is as a way to maybe rethink our institutionalization?

Back to this question of how language functions. A case in point, we were just at a museum opening in Porto and ran into some gallerists from an important New York gallery. They had asked what we were doing in Portugal and we said, “We just came from Lisbon and we were working with the Kunsthalle Lissabon for the week.” And they had this look of like, There's a Kunsthalle in Lisbon? They seemed somewhat panicked to think they might be out of the loop. It's like we had triggered an anxiety that we had access to some sort of insider knowledge that they didn't know about. As we explained what the Kunsthalle is and as it came more into view for them, they were like, “Oh, okay.” It was this funny thing.
It has happened so many times with us. And the name, in itself, has in it a kind of auto-destruct button. You know, kunsthalle is a German word, but it’s acknowledged internationally as the “art center.” We know what a kunsthalle is. But then the geographical marker is also in German, and that is the one thing that doesn’t make sense. If it were a proper Kunsthalle, why would “Lissabon” be in German? It could have been Kunsthalle Lisboa or Lisbon, you know? But we wanted to play with expectations. If this is a German name and if we’re activating a bunch of expectations as to what a mainstream mid-to-large scale European institution is, then we should keep, you know...

The marker.

The geographical marker also in that same language, as you have in Bern, Zurich, whatever.

Sure. Of course. And that can indicate varying sizes of institutions.

It does.

Do you remember the moment when you both came up with the name?

Yes. I think it was in the Museumsquartier in Vienna. We started to discuss this idea that we had for a long time of opening a space in Lisbon. We were kind of going through all of these names and suddenly the Kunsthalle Lissabon appeared.

I don’t remember who said it, but one of us remarked “Wouldn’t it be funny if we opened Kunsthalle Lissabon?” And we were doing this right in front of Kunsthalle Wien.
AK  
Of course.

LS  
We were playing with that idea, as you do with some kind of random idea you 
have when you’re on vacation. And then we just dropped it.

JM  
Yes. We let it sit two years or something. And after two years, it appeared 
again. We just had to open the space. After a bit of discussion around the 
space, or what we were going to do with the space, we decided to open the 
Kunsthalle Lissabon.

AK  
But the name came first and in 
advance of a space.

JM  
Yes.

AK  
Like two years in advance, you’re 
saying.

JM  
Generally, yes.

LS  
Yes.

JM  
It was already in our minds.

AK  
So Kunsthalle Lissabon, in a way, 
has existed for nine years.

LS  
No, no. It was initially a joke. We thought of it as a joke and it stayed in the 
back of our minds, you know, as something you do, as something you think 
about when you’re on vacation. Nothing serious.
AK
But jokes sometimes tell the truth, right?

LS
Yes, they do.

GEE WESLEY
The truth is told in jest.

LS
Yes. Fast forward to 2016 and here we are discussing it seriously.

AK
I’m curious to know what prompted you to even joke about that name? What are the set of circumstances that would prompt you to have that discussion?

LS
The institutional landscape.

AK
Right, that’s what I’m getting at.

JM
In Lisbon, or in Portugal at the time.

AK
Which was?

LS
Which, at the time, seemed very local, very self-absorbed, lacking criticality. Not at all challenging for a young curator. I think one of the hidden reasons why we created Kunsthalle is that because none of us saw ourselves working in one of those institutions that existed at the time. We would die inside.

AK
So you had to create your own institution.
Exactly. We had to create the set of conditions, in terms of modes of production, in terms of modes of visibility, in terms of discourse, in terms of political agency, and in terms of an ethical awareness that mattered to us.

AK
Right. Right. And artists that you wanted to work with.

And the artists.

And art.

AK
That weren’t currently showing in Lisbon or elsewhere in Portugal.

No, my God, no.

Yes, not in that first year.

True.

We of course started with a low budget.

No budget.

Or no budget at all. So we started to work...

With friends.

In the beginning, with friends, with local artists who are friends. Most of them did their first shows with us, so it was also this way of working with friends,
but working...

And memory works in a funny way. We now think of them as friends. At the time, they weren’t necessarily friends, but now they are.

Yes, that’s true also.

Our first show was Nuno Sousa Vieira. We knew him, but you know…and then we had Mauro Cerqueira. They were people we knew and people that we invited to work with us, to do solo shows, because the solo show was present since the beginning. But they weren’t friends at the time. Now they’re friends. It’s funny how these things work because when we say these things, “Oh we worked with friends,” but they weren’t friends at the time. They were acquaintances. They were people we knew, for instance, André Romão, who did the first solo show with us.

None of them were friends at the time. That’s true.

It’s interesting how these things work because if one of our claims is that the institution produces...

Friendship?

You know, a set of relationships that we choose to name friendship, then here we are after all these years kind of thinking about the past and saying that they were friends before they were.

Yes, exactly.

It’s interesting how even what the institution produced over the years affects our memory.

In a sense, you could say your
institutional memory is how you think back on your relationships. Getting back to the moment when you started, I’m curious to hear more about the set of social relationships on the ground that required Kunsthalle Lissabon to begin? Who was it for, outside of yourselves?

LS

I think it started as a desire to think things through. And it started as our desire to think about these things that were very important to us and that we couldn’t find in the local community. It wasn’t so much about initiating a discussion with a community, which soon after became the case. Initially it was just us wanting to think practice through practice. We didn’t want to write essays or organize seminars or workshops about the question. We wanted to perform it without knowing what the outcomes would be. And then as soon as we started performing the institution, we had to start thinking about these questions, like Who is this for? And that came as part of the performance, not as part of the initial reflection that generated the performance. But if you’re performing an institution, then all these things need to be taken into consideration: What is our public? What is the public? What public do we produce? What public do we imagine? What are the consequences of this? What are the conditions for something to happen in a specific way or not? Those questions became part of the reflection.

Now it doesn’t make any sense to remove those issues from the ongoing project. It’s part of this. And we have been very critical of other institutions. For example, there is this guy running an institution here in Lisbon who said that people are stupid because they don’t understand what his space does. So basically, he’s creating a public that is alienating and alienated. He can’t even imagine dissent or critique as a mode of being a public. So that is very problematic in terms of what is being instituted. What public is being produced? A public that is a no public. There are no publics because you don’t go to a place where you’re called stupid.

JM

I think in the beginning, something we were also responding to, beyond the lack of institutions, is the beginning of the financial crisis. Our generation had to leave the country to work abroad and all this. It was also us reacting to that, I think, in a way, because artists were leaving at the time.
Everyone was leaving at the time.

JM

Everyone was leaving at the time. So it was this idea of reacting to and reacting through. We had to do something and in a way, I think that it also was part of why some artists become friends later, because some of them were abroad at the time. But because of Kunsthalle Lissabon, they came back and they started to see projects happening in the city that were working in different ways.

LS

Yes.

AK

It inspired growth in that sense.

JM

Yes.

AK

Actually, that’s interesting. We talked about the Kunsthalle, but “Lissabon,” not just in terms of German, but the fact that you wanted to ground it in the place, but also the precarity of the place.

LS

Yes, there is no other way around it. You speak from a place; your point of view is always grounded in where you’re from. Your views of the world, how you interact with the world, are always the result of how you were socialized. When we were transitioning from the performative gesture to the radical hospitality approach—I think we discuss this in *Performing the Institution(al)* Volume 2 in the introduction—we make that transition explicit. We just didn’t pay attention to it because hospitality is already very inscribed for us socially. We can rationalize it and we can feed theory into it to make it something that is useful and productive as a tool, but being with people and spending time with people is something that we are born into. In Portugal spending time together, for example, there are three- or four-hour Sunday lunches where everyone is just discussing the world while eating and drinking. That is what we do. So maybe an idea of radical hospitality couldn’t
develop, I don’t know, in Scandinavia. I’m being biased and prejudiced, of course.

JMJ

I think they try it though at some institutions.

LS

So this is grounded. Kunsthalle Lissabon is the result of a specific set of conditions. And one of them is...

AK

Cultural conditions

LS

Cultural conditions. Friendship is important to us even outside of Kunsthalle Lissabon, outside of the reflection. You’re no one without your friends. You’re no one without your family. You’re not one individual. You’re part of a larger community. I remember this from being a kid. And that may have gradually disappeared because of neoliberalism’s post-war individualism, and the internet, etc. But creating a community, instituting a community, doesn’t necessarily have to be productive. It’s not a community that gathers in order to produce something, except itself. That is very important to us, and I think there is room for political thought in that.

JM

Yes.

LS

Just, you know, this. We’re talking, and this is work. It is. But even if this weren’t happening, even if this conversation wasn’t happening, if we were just at dinner after the opening...

JM

We were invited by this local biennale called Bienal de Cerveira to do an exhibition there as part of the biennale. And we came out and did this project about our...

LS

Being together.

JM

Being together. We worked with nine artists.
There was no theme. But it was probably our first attempt to make a set of relationships visible through the format of the exhibition. In that sense, you know, it was a group of friends, a community of people that was based in that building, just working together, producing a show together.

AK
Did you do that under Kunsthalle Lissabon?

JM
Yes.

LS
Yes, it was a Kunsthalle Lissabon project.

AK
Were you working when this all started? I'm curious to hear about your relationship to your day job.

JM
I was working for the city of Lisbon already, in the Communications Department of the City Museum. From there, I started working with contemporary art. I then went to work in a new museum that they were creating through the African Center called Africa.Cont.

LS
I forgot about that.

JM
At the time, we already had started Kunsthalle Lissabon and they asked me to work in the Africa.Cont. And from Africa.Cont they invited me to be the head of contemporary art of the city. We already had started Kunsthalle Lissabon and it was one of the first things that we discussed with the councilor of culture who invited me was, “As you know, I have this project that I’m doing and I don’t want to let the project go.” They responded that as long as they don’t touch each other, the city’s okay with it.

AK
That’s great. I’m sure that it allowed you to do different —
Different stuff, yes. Working for the city has been more about supporting a way of working, in terms of conditions for the artists and in terms of the studio...

Structure.

Structure, yes. It was the same way that we were working in the Kunsthalle Lissabon, creating other stuff. It’s creating conditions for them to work.

It seems like from what I understand that you were able to take some of the ethos of the Kunsthalle Lissabon—the things that you guys value—and try to infuse that into the structure of the city. That’s a rare opportunity to have.

That’s right.

But I’m sure there are frustrations working within the city. I’m sure that there are projects that you were really proud of, but also things that you didn’t really want to do.

Of course. That’s something that I’m really proud of. The city held a public appeal for the studios, having the jury, etc. It was really important for me, this way of doing things, for me and for the city.

It was such a huge change.

It was. I think it really also depends on the people you work with in the city. It
really depends on the councilor. I’ve always been working with the councilor that is now in charge, so it is like working with a dream partner. It makes a huge difference that they really allow you to do your stuff. Of course, you have to throw in some political stuff. You have to do some of these kinds of exhibitions because the mayor from Budapest is coming to town, so we have to do something with Budapest; or the embassy, because it’s the 200 years of something or other, and so we have to do this. But other than those types of things, you have the space to do the projects you want to do that you think are important for the city or for the community. In that way, it was really important for me to work in the city during these years and it was really important to shape, in a way, the community and being supportive of them.

No, and he’s done an amazing job.

You’re a little biased.

You know I’m biased.

Oh, you should be. That’s totally fine.

But there’s a tremendous difference from the role of the city in contemporary art before and now.

Getting back to the Kunsthalle Lissabon, once you had the name, you waited two years and then you opened the first space.

It was a tiny, tiny space. Listen, when we were starting, we knew that we couldn’t afford rent, so we just wanted a free space. It may sound like this was all very articulate from the beginning and very planned. It wasn’t. It was a sort of experiment. We were making things up as we went along.

Thinking by doing.
So we got this tiny, tiny space which was a storefront that was really a weird ground floor office/storefront. We got it for free because at the time João knew the guy who ran the building and he told him, “Listen, we would like to open a space. Can you find us anything in the building? You know, we’re not picky. Anything will do.” And the guy said, “Well, that one over there facing the street is empty. It’s really bad. Do you guys want to have a look at it?” And it was a really bad space. It was a former office, so there was a weird partition dividing the space. There were telephone wires everywhere. And we were like, okay. We don’t really know what to do with this. We thought, there’s a Portuguese local artist named Nuno Sousa Vieira, a sculptor. His work has been dealing with obsolete architectural structures and turning them into sculptures so we thought it could be an interesting reversal of the relationship between the artist and the institution if it was the other way around; if it were the artist that could, through his practice, create the conditions for the institution to exist. We invited him for the first solo show. He took all of that and then created an installation that was the first project of Kunsthalle Lissabon. Once the show was over, he removed it and we were left with an empty space, but with the traces of his installation, which stayed with us throughout the two years we were there.

We were there for two years, and then we moved upstairs. It was right above us, on the first floor. The building, at the time, still had plenty of empty spaces. The shift in space started because we needed an office space to get some work done, because we didn’t want to work from home and we were performing the institution. It was clear that institution as only the exhibition space wasn’t viable. We needed to expand physically and we needed a space that could provide us with that other part of an institution, the institutional activity: admin work, you know, whatever.

AK
Because that’s also part of the institution.

LS
Exactly.

JM
In the beginning, we moved because of the office space there on the first floor.

LS
There was an in-between phase in which we had the space downstairs on the ground floor, the storefront, but our office was on the first floor. It was
a bit weird. And that wasn’t really functioning because they were detached from each other and they were far apart. We got tired of that space and, again, we were playing with expectations and we had constructed Kunsthalle Lissabon as a tiny, tiny office space. We thought, “Okay, so we need to play with peoples’ expectations a bit more. How can we do this in relation to our use of space?” There was this abandoned corner room: 19th century, plastered ceilings, hardwood floors, tons of very dramatic windows, a very decadent bourgeois, semi-derelict apartment. A very different atmosphere from what we had. And we thought, “Well maybe this could work. It’s hard. But what if we moved it here and see what happens, you know?” We asked for that space and we got it.

AK
So, it wasn’t the artists that prompted the move?

LS
No.

AK
It was actually the administrative work?

LS
Yes, it was the admin work. The admin work prompted the need to expand. The first space was very, very small and it was very, very limited in terms of what we could actually present there. We wanted something a bit bigger, but we wanted something nicer. We were like, “Okay, so we’ve played the card of the crappy Kunsthalle. Let’s play the card of the very picture perfect Kunsthalle. Let’s move to the extreme opposite of where we were.”

AK
Right, like the Schinkel Pavillon.

LS
Yes, and we thought of it as our version of the Schinkel Pavillon. You know, kind of derelict.

AK
It looked very similar in some ways, with the circular marbled room.
Yes. We were very interested by the idea of what that room could actually allow us to do curatorially, because it is a very specific room. When you think of the Schinkel Pavillon, there are a very limited number of things you can do and artists you can invite. For us, that was not necessarily connected to the institution, but curatorially, we wanted that challenge. We wanted to abandon — if we were ever connected to — the white cube. And we wanted a quarter of a circle, 19th century windows with balconies, you know, beautiful ceilings, everything. What we were showing transformed tremendously. Those were our most beautiful years. We moved toward more formal practices, such as Amalia Pica and Leonor Antunes. Which are gorgeous.

Haris Epaminonda.

Haris Epaminonda and Daniel Gustav Cramer. Melvin Moti, which was insane. It was delicate. It was subtle. You know, I’m getting goosebumps. Very politically engaged. Ahmet Ögüt, Mounira Al Solh, Pilvi Takala. So those shows were all about the artist in the world.

Got it. Because it’s a storefront.

Yes. We wanted, again, to play with peoples’ expectations. We just thought, “Okay, so they expect this from us. Let’s keep them guessing.”

I think it’s really back to the crisis. I think it’s really important that all these movements could be made because of the crisis.

True, yes.

Did it also hit here in 2008? Is that when it started?

That’s why the space was for free.
We are a product of the crisis.

Yes, it created the Kunsthalle Lissabon.

Both conceptually, but on a very practical level as well.

On a very practical level because...

The space was free and we could use it because of the crisis, because...

AK
Things were empty. They were abandoned. It was a former bank building, wasn’t it?

Yes.

LS
Yes, once the crisis started to wear off, obviously, the building was sold and it’s now a very expensive area. Across the street there was Cartier, Louis Vuitton, Prada, Armani.

AK
Which is incredible to think that that was where an empty space would be. It’s almost demonstrating that there’s an issue here financial instability.

GW
Right.

LS
An empty building. It was a whole building.

AK
Back to precarity: both in regard
We thought that precarity could be a very apt metaphor to describe the way we operated the Kunsthalle at the time. We felt that precarity could be an interesting concept to describe what we were doing and how we were engaging with the community. I think we were a bit reckless at the time, or careless. I mean, we were riffing on that idea as an idea without actually acknowledging that precarity was literally destroying the social fabric of the country. And not only the social fabric of the country, but our community, with the extreme cuts. At a certain point we decided we should abandon that as a tool or as a metaphor to describe the way we were operating, and instead, focus on fighting it. That’s why, for instance, we don’t exploit interns. No one works for free. If we can’t afford an intern, we won’t have an intern. But if an intern is working with us, then he or she must be paid because it is labor and labor should be paid. The same thing with artists. Artist fees, from the beginning. Per diems. Everything.

AK
Do you get paid?

I get paid.

AK
Good.

I get paid. Not enough.

AK
But you didn’t in the beginning?

Not in the beginning, no. In between grants.

There was a really rough year.

That lost year, yes.
I think that’s when we really started abandoning precarity, because we had two options. Either I would work for free and Kunsthalle Lissabon as a project would continue, or we would end it because there were no conditions. My options were either unemployment or voluntary work.

AK
They’re not ideal situations, because you also don’t want to exploit yourself.

LS
Exactly.

AK
We all do this to a certain extent, right? We work more than we get paid for.

LS
Exactly. For a year I was unpaid, and it was tough. It’s mentally terrible, you know, because you’re still committed to the project the same as when you were paid, except there is...

AK
There’s no one to blame but yourself.

LS
True. And so we decided that we should institute different relations, different labor relationships.

AK
Right.

LS
In our community sometimes, you know, the exploitation of artists, of interns, is mainstream and common.

AK
I was going to ask, do people normally pay artists here for exhibitions?
There are no rules.

AK
There are no rules. Well, it’s the unregulated art world.

LS
It’s unregulated. What happens is one of three things. Either you get a fee, which is rare, either out of the production budget, whatever the artist doesn’t spend...

AK
Oh, they get the leftovers?

JM
They get the leftovers.

LS
Which then means that the artist will cut back on production costs.

AK
Right. There should just be a fixed fee and that’s just it.

LS
Or you don’t simply get a fee. And I think we told you this. We did the first solo show of a duo, young artists, and you know, because they had no experience and we were like, “OK, so you get a fee, it’s a 600-Euro fee, blah, blah, blah. You just need to get us a receipt, or if you don’t have receipts, just collect as many supermarket receipts as possible, we can make up for that amount.” They thought that was mainstream and that was very common. They’re invited for a project at Gulbenkian Foundation...

AK
Which has so much money.

LS
Which has so much money. First thing they ask, so, well, what about the fee? And the answer was, isn’t this fee enough?

AK
Right. Economic capital versus cultural capital, which doesn’t pay
And then, you know, those two kids were like, “Your budget is tremendous and there is no fee, but those guys have a fee.” It’s a matter of respect, but it’s mostly a matter of ethics. We’ve decided — and it changes because our production budget changes from show to show — the average fee we pay artists should represent maybe 20 percent of the overall cost of each exhibition. Between 10 and 20 percent of what an exhibition costs us. When you think 20 percent of the overall exhibition cost, it’s pretty decent.

AK
That’s really good. But fast forward to today and it’s not quite the same conditions of the crisis as it was the last time I was here. You don’t feel it on the ground in quite the same way. There’s this wave of tourism.

Yes.

JM
Well, tourism was the easy fix.

Yes, but in terms of funding, for instance, it’s changed a bit.

LS
Everything changed. It was really difficult. The very neoliberal prime minister we had told people they should emigrate.

JM
Especially young people and teachers.

LS
He said that the crisis was our own fault.

JM
Young people and people with a degree already. He was saying that people with degrees would not find jobs in Portugal. That they should...
Go elsewhere. He told us that the crisis was our own doing, each of us, and we had to pay for it. We had to suffer for it. It was really, really, really bad. But thankfully, they worked it out and the first thing they did was to terminate the Ministry of Culture. Like, we don’t need culture, that’s just an expense.

AK
I’m curious because it seems like every artist that Gee and I have talked to have had some sort of Gulbenkian funded residency at Gasworks or they’ve been in New York and, we were really impressed that seemingly every artist that we’ve encountered has spent time living and working abroad.

LS
Yes, it’s a given, in a way that as an artist — not as a curator, though, but as an artist — you’ll apply to these residencies and these grants and eventually you’ll get one.

AK
Is it because it’s just small enough?

JM
We have good grants and good foundations like the Gulbenkian Foundation, which is big and has been giving grants since the 1960s.

LS
When the foundation started, the country was very different. It was very small, you know?

AK
Right. More provincial.

LS
There were no opportunities for education here in the arts. So Gulbenkian’s mission — there was no Ministry of Culture — was to send artists, dancers, choreographers, actors, musicians. Up until about 10 years ago, Gubelkian had a dance company and an orchestra. They also have a research center for
sciences and they’re doing a lot of research in genetics, etc.

AK
So not just in the arts.

JM
Not only in the arts, no.

LS
Development. You know, science and arts and culture. They’re one of the largest European foundations.

AK
So there are these Portuguese artists who are in fact very international. Do a lot of them come back or do some of them stay in Portugal?

JM
Some of them stay, but...

AK
Like, Francisco Queimadela and Mariana Caló were from Porto, but they went and lived in Berlin for a while.

LS
Yes, and London.

AK
Right. I’m curious about the decision to come back. Because there seems to be a wave now of international people coming and wanting to live in Lisbon and curate here as independent curators. Was this always the case?

LS
No.
Not at all.

AK
When did you start seeing that happen and how has that affected the dialogue that you have? I wonder if the dialogue that you initiated is part of the reason that they want to come.

LS
It’s so hard to find reasons for that.

AK
Sure. Well, maybe not the reasons, but rather, how has it affected you? Has it been positive?

JM
It’s a really positive thing, for sure.

LS
One of the reasons why we define Kunsthalle Lissabon the way we do is because we wanted to be part of a larger scene, a more international scene. We wanted to break free from this very regional, local community. The fact that we now have artists moving to Lisbon and curators moving to Lisbon, for us, it’s really good. It’s really productive, specifically because all these people who are coming in have no understanding of the local hierarchy.

AK
Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

JM
It’s a good thing.

LS
You’ve seen how we work. We’re very skeptical and we try not to reproduce those hierarchies. But we are part of them. It’s very difficult for us not to see this guy who is the director of a museum and not act in a specific way because he is the director of that museum.
AK
Right. You don’t just seem him as a person. Do you feel like the people who come here from elsewhere have the sensitivity to the local context and the artists and the history? Sometimes to come dive-bombing into another scene can cause tension.

JM
No, no. I think some of them are kind of trying to engage with the city.

AK
Is it better to engage or not to engage?

LS
I think, in itself, it’s not good or bad.

AK
I’m sure there must be some people here who are just based in Lisbon, right?

LS
Yes, but that’s a good thing.

AK
That’s a good thing?

LS
Because it’s acknowledging that it’s not that special.

AK
Right. That in this day and age, it almost doesn’t matter where you live on some level.

JM
Yes.
Exactly. And you know, Portuguese art is the same as Spanish art, is the same
as Italian art.

AK
And you can also say who you’re
in dialogue with.

GW
You get to choose.

LS
It’s good that someone makes that visible because there is a certain tendency
to think, “Oh, Portuguese art is the best.” It’s just that, you know, it’s not exotic
enough, so it doesn’t get into the biennales or whatever.

JM
Or they don’t have the money to export it.

LS
If a group of, I don’t know, Latin American artists moved to Lisbon and they’re
not aware, I think that can be interesting. It could send a message, like, “I’m
sorry, you’re not that special.” It’s not being dismissive. It’s just opening up
people to the world. There is more to life than Lisbon, you know. I think that is
very important. That’s what we are trying to do in our own way. Probably not
anymore, but three or four years ago, probably around the last time you were
here, we were asked by curators — probably not the most exciting curators or
the best curators or the most international curators — but we were asked, and
I’m quoting, “Where do you find these artists?!”

JM
For a while, the scene was really local.

LS
Our program isn’t that cutting edge. We’re not searching for emerging artists.
We’re not doing that kind of work. These people that we thought were pretty
obvious, you know, even though they are young. Like, where’d you find these
artists? What’s happening for the time being is important. It creates smaller
communities inside a community, and I think it’s nice. I think it’s important.

AK
Maybe if you’re bringing things
into Lisbon, maybe these other
people are bringing Lisbon out into the world a little bit.

**JM**

I also think it’s a whole different set of relations. As you were saying, like, all these international artists came and they started to...

**LS**

To spread the word about us, you know. About what’s going on.

**JM**

About the relations I have with other artists here. I think it’s really important for the city or for the scene and for the art community that all these people are moving to town, because there’s some really important people moving.

**AK**

I guess one question that we had, because we’ve talked previously about site specificity, is this idea of Portugal having the allure of not being a center and a fetishization of that.

**JM**

On the center and peripheries?

**AK**

On centers and peripheries, yes. All these things that shouldn’t almost matter anymore on some level.

**JM**

But they do. They still matter.

**LS**

I don’t know.

**JM**

I think we’re not peripheric enough and not central enough.

**LS**

And we’re not exotic enough, because we’re Europe.
AK
No, you’re not exotic enough.
But I think that there’s also a romanticization around moving here.

LS
A romanticization of the crisis. That’s the word. It’s the same reason why Documenta is going to Athens. It’s gotten cheap. It’s amazing. It’s unspoiled.

AK
Yes, but now there are tuk-tuks everywhere, so there you go.

LS
I think the notion of centers and peripheries kind of was diluted by places like Beirut or Mexico City, which became way more interesting than places like London or New York. People would go to these places for research. Artists would move to these places because they were much more visible than being in Berlin or London or New York. I think it’s just making things faster and more disposable. For the next two years, it will be Lisbon. Then the following two years, it’ll be some other city.

AK
Right. I’m just curious, for the people who are so invested in the local scene, what is that experience like? It sounds like so far you see it as a positive.

LS
I think for the time being it’s positive.

AK
That’s good.

LS
I think, but it has just started. I think it will be very fast, but I don’t think it will become something like Berlin. Brussels didn’t become Berlin. I think by the time, in two years’ time, probably a lot of people who moved to Lisbon will have moved elsewhere because they wanted a cool place to live for a couple of years, to check out what was going on and then probably what they expected won’t come true or it won’t be what they expected it to be.
JM
Or there’s another new thing and they want to go there.

LS
Or there’s a new thing, you know. And probably, you know, someone will tell us, oh no, Rome is the place to be right now, and they’ll move to Rome. I don’t think people will stay here for the next 12 years.

AK
But while they’re here, it’s making an interesting discussion.

LS
It’s making Lisbon more open. And there are more dialogues to be had with more people.