

I was born in 1993. Looking back, I have vivid memories of Lisbon changing over the years — like lego blocks of recollections expressed by visions, flavours, shapes and colours.

For example, I can clearly recall the excitement in the city over Expo'98. You could sense it in the air and it wasn't the same as the later (but comparable) hype of Euro'2004 (far more hysterical and violent'). Expo had a wholesome and forward-thinking theme to it: *The oceans, a heritage for the future*.

To me, it seemed people had a hopeful twinkle in their eye, and Expo bumper stickers adorned every car. It was an extravagant money-no-issue project of starting a completely new neighbourhood. Lisbon never experienced anything like it before or since. We could finally discover what a "future Lisbon" would look like. Much more than a development project, it ushered in a new millennium of urbanist possibilities. A cutting edge, democratic and forward-thinking city erected on the muddy² myths of a once-big-now-little-country. Certain of its national identity but curious about others, in a manner that finally appeared hinged not on last century propaganda but on a globalist '90s tech-economy. The imperial tropes of Estado Novo still lingered, but now, with a twist of internet, global village, pro-sustainability and ecological discourse — the sea was no longer (only) the stage of maritime accomplishments but now also a source of future tokenism. Even if all this fanfare was naive, the positivity was undeniable. As the then president proclaimed in full opening speech mode: Lisbon was now "an instrument of national affirmation". Meaning, Expo'98 was a key moment of a city emerging precisely as such — an instrument.

The question arises: are cities supposed to be a tool, if so to what end? Nikolai Nekh has been working in and around this question for some time now. In 2019³ Nekh, started an extensive body of work under the umbrella title "Museum of Gentrification", which now, at Balcony Gallery, reaches a resolution (to be concluded in an upcoming monograph). The employed techniques are several: photography, sculpture, assemblage, drawing, video and text. I would argue that one of the most prevalent and shared traits of all these multidisciplinary works is an obsession for surface. The slick and seductive power of current visual mechanisms designed to grab us (our attention and cash). This of course goes beyond objecthood, quietly framing taste and overall sense of desire, what we want or don't want. Nekh has trained himself to become a specialist in toying and manipulating with consumer-focused scenography and in "Museum of Gentrification" we find a plethora of visual tropes that unite us as consumers of goods (be it Ikea furniture, real estate or dishware). It is a world of fantasy, a clash between reality and fiction: the color-washing of antique racist furniture, the shiny

MUSEUM OF GENTRIFICATION

NIKOLAI NEKH

Curated by Diogo Pinto

22.09.23 to 02.12.23

BALCONY
CONTEMPORARY
ART GALLERY

Rua Coronel Bento Roma 12 A
1700-122 Lisbon | Portugal

T (+351) 211 339 866
M (+351) 969 847 655
M (+351) 932 380 822

info@balcony.pt
www.balcony.pt

¹ Spending gigantic amounts of taxpayer money on football was a much easier sell. The country roared together with the prospect of basically winning. It was so exaggerate and real. It felt like, as a country, we could finally settle a debt that was long overdue. To the point that people — as a nation — could proudly look in the mirror. Alas, not winning the cup, it was short-lived and the downfall of such moral high wasn't easy.

² Literally and figuratively. The whole project was built on top of either abandoned, highly contaminated industrial sites or endless car landfills. Also, the theme of the exhibition (Ocean) was dealt with in a very blissfully ignorant sort of way, ignoring all Portuguese colonial and slavery endeavours with the usual "only tell me the good parts" lusotropicalism same old, same old, but now in the Y2K era. The under-the-rug-muck-sweeping was all encompassing. Also, António Mega Ferreira and Vasco Graça Moura came with the Expo'98 project precisely when, and because, they were leading the commission for the 500th year anniversary of the so-called "Portuguese Discoveries" back in '89 — hence the "modern" take on oceans.

³ Nikolai Nekh, "Museu da Gentrificação: Expositor No 6.". Published in Wrong Wrong Magazine (04.01.2019).

human-sized meat grinder, the real estate agent crummy leather armour, the nostalgic breaking of utopian Vista Alegre. The “Museum of Gentrification” is a fictional museum, but only in the way that gentrification is also day-to-day fiction by force of inflation, speculation and *unrealistic* cost of living.

25 years later, in retrospect, Expo and the subsequent Parque das Nações were a financial disaster. Mismanagement, corruption and very creative accounting left no option but to turn the project into a neoliberal playground. To avoid insolvency, cultural centres were turned into casinos, theatres into luxury hotels and, well, the priciest apartments in Portugal. In the end, it did what it set out to do — it showed us what future Lisbon looks like. And it looks like a city in perpetual scurry of outstanding payments, lost in the fine dance between public service and market. By sway of desperation, our notion of utopian city seems to be tied with the ruins of debt (not only financial but also historical).

The national industry is tourism and that means instability runs deep. Selling homes, selling identity, selling ourselves in a 24/7 free-for-all. Ultimately, the city is both all of us and some sentient *other*. It breathes with and through us while being completely independent; it will forever carry on without us, unfazed, in a never ending cycle of urban life and death — utterly beautiful and brutal.

MUSEUM OF GENTRIFICATION

NIKOLAI NEKH

Curated by Diogo Pinto

22.09.23 to 02.12.23

Diogo Pinto

BALCONY
CONTEMPORARY
ART GALLERY

Rua Coronel Bento Roma 12 A
1700-122 Lisbon | Portugal

T (+351) 211 339 866
M (+351) 969 847 655
M (+351) 932 380 822

info@balcony.pt
www.balcony.pt