

## Conditional Fictive Objects in Contemporary Sculpture Practice

### Objetos Condicionais e Fictícios na Prática de Escultura Contemporânea

#### Rajaa Paixão

Lebanese-Portuguese visual artist based in Lisbon. Ongoing practice-based PhD in Fine Arts—Sculpture. Universidade de Lisboa, Faculdade de Belas-Artes, Centro de Investigação e de Estudos em Belas-Artes (CIEBA), Largo da Academia Nacional de Belas-Artes, 1249-058 Lisboa, Portugal

#### Abstract

This article presents an overview of a body of sculptural works developed for a practice-based research in Fine Arts. The research investigates contemporary sculpture as fictive object through subjectivity and its understanding in postmodernist theory, using real and imagined narratives as a catalyst. It adopts a reflective practice methodology to scrutinise the course of sculpture making when created under conditional spatiotemporal circumstances, with the primary objective of deepening the understanding of sculpture as (fictive) object and delineate its possible roles.

#### Abstrato

Este artigo apresenta uma visão geral de um corpo de obras escultóricas desenvolvidas para uma pesquisa baseada na prática em Belas Artes. A pesquisa investiga a escultura contemporânea como objeto fictício por meio da subjetividade e a sua compreensão na teoria pós-moderna, usando narrativas reais e imaginárias como catalisadores. Ela adota uma metodologia de prática reflexiva para escrutinar o curso da escultura quando criada em circunstâncias espaço-temporais condicionais, com o objetivo principal de aprofundar a compreensão da escultura como objeto (fictício) e delinear seus possíveis papéis.

#### Introduction

This article presents an overview of a body of sculptural works developed for a practice-based research in Fine Arts. The ongoing research investigates contemporary sculpture as fictive object through subjectivity and its understanding in postmodernist theory, using real and imagined narratives as a catalyst. It scrutinises the course of sculpture making when created under specific spatiotemporal circumstances. Creators respond to certain aspects of existence, particular to a personal journey, background, and experience, triggered by catalytic events manifesting at key stages of one's life. The result in art is an array of divergent reactions to the same trigger, betraying striking differences in perception and processes of making. This practical exploration reflects on the relevance of a personal artistic process and experience in the contemporary sculpture framework, and how subjective perception of reality exposes facets of the world we live in. The research considers several questions: How does the passage from personal narratives to public objects happen? To what extent can the perception of real and fictive narratives manipulate the becoming of a

sculpture and its constituents, alluding to specific materials, and initiate its juxtaposition with found objects? How can the real and the fictive coexist and how do they determine the creation of a sculptural work? What is the importance of objects and what symbolism do they represent to our condition? What can sculpture achieve with these roles on both personal and social levels? The inquiry adopts an experimental approach in a personal, circumstantial, and cultural context. The term *conditional sculpture* was specifically coined for this exploration. In this precise context, sculpture started being considered conditional after the creation process didn't run freely without drastic interruptions and limitations subject to unpredicted events, relating to early motherhood, and now, the global pandemic and its implications. The inquiry acknowledges these major intrusions to the art practice and studies the course of sculpture making accordingly. It investigates the metamorphosis real back-stories undergo when they merge with the fictive, and the narratives they jointly produce. Autobiography is employed as the source of the narrative translated into sculptures. By becoming a physical

object, autobiography transforms into 'autotopography' (González, 1995, p. 180) which at once refers to, and distinguishes itself from autobiography, by referring to "a spatial, local, and situational 'writing' of the self's life in visual art". The objectives of the research are to deepen the understanding of sculpture as object, elaborately as fictive object, delineate possible functions of fictionality in life, validate further the importance of subjectivity in art, and frame the context of creating under specific spatiotemporal circumstances and social conditions. Such a study holds relevance for social and spatial experiences and maps the universal relatable similarities of struggles and anxieties behind our perceptual disparities. It serves as an indicator for analysis and the study of several beliefs in society depending on our condition, background, gender, and influences during this point in history, a present considered contemporary. Most of all, it aims to delimit existing functions, and suggest new roles played by sculpture in this precise context. In a wider perspective, the inquiry seeks to uncover subliminal influences, demystify predefined universal stereotypes, rules and myths of no-nos in both the contemporary art scene and the social realm. The research focuses on the process of making as the primary source of self-reflection and findings, and uses the written theoretical study as a following support. Altogether the methodology consists of what Donald Schön (1983) defines as a reflective practice. It falls under James Elkins' (2005, pp. 8-16) second model in the configurations of Practice-based PhDs where the artwork is equal to the dissertation. It corresponds to thinking through making, yet doesn't fall under what Tim Ingolds (2013) defines as the art of inquiry. Ingolds thinks of making as a 'process of growth' and proposes to read making longitudinally rather than laterally, by answering to the flux and flows of the materials we work with, as opposed to starting with an idea in mind, and with a supply of the raw material needed to achieve it (pp. 20-22). The process adopted matches Ralph Holloways' (as cited in Ingolds, p. 41) understanding of the process of making clearly defined by a starting point and an end point. The creation of the sculptures began with 'both a plan and a finite set of component operations required to implement it'. These components are assembled bit by bit as the practice evolves, to constitute a totality that corresponds precisely to the original sketch and imagined sculpture. The type of activity undertaken is conceptual with the primary attempt to understand the creative artefacts themselves

(Sullivan, 2009, p. 62). The methods follow the rule of no rules, by conducting the research without restrictions as it is already restricted by nature, and letting the practice run its course. They involve a 'creative analytical processes (CAP) ethnography' (Richardson, 1999, p. 660), which includes autoethnography, fiction, writing stories, installations, and photographs. The methods used are validated and deemed effective by Carole Gray and Julian Malins (2004, p. 30), counting observation, visualization, drawing, lateral thinking, sketchbook/notebook, photography, video, experimentation with materials and processes, modeling/simulations, reflection-in-action, personal narrative, use of metaphor and analogy, organisational and analytical matrices, visual narratives, and critical writing.

### Development

The body of artistic works entails several projects, each tackling a different theme. The first two projects are presented here. Even though the individual practical projects differ in themes and visual outcomes, they all share the same creation process and generic properties characterised by the following steps:

*Catalytic event/inspirational trigger registered as a lingering idea and chosen to explore > Documentation + Autoethnography texts (optional or throughout) > Real back-story mixes with an imagined story > A new narrative is generated > Fictive objects pertaining to the unified narrative are imagined > Sketching of the fictive objects > Materials designated by the narrative > Execution/creation of the fictive objects in the studio > Installation/Individual documentation of each project > Reflective/autoethnography texts (optional or throughout)*

Project I is titled *The water tank (TWT)* (2018), and was inspired by a familiar object from our daily life and its surroundings, an old water tank in Grândola, Portugal (Figs. 1,2). The structure of the tank was artistically documented and studied, and gradually resulted in the creation of four works. The first main sculpture reimagines the tank, followed by three supporting sculptures rethinking the tank and its surroundings.

In the autoethnography notes, the artefacts were analysed from two points of view separately, as an artist and as a mother.

*As a visual artist [...] I can picture this structure in the park [...] Given a neat paint and placed out of context, the tank could*

have been called public art, or a monument. [...] I look at the tank and imagine a collaboration between Robert Morris and Le Corbusier, a sculpture titled 'Untitled sur pilotis' [...] What happens when the narrative is not a clear post-creation reading, and when the viewer is unaware of the thinking behind it? [...] As a mother [...] Seeing my 2 year-old standing underneath the nearly 5m-high tank certainly triggered a sense of anxiety [...] I can't help but think about how mothers are supposed to be in the eyes of society: strong, solid, in control; when a tsunami might be taking place inside their mind. [...] In the case of the water tank, the water is tamed, controlled, powerless, reduced, and more prone to condition deterioration. [...] Does society reduce mothers to water tanks where the ageing process is a sign of degradation? (Paixão, 2019)

The notes determined intersecting dominant themes, such as Influence and movement, The good and the bad, The mother of the mother, Extendable properties, Criticism, Freedom, Fear, Crazy, Play, Time, Depth, The tactile and the sensorial, and Control. It pointed to concerns of social nature and myths around the image of the artist in the art scene, and the image of the mother in society. By metaphorically comparing the tank to a mother moulded by society, it demonstrated how the fictive narrative behind the sculptures recreated a fictive space where the mother was free from judgement and stereotypes, and how the choice of materials was made to materialise the ideas behind the narrative.

*Scenario a: The tank has been downsized, the imperfect cube and the long base structures have been accentuated, and the tank has become less dominant. It has now conceded to show transparency and reveals its inside. The water has taken control over its destiny and has overflowed outside the tank. Instead of being threatening, the water lies calmly and peacefully on the tank, looking very vivid, free—yet composed—healthy, and doesn't appear to be affecting the balance of the tank. Residues have remained inside the tank, pure white, clean, harmonious, retaining a shine betraying the former presence of the water. (Figs. 3,4)*

*Scenario b: Some water drops have escaped outside the tank, and are leaking on the tank's bases/pilotis. Invisible to the eye, light can reveal their presence and crystalline property. (Figs. 5,6)*

*Scenario c: External factors surrounding the tank play a role in its existence. Autumn leaves contribute with an organic and ephemeral look, softening its threatening aspect. The water*

*drops have fallen on the surrounding elements, gathering and reshaping in a frozen state, affecting the texture and the matt aspect of the surfaces it gets in contact with. (Figs. 7,8)*

*Scenario d: Human presence is occasionally present, interacting lively around the tank, instigating the play factor, and adding a sunny touch to the green scenery. (Figs. 9,10) (Paixão, 2019)*

Project II is titled *Nurturing sculpture-time (NST)*, and was inspired by the dominant theme of time determined in Project I. It explored the subjective notion of time perceived by both the mother and the artist, focused on the shape of time and the existing theories around it in the literature. The notion of the shape of time was translated into a visual perception consisting of two sculptural works, *Wormholes & Space Cashews* (Figs. 11,12) and *Space Skins* (Figs. 13,14). The exploration culminated in the publication *Fatalism as a product of Motherhood in the context of Sculpture* (Paixão, 2020). The paper demonstrated theoretically how subjective perception can differ not only from an artist to another, but for the same artist from a day to another, depending on real life occurrences, biographical circumstances and conditions. The project also underlined the passage from real to fictive narratives, and the functions of materials.

*The artist didn't perceive one specific linear direction and decided to create many. Time might consist of multiple isolated time streams instead of a single line [...]*

*The mother is [...] aware of the physical and periodic time. The most overpowering influential factor, which was the emotional health anxiety linked to severe food and skin allergies in the child, was isolated and scrutinised. The erratic and exploratory artistic thoughts are often interrupted by exterior interferences, inducing worries and a need to rush. There's an intrusive tense on the guard, the irrational dread of unfortunate events, by not having control over what is going to happen in the future, the inevitable and the unavoidable, or Fatalism. (Paixão, 2020)*

All the sculptures in the projects are created for the indoor space, possibly the white cube. Without being site specific, they need to be displayed collectively, with reasonable space between them in order to safeguard each piece's identity as an independent sculpture, yet still correlate with each other. The smaller the sculpture is, the less space it includes around itself, and has correspondingly less of a spatial field in which to exist for the viewer. This distance of the object in space from our bodies, structures the quality of 'publicness' or 'privateness' imposed on things (Morris, 1968, pp. 230-231). In general, these sculptures are abstract and hint to an unclear narrative. Only a few items denote a figurative representation, such as leaves, or socks, which steer away for hyperrealism and merge with the abstracted whole. Titles can provide further hints for the elements the sculptures and hidden narratives represent. The works are accessible to the human scale with their variable sizes, where the entirety of the biggest sculpture can be looked at in detail. Robert Morris elaborates that the smaller an object is, the closer one approaches it (p. 231). The human body enters into the total continuum of sizes in the perception of relative size, and establishes itself as a constant on that scale (p. 230). The sculptures are static, and feature various materials responding to the correspondent narrative. The materials present an organic and industrial combination. They feature traditional art materials, construction materials, and occasionally found objects and readymades. In this context, readymades are employed as a complementary structural object, or supporting base, unlike Louise Bourgeois's selection of objects rooted in memory and biography holding a personal meaning; or Marcel Duchamp's selection of objects as the idea of the object ("The Art of Louise Bourgeois", n.d.). Bases play a crucial role in the presentation of these sculptures. They are neutral in terms of colours and texture; vary from nude wood, to untreated industrial metal, or neutral casted materials and found objects, most of them grey. Jean Baudrillard (1996, pp. 38-39) notes that there are now functional substitutes like plastic and polymorphous substances for organic and natural materials. Manufacturing synthetics means that materials become polymorphous and lose their symbolic naturalness, and so achieve a higher degree of abstractness making a universal play of associations among materials possible. The works in the project are composed and added part by part, a type of sculpture both Donald Judd and Morris are opposed to. Therefore, they

are considered anthropomorphic based on Judd's portrayal (Fried, 1998, p. 150). These works feature specific elements separate from the whole by their implications, and set up relationships within the work. Those elements are the ones that directly point to a hidden narrative, and hold symbolic representations. They betray the structure as a whole and point to a hierarchical importance. Hence, they screen the values of indivisibility, wholeness, singleness, of a 'one thing' work, or Judd's 'Specific Object', distinguished by a unitary form or shape, and essential to create the pure 'gestalt' sensation Morris talks about. In these projects, the gestalt is diluted by the diversity of materials, shapes, textures, and symbolism. The identity of the narrative, and consequently the one of the maker, override the identity of the work as a unified whole. Due to the merging of the real narratives with the imagined ones, most of the representations are unrealistic, fictive, with a touch of familiarity. They are at the same time part of reality and detached from it. The sculptures consist of incepted and materialised objects with their own separate identity, therefore, are autonomous. They share a tempo-spatial dimension where the real and the fictive intersect, belong to an alternate reality, and simultaneously exist in the maker's and the viewers' real one. By becoming real fictive objects, the sculptures are separated, freed, distanced from the artist's mind, and given a life, or biography of their own. Stranger and somehow familiar to the viewer, they are orchestrated and related objects, sibling-like, where the first imagined work is the central piece, and the rest are supporting sculptures that complete the narrative. In each project, the lingering initial triggering thought was acknowledged, faced, dissected, understood, demystified, externalised, controlled, and its perception was manipulated. The tackled themes flag common concerns, such as social pressure, health anxiety, fatigue, concerns for the future and the environment. The thoughts are relatable, yet, they are materialised under a new angle, and an unrelatable perception. Sculptures are here called objects in their physical function of materialising a fictive, perhaps domestic, object pertaining to a new reality. This condition is specific and narrow, as opposed to the general and pervasive condition of Fried's 'literalist' art (p.148). Based on the works developed, key themes were elaborated within the theoretical discourse to assert the roles sculpture can play in this precise context, including *the narrative and the fictive, imagination and perception, and objects.*

## Conclusion

Whilst the thought of the fictive generally promises unlimited possibilities, it is here employed in the imaginative generation of narratives, in the pre-process of the practical execution. Yet, the sculptures are fictive by being a product of the fictive, for they are predetermined and controlled by obeying to the fictive narrative. The control solely belongs to the artist. Throughout the whole creation process, only restricted materials, such as the blue silicone in the water tank sculpture (Figs. 3,4), have reclaimed a tiny fraction of control where the sticky silicone decides on its own bumpy texture despite being modelled in a more or less specific shape. On a philosophical level, everything can ontologically be argued as conditional, and yet, practically, not all freedoms and conditions are equal. The process of these case studies is conditioned on many – if not all – levels and steps, that there isn't much chance for chance, or materials to interfere. It is pre-conditioned due to the circumstances and freedom restrictions surrounding the artist, who herself subjects the making process to more conditions, resulting in absolute post-conditional works, pinning condition as the fulcrum of the inquiry. Same as the material object relies on the physical space or *substrate* (Borgo, Guarino & Masolo, 1997) to exist, the fictive object relies on the fictive space to exist. The essence of fictive sculpture is then firstly in its preceding fictive space and mental dimension, which needs to be looked at closely in spatial artistic fiction. This fictive space is different from imagination, the dimension we know, or the collective reality we share. It is a mental space involving undefined time, unlimited spacetime. It is an expansion or a separate space from the shared space we physically perceive. The experience of related works of art could be more immersive if the makers uncover the pre-creation phase of (fictive) narratives and its potential. Mostly the ubiquitous and hidden ability of the artists to imagine, then completely visualise inside their mind, simulate a second reality in an expanded experience as real as the real one, and project it clearly into a fictive space only them can perceive. The mental invisible space, the negation involved, what it not collectively real or present. Sculpture as fictive object allows viewers to encounter an alternate reality in terms of mental dimension, very intimate and particular to the individuality of the maker, an individual freedom, mentally independent, though always shared through what our real human conditions is, and that is our physicality, mortality, bodily experience and the collective

or social: collective experience, collective perception, and therefore, collective reality. In the case of fictive sculpture, the expanded fictive space is as real as the shared physical one for the maker. This condition is different from any other condition we endure, for it is not imposed on the maker, a fate, or unchangeable, but created by him, subject to his rules, changeable, modifiable and even eliminated at any time, subject to non-condition. Its importance to society is on another scale, because unlike the representation of what we collectively know or see, such as trees, materials, and even the voiced reality of others in this world, it is a gateway to understanding our differences, individuality, and remember that not all reality can be seen, an yet, its existence is unquestionable. The fictive object is a piece of evidence; a proof of existence to what is invisible to others. Consequently, sculptures emanating from collective reality involve one space (the physical). Fictive objects/sculptures involve at least two spaces, the physical one collectively seen by the viewer and the artist, and the mental one only seen by the artist, though only perceived by the viewer to the extent to which the artist is willing to - and can - reveal of it.

## References

- Autobiography. Retrieved 27 August 2019, from <https://literaryterms.net/autobiography/>
- Baudrillard, J. (1996). *The System of Objects* (J. Benedict, Trans.). London: Verso.
- Borgo, S., Guarino, N., & Masolo, C. (1997). An Ontological Theory of Physical Objects. In *11th International Workshop on Qualitative Reasoning*. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319395277\\_An\\_Ontological\\_Theory\\_of\\_Physical\\_Objects](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319395277_An_Ontological_Theory_of_Physical_Objects)
- Elkins, J. (2005). The new PhD in studio art, *Printed Project*, 4. Dublin: Sculptor's Society of Ireland. Retrieved from [http://ace.caad.ed.ac.uk/JointGrads/2009/Elkins-Practice-based\\_PhD.pdf](http://ace.caad.ed.ac.uk/JointGrads/2009/Elkins-Practice-based_PhD.pdf)
- Fried, M. (1998). Art and Objecthood. In M. Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (pp. 148-172). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- González, J. A. (1995). Autotopographies. In G. Brahm Jr. & M. Driscoll, *Prosthetic Territories: Politics and Hypertechnologies* (pp. 133-149). Boulder: Westview Press.
- Gray, C., & Malins, J. (2004). *Visualizing research: A guide to the research process in Art and Design*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Ingold, T. (2013). *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and*

*Architecture*. Oxon: Routledge.

Morris, R. (1968). Notes on Sculpture. In G. Battcock (Ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (pp. 222-235). New York: E.P. Dutton.

Paixão, R. (2019). Notes on the water tank. Retrieved 20 November 2020, from <http://rajaapaixao.art/notes-on-the-water-tank>

Paixão, R. (2020). Fatalism as a product of Motherhood in the context of Sculpture. *Convocarte: Revista De Ciências Da Arte*, (8/9). Retrieved from <http://convocarte.belasartes.ulisboa.pt/index.php/proximo-numero/>

Richardson, L. (1999). Feathers in our CAP. *Journal*

of Contemporary Ethnography, 28(6), 660-668. doi: 10.1177/089124199129023767

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.

Sullivan, G. (2009). Making Space: The Purpose and Place of Practice-Led Research. In *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in the Creative Arts*, edited by Smith, H. and Dean, R. T. 41-65. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

The Art of Louise Bourgeois. Retrieved 9 January 2020, from <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/louise-bourgeois-2351/art-louise-bourgeois>



Figs. 1,2- A water tank and its surroundings, September 2018 in Grândola, Portugal. Photos: author.



Figs. 3,4- Rajaa Paixão, TWT: the water and the tank, 2018, silicone, wood, glass, clay, wall paint, varnish, 106 x 35 x 35 cm. Photos: author.



Figs. 5,6- Rajaa Paixão, TWT: dripping and leakage, 2018, wood, metal, translucent plastic sheet, glue, ceramic holder, screws, bulb, lighting electrical accessories, 110 x 25 x 80 cm. Photos: author.

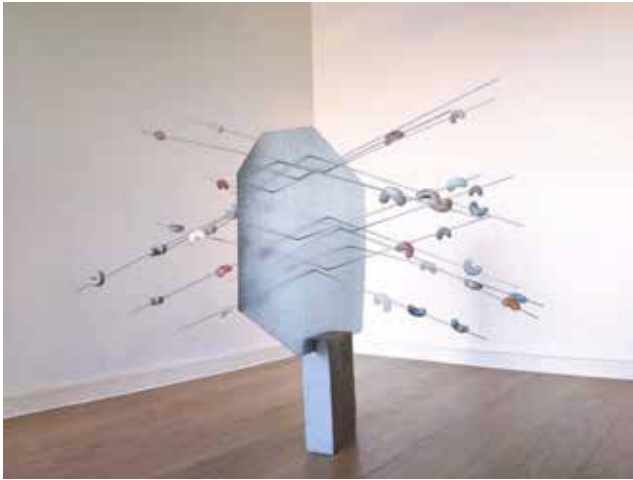


Figs. 7,8- Rajaa Paixão, TWT: the ruins and the frozen puddle, 2018, silicone, metal paint, rock, roof tile, metal, wood, metal wire, indoor paint, variable dimensions. Photos: author.



Figs. 9,10- Rajaa Paixão, TWT: Post-play happy socks, 2018, clay, acrylic paint, varnish, marble, metal, 80 x 73 x 20 cm. Photos: author.





Figs. 11,12- Rajaa Paixão, NST: Wormholes & Space Cashews, 2019, metal, silicone, acrylic, plaster, spray paint, 90 x 90 x 100 cm. Photos: author.



Figs. 13,14- Rajaa Paixão, NST: Space Skins, 2019, metal, silicone, acrylic, plaster, spray paint, 101 x 120 x 22 cm. Photos: author.