

# JOÃO ONOFRE

JOÃO ONOFRE (Lisbon, 1976) has been marking out a path on which video art intersects with drawing and photography to create intense and synthetic situations that are often linked to the recent history of conceptual art.

His, almost invariably short, videos show easily describable situations in which actors collectively or individually carry out tasks or actions performed for the spectator. In their apparent literalness, however, these situations contain a subtle poetic echo that is often capable of producing ambiguous metaphorical reverberations open to a wide range of meanings and interpretations.

This exhibition of the João Onofre works belonging to the Cachola Collection includes the first of these video pieces (*Untitled (We Will Never Be Boring)*, 1997). It is a video in which a couple (a man and a woman) walk towards each other on gymnasium treadmills placed opposite each other without ever coming into contact. Formally dressed, they act out a classic cinema scene — the amorous encounter — in a way that is deconstructed here by the incompleteness of the proposed situation. A seminal work in João Onofre's career, this first video piece lays down the essential foundations of many of his subsequent works: the use of an emblematic situation lacking in any temporal or spatial context, a sense of diffuse metaphorical power, a vague feeling of melancholy, and the use of the loop as a device required by the atemporal nature of the action.

The second video on display — *Untitled* (1999) — also shows a couple of performers, their bodies revolving, opposite to each other, pressed against the lateral walls of a space that possesses no context or reference points, attracted by a mysterious force that sucks them against the lateral boundaries of the projection. While, on the one hand, a cyclical, repetitive and mutually alienating action can still be seen, on the other, the intensity of the film is marked by the bodies colliding against the imaginary, but nonetheless very real, walls of the screen in a way that heightens the repetitive structure of the action. This piece, which is indicative of other works produced in the late

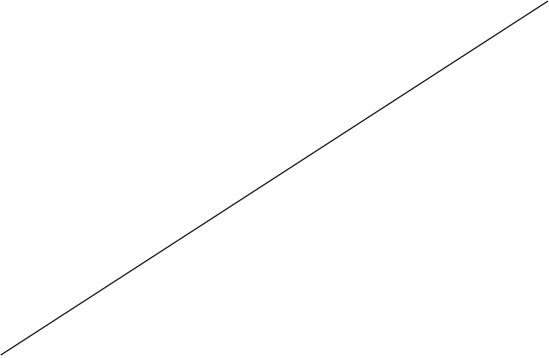


*Tacet*, 2014  
2K video, colour, sound, 7'40"  
Variable projection dimensions

1990s, consolidates the importance of sound in João Onofre's oeuvre: although it is used in earlier works (the sound of the treadmills was also essential in constructing the sense of pointlessness inherent in the blind walk), here it becomes a key element.

In the melancholy of their characters' isolation, these earlier works highlight a humanist component that the artist would incorporate in various ways over time. This component pervades the production of a series of processes (which we may call performative) that are developed for the spectator and sometimes seen front on, as if performed for an audience. In some of João Onofre's video works, the performers play roles that relate to their professions (singers who sing, dancers who execute ballet moves, magicians who perform a levitation act). However, they are removed from the context of their performativity by a process of maladjustment that gives rise to a sense of strangeness. These processes are sometimes complexified by the incorporation of allusions to key moments in the second wave of avant-garde art movements, involving citations that are completely explicit but not always widely known to spectators, thereby adding layers of meaning that depend on the observer's familiarity with the micro-narratives of the art world.

His most recent video, *Tacet* (2014), which is now being shown in Portugal for the first time, falls into this category, although it alludes to a very famous work in the history of contemporary music: John Cage's piece 4'33". This historic work by the American composer, which was performed for the first time in 1951, consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence, or rather, of a period in which no sound is produced by the pianist interpreting it (the first such pianist being the composer David Tudor) apart from the sound of the opening and closing of the lid of the piano keyboard that punctuates each of the work's meticulously timed movements. Inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, which John Cage saw at Black Mountain College in the same year, the composition functions as a kind of sound ready-made as the work is filled by random background noise. In João Onofre's



version, the pianist interpreting the work sets fire to the grand piano (in an allusion to the way that John Cage altered the sound produced by the pianos that he used, thereby making famous the notion of the ‘prepared piano’), radicalising, in the most absolute way, the transformation of the instrument to the point of its destruction. The intensity of the work, its tragic character, the way that it evokes death through the conversion of the piano into a funeral pyre, clashes with memories of instruments being destroyed on stage that populate the minds of rock fans, in a whirlwind of allusions that echo the intensity of the transcendence and risk inherent in the creative process.

This work, which was made in collaboration with the António Cachola Collection, imbues the *Camusian* dimension of Onofre’s oeuvre with other connotations while maintaining the paradoxical ambiguity of his earlier works.

Finally, the last room contains a print (aquatint) inscribed with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and an ‘image of beauty’ transposed to binary code. The image and the text, which are visible but made incomprehensible by having been translated into a language whose representational code we do not master, constitute an image that has come unstuck from its meaning, as if a gulf had opened up between two instances of the process of representation.

The entire exhibition is therefore focused on this gap, that is, on the space established between what we see and the meaning that we sense has gone astray, as if the image were mourning its loss of relevance while sometimes drowning in its compulsive beauty. This is the dense and disturbing material of João Onofre’s work.

# António Cachola Collection

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Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Elvas, MACE

## *Aknowledgements*

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Marlborough Contemporary, Londres  
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The works belong to the António Cachola Collection

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ESPAÇO FIDELIDADE  
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FIDELIDADE  
SEGUROS DESDE 1888

MUSEU DE ARTE  
CONTEMPORÂNEA  
DE ELVAS



COLEÇÃO  
ANTÓNIO  
CACHOLA



*Untitled*, 1999  
SD Video, colour, sound, 3" loop  
190 × 210 cm

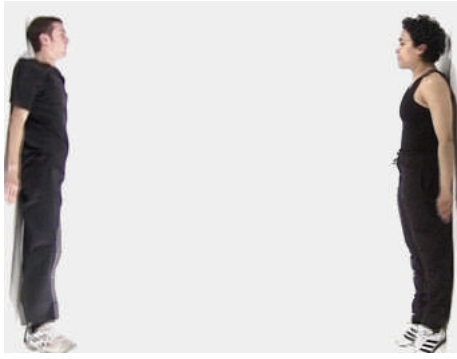
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*Untitled (We Will Never Be Boring)*, 1997  
Video, colour, silent, 60'  
Analog single copy. Exhibition copy  
transferred to DVD  
233 × 308 cm

João Onofre was born in Lisbon in 1976, where he lives and works. He studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon and concluded his MA in Fine Arts at Goldsmiths College in London. He has exhibited widely his work individually in several museums and galleries internationally, namely: *João Onofre*, I-20, New York (2001); *João Onofre*, P.S.1. / MoMA Contemporary Art Center, New York (2002); *Nothing Will Go Wrong*, MNAC, Lisbon, and CGAC, Santiago de Compostela (2003); *João Onofre*, Kunsthalle Wien. Project Space Karlsplatz. Wien (2003); *João Onofre*, Magazin 4, Bregenz (2004); *João Onofre*, Toni Tàpies, Barcelona (2005); Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art, Lisbon (2007); *João Onofre*, Galleria Franco Noero, Turin (2007); Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona and Palais de Tokyo, Paris both in 2011; Marlborough Contemporary, London (2014).

Onofre took part in numerous international group exhibitions, amongst them, most notably: *Plateau of Humankind* - The 49th Venice Biennale, *Human Interest* at Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia; *Performing Bodies*, Tate Modern, London; *Youth of Today*, Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt; *Video, An Art, A History 1965-2005 New Media collection*, Centre Pompidou, Sydney- Contemporary Art Museum, Barcelona- Fundació La Caixa, Taipei Fine Art Museum. *Postscript: Writing After Conceptual Art*, Denver Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, E.U.A.

His work is represented in public and private collections worldwide such as: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Centre Georges Pompidou – MNAM/CCI, Paris; The Weltkunst Foundation, Zurich; La Caixa, Barcelona; MACS – Museu de Serralves, Porto; CAM – Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon; MNAC – Museu do Chiado, Lisbon; GAM – Galeria D'Arte moderna e contemporanea, Turin; Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Ministère de Culture, Paris.

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