

Macao: 9 Interviews and the *eXistenZ* Context of Uncertainty

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THE INTERVIEW PROJECT

In a world where technology, spectacle and excess seem to eclipse former concepts of architecture, the individual and society, what might be the current characteristics of Macao as a city? If there is any consensus, it lies in the notion that what is happening to and in Macao matters, because this level of transformation has never been seen or attempted before. And while it has a kind of terrible beauty in its scale and scope, no one is quite sure how it will ultimately impact on the future of Macao citizens.

This essay unites excerpts from nine interviews with architects, researchers and university professors conducted between June 2013 and November 2014. Dealing essentially with architecture, it is about the memories, experiences, boundaries and movements of those who inhabit Macao. The paper's title is an



allusion to the context of uncertainty that hovers over Macao's future, but also to the mixture of styles that exist in the unbridled fantasy, exoticism and boldness that characterise the urban fabric of the Territory. The essay's relevance is in its analysis of the contemporary condition of our times, and in its directing, from the point of view of Macao, an inward gaze at the challenges that Macao's modern urban life presents. *Macao: 9 interviews and the eXistenZ context of uncertainty* is therefore the moment in which these nine interviews encounter one another and breathe together, symbiotically.

I believe the nine contributions in this paper, when taken as a whole, stand as the foundational elements of a process in which the creation of contemporary understanding translates into the search for parity of thought and deed. *Macao: 9 interviews and the eXistenZ context of uncertainty* is intended as an essay compiled from interviews, a roving, undisciplined, unsystematic wandering, providing a comprehensive overview of the social, territorial and cultural changes that have swept through Macao over the last decades. According to Diogo Burnay¹:

...the idea that newness in Asia is the way to move forward seems to be the way a lot of intellectuals and artists think. In architecture, this differs greatly from purely artistic practices. We do our work in a context that has

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Waterfront between Macao and Zhuhai, 2014.
Photo by Ieong Man Pan.

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immeasurable ramifications on other disciplines, other disciplinary tensions and other social, cultural and political agendas, as well. It is my understanding that this apparent dichotomy or plurality of remembering and forgetting is a way of moving forward with hindsight. It is a way that, I would say, tries to connect the heart with the brain. How one feels and how one thinks.²

I am interested in the form and concept of the interview itself. Particularly in the way it keeps the past present—Hans-Ulrich Obrist³ would call it ‘a protest against forgetting’—but also as a way of compiling thoughts about the future. And I wonder what role it adopts when it transcends the traditional question and answer structure? A form of architectural criticism? According to Pedro Gadanho⁴ it is necessary to bring criticism closer to cities. Perhaps critical thought should be factored into the equation when publishing collaborative projects. As it is, today’s criticism is more interpretive, risking hardly anything at all. Sometimes Macao reminds me there is no doubt there will be a new start. Somewhere in the near future, it will happen. Regarding the possibility of a global specific urban future that is yet to emerge, Pedro Campos Costa⁵ indicates:

Lately it seems there is an absence of utopia. There is a lack of dreaming the future, since of course you don’t want to have a nightmare. No one enjoys having nightmares, so if we do not dream the future in a very positive way, we consequently do not conceive of a future. In short, what I am trying to say is that we build the future of the cities, but they cannot be solely what we are able to imagine, and even if we manage to influence the course of events, the future will for sure be totally different from what we had expected.⁶

What sense can be made of the kaleidoscopic production being witnessed in Macao? Is architecture a mere technical service, or is it a cultural expression on a par with literature, cinema or contemporary art?

MACAO IS ABOUT THE NEW WORLD

In Europe the tendency is always to rein in architecture to the level of a serene gesture— as if it were necessary to watch and listen to the landscape and not impose anything, with the design, that doesn’t belong. In Asia the densities and the flows diverge, and

in Macao those variations are made even more palpable by the Territory’s small size and encircling borders. On this point, Werner Breitung⁷ comments:

Since the very strong development that has occurred—of which I have only captured the beginning, when it started in 2003, 2004, 2005—the influx of Mainland people has changed Macao. Now many of my friends are saying that Macao has lost its identity and its difference from Mainland China. Some even consider leaving Macao, because they feel that, with this change, it’s not home anymore. So, for many people, the opening of the border to two-way traffic between Mainland China and Macao produced the feeling of loss of home and identity.⁸

The Western media very often links the word ‘future’ to the word ‘China’—so often that it seems appropriate to ask people working in China today whether, from the viewpoint of ancient Chinese philosophy, they see time as ‘a conception of processes and unfoldings of opportunity and duration that doesn’t allow itself to be filed under a common, global concept’. To this Wang Weijen⁹ responds:

Europeans or Americans—the West in general—see China almost as equivalent to future or opportunity, and probably many Chinese architects do now. It’s a kind of commonly known fact that this is the frontier and experimental site for Western architects. When they come here they get to do things that they are not allowed to do over there. Of course, for architects whose whole education was based on building utopia starting from Le Corbusier, China is a great and fantastic site. There are at least two important aspects. One is that, in a well established civic society, social changes and physical changes cannot be sped up the way they can be in China, because of the basic rights of an individual to take part in the decision making regarding the change in physical environment. In the case of China, unfortunately, the government system and social system are made in such a way that it is a heaven for developers and a heaven for architects and bureaucrats. There is no civic society established there to sustain or protect the basic human social fabric. The other aspect is that things you don’t get to do in Lisbon, for example, you



Cotai Strip, 2014. Photo by Jeong Man Pan.

get to do in China. You know—and everyone knows—that there is no way you can displace one thousand people and their houses, but this can easily be done in China. China provides a virgin territory frontier for architects to do physical intervention. So there are two aspects: the social one and the physical one. In Europe, there is that long developed understanding and suffocation among middle class society. The physical environment includes history and plays an important part. Everybody knows that history plays an important part, and from Lisbon to Amsterdam it is important to move forwards, but in those contexts the basic respect for the physical fabric and the artifacts is well established and well known.¹⁰

Macao is about the new world, where dream and reality mingle. It’s about the possibility of enough

corporeal energy being created to ‘escape the prison’, escape real life, where nothing happens, where ‘we are safe, and everything is boring.’ It’s a game where the virtual is real, where artificial action plays at reproducing man’s imagination, demystifying the idea of a game outside of life. So, why is Macao still a playing field for the revival of past architectures? Mário Duque¹¹ explains that:

The possible argument and the space for discussion lie more in the reason why we may need to accomplish architectures of a past time or the way we admit these architectures could better serve our present-day cityscapes, urban society’s concerns, life styles and our aims in general. Indeed, to revive architectures of the past, which suited humans in different frameworks, sets of assumptions and lifestyles, is a recurrent phenomenon in the history of architecture and urbanism. However, the

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reason why the phenomenon emerges is always a pertinent argument, as it explains what animates culture at a specific time, namely in respect to the architectural substances that are revived. Another relevant aspect lies in the fact that when we try to accomplish architecture that is not of our time, we may face challenges, simply because we may no longer have the craftsmanship available that it requires. We may no longer be trained in the same skills. We may no longer understand the meaning of the related patterns and details. We may have to rely extensively on research. Altogether things that do not flow as naturally as they would have at the time they were conceived, as with everything that is not synchronistic with its time, unless commitment is assembled. But there is also little possibility for meaningful evolution, if there is no resourceful scope of interpretation in relation to what motivates and animates societies.¹²

The way in which Macao *makes* itself out of past forms causes us to live between scenes, in a holographic world suspended over the real world. We allow ourselves to be polluted by the profusion of electronic signals, by the glare of the neon, by the moving images, as though we were characters in some videogame. In Macao the charged atmosphere becomes supercharged. The concentration of signs and lights is a message in itself, a form of communication. Thus the speed of communication becomes the speed of automation of the decoding of those signs, the time it takes to receive the performative expression of the signals. We are looking at what Andrea Ranzi describes as narrative territories, profoundly mediated spaces that describe an action to us and tell us how to act. According to Thomas Daniell:¹³

If European urbanity tends to be orderly and sedate, with public plazas defined by permanent, monumental buildings, Asian urbanity is unstable, a teeming labyrinth of narrow streets lined with temporary structures. Those are, of course, reductive caricatures, but the modern city in China does seem much more impermanent than in the West, and that has to do with the lack of enforcement of certain rules. The appearance of Macao is partly defined by temporary markets, by cages stuck on the outside of apartment buildings, by shacks built on rooftops, most of which is illegal.¹⁴

On the other hand, Jorge Figueira¹⁵ confesses:

What I like about Macao is that it reveals the opposite of what is happening in our cities in Portugal. What I like in Macao is people—the crowd. It's the density. I know that at some point to have a big population is a problem. But the density, the migration flows and the youth give us the idea of a growing society, a powerful society. A society that is on time and that operates in an extremely shared space, in which an amazing humanity experience takes place.

In a world dominated by image, Neil Leach¹⁶ warns of the aesthetics of architecture threatening to relegate its content to oblivion and, in the worst case, actually becoming the anaesthetics of architecture. An explosion in information, particularly visual information, is held to be the cause of an atmosphere of hypnosis. René Huyghe¹⁷ also shares the idea that the proliferation of the image, viewed as an informative instrument, increases modern man's tendency towards passivity, forcing him into oblivious or apathetic behavior. As we know, the position defended by Marc Augé is one of supermodernity as a creator of non-places, said of spaces that do not include 'places of memory.'

In my opinion these shifts of gaze and plays of imagery, this emptying of the consciousness, can be caused—this time in systematic, generalized and prosaic fashion—by the characteristic features of what I have proposed to call 'supermodernity'. These subject the individual consciousness to entirely new experiences and ordeals of solitude, directly linked with the appearance and proliferation of non-places.¹⁸

These are relatively new spaces, without tradition or history, which result in profoundly dehumanised spaces, spaces without ontological breadth. Consider for example the world of the casino understood in the context of Macao:

They are objects very needy of humanity, of anthropomorphism, anthropology, sociology... they are aliens looking for connections... they are non-places with the brutality of gigantic places. They are waiting to call home, like E.T. I must confess that, in 2011, when I saw the Grand Lisboa for the first time I was very disturbed. I even wrote about it in that little book. In July



Grand Lisboa, Macao, 2015. Photo by Jeong Man Pan.

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and now in September, every passing day, I like the building more, and I feel that what I wrote three years ago is highly unfair; as if I wanted to overcome the building's cruelty with my own. The finale of a giant building cannot be a tiny head. A tiny head means a mental disability. The head must be in proportion with the body, and the arms should not be cut off. That thing is a kind of cut-off body with a tiny head and a giant ball at the base. When I wrote about the Grand Lisboa in 2011, I tried to overcome the rawness of that mechanism with my own description. But now I would write something completely different.¹⁹ Indeed, the new in Macao is defined precisely by the way in which memory is invoked: the conquest and abandon of places and objects, the conquest and abandon of beings and conditions, the conquest and abandon of spaces and times. In fact, we are looking at a Territory that exists as though suspended in a time remembered, as though conquered in a memory of time. On the issue of memory Mário Duque remarks: The other question, whether Macao is all about memory, i.e. past as opposed to present: both

are complementary components that necessarily occupy spaces of individual and cultural existence that are not static. Instead, they pulse in the course of time and have different configurations in specific historical momenta. When the relevance of one component appears diminished, the other develops, and, conversely, when one emerges overwhelming, the other shrinks. There, at the same time, individual and cultural psychological structures necessarily converge, shaped by where we tend to place the mind and the heart. I trust the mind to be far better fitted to understanding the past and the heart far better fitted to feeling the present. Macao is a good example of how the present has pulsed continuously with opportunities and how opportunities have faded into memories of years gone by, until new opportunities set in. However, I am skeptical that memory that emerges as a mere business opportunity or a commodity, without interpretation, may have the capacity to generate accurate records and understanding and nourish individuals and societies into future accomplishments.²⁰



Seac Pai Van Public Housing, Cotai, 2014. Photo by Jeong Man Pan.



Site work, Cotai, 2014. Photo by Jeong Man Pan.

Focused more on China, Jianfei Zhu²¹ reveals:

China is one of those countries that is very obsessed with its own past, despite moments of destruction and self-criticism—the Cultural Revolution, for example. Still, I believe China is a country that aims to record and remember its past. But the problem is that this is done primarily through writing and not through physical building. In the case of physical buildings, China is not particularly good at keeping its own historical past. In China, the physical fabric of the city and the physical architecture appear to be very different issues. It is a different situation than in the West. If in the West physical buildings serve an important role in keeping the memory of the past, in China it is mostly a memory of the word that matters. Memory is registered through literature,

through writings instead of the physical artifacts of buildings. There is a difference between writing and building. Compared to Europe, building is a completely different issue in China. Since in China buildings are mostly made of timber—along with many other materials, but especially timber—they are very easy to build and to destroy. That implies a different kind of logic for keeping memory through buildings. In the case of China buildings are often destroyed and built very quickly, on a much shorter cycle. This has to do not only with the use of timber but also with political situations, with a strong and centralized state, aims for new cities, especially capital cities, with new plans to be implemented quickly and thoroughly. Well, it is a complicated story, where politics, materials, construction methods and forms of

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memory are interrelated. Basically I would say that memory in China is mostly maintained through textual memories, through literature, through the recording of history, through other forms of art and not through the physical form of buildings. In the case of buildings it is an entirely different approach.²²

THE *eXistenZ* CONTEXT OF UNCERTAINTY

Can simulation substitute reality? Will simulated reality be the new reality? Will it be possible to construct a parallel digital world and exist in it? Presently, the emergence of the concept of the virtual and virtualisation is being acknowledged in a broad interdisciplinary debate, taking place between thinkers, economists, scientists, doctors and artists. The recent diffusion of digital technologies has transported this topic into the realm of architecture, which is ordinarily accustomed to dealing with objective and finite things

as a given, related by linear and continuous time to physical, bounded space. Pierre Levy comments on this idea: ‘A new type of artist has emerged, an artist that no longer tells a story, an architect of spaces for occurrences, an engineer of worlds with thousands of stories yet to come, a sculptor of the virtual.’²³

Early on, cinema, which was clearly a way to represent and translate reality, became a solid point of departure for the representation of imaginaries connected with the future. It allowed us to glimpse imaginary worlds that were either complete departures from our civilisation, showing us bizarre conceptions of our future, or were attempts at establishing connections to, and, in a supported way, predictions about the world of tomorrow. From simulating the experience of architectural space, film derived the ability to document architecture and, at the same time, distort architectural form to the point of lending plausibility and coherence to the most varied corruptions and decontextualisations. With the growing digitalisation of the contemporary

world, perceptions of space in architecture and film are closer than ever. Wang Weijen adds:

As do many other people, I think that nowadays the best way to describe China, the phenomenon of China, in terms of its urbanization, would be to use one of the movies by the Chinese director called Jia Zhangke, such as Still Life for example. Several of his movies depict the recent changes of places and time.²⁵

One way or another, films about the future demonstrate an unrelenting will to anticipate it and interfere with the temporal order of things. This brings us to *eXistenZ*.²⁶ The biotechnological density of Macao repeatedly brings the David Cronenberg film to my mind. During the film the characters spin off into in-game personas. The worlds interlace in ‘jagged, brutal cuts, slow fades, shimmering little morphs’. In the *eXistenZ* universe the character-personas and the persona-characters are ‘stumbling around together in this unformed world, whose rules and objectives are largely unknown,



Gongbei Border, Zhuhai, 2014. Photo by Ieong Man Pan.

seemingly indecipherable or possibly nonexistent’. While Pikul’s and Allegra’s physical bodies lie stretched out on the bed in the hidden chalet, *eXistenZ* takes them to the grimy, absurd and grotesque world of the Trout Farm. Suddenly, in the middle of a special

Caesars Golf Course, Cotai, 2014. Photo by Ieong Man Pan.



Avenida do Infante D. Henrique, Macao, 2015. Photo by Ieong Man Pan.



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lunch, needs arise, desires to kill. The mutants continue to grow in captivity, serving the nervous systems of the ‘game pods’, and when least expected, the dog is revealed to be the Chinese waiter’s friend. Inexplicably, the occurrences within the game are translated into the reality of our lives. The so-called ‘reality-bleed-through effect’ triggers countless setbacks.

eXistenZ ends with the assassination of the supposed creator of the transCendenZ game, Yevgeny Nourish, by Allegra Geller and Ted Pikul, who might be terrorists belonging to an anti-system movement. ‘Death to the demon Yevgeny Nourish! Death to PilgrImage! Death to transCendenZ!’ The repetition of this phrase suggests the game might continue to another level, which leaves one of the participants confused to the point of saying: ‘You don’t have to shoot me! Hey, tell me the truth. Are we still in the game?’ Cronenberg demonstrates that the capability to create interaction between different levels of virtual reality leads to a complete loss of sense of place and of references for the limits that should separate the game from reality. Indeed, Macao appears to be built on a spot between reality and dystopia (where the actual references are mixed up: the reality of a dystopia—or the dystopian version of a reality?). *eXistenZ* and Macao both emerge as pre-territories, images that precede the true image, of a desire that manifests or dissipates in the permanence, ephemeral, of a fragment, a glance, a feeling. A fascination and an inquiry.

In Macao we are confronted with an architecture that imposes limits on the end and the beginning—of a reality, still uncertain yet present, still possible yet absent. In *eXistenZ* we are confronted with a new possibility for disembodied existence: the fact that another reality might be introduced into our body, not via the senses but rather through a ‘bio-port’ that feeds the reality directly into our brains. A reality that is then generated by us and is based on the memories, desires and fears we experience in reality.

Once Hans Ulrich Obrist asked Peter Smithson how he sees the city’s present condition. He answered that today there is no sense of the collective, the space between, and that all buildings are built as if they existed only in themselves. According to Hendrik Tieben:²⁷

There are a lot of examples of this tendency in Macao. The best example is the change of the original NAPE plan, after the opening up of the gaming monopoly. Take the MGM, where

basically one walks around a large and entirely closed block. The earlier master plan had very specific guidelines for the way buildings should relate to the public space and address Macao’s hot and rainy climate and general comfort when walking on the street. All this has been ignored in the new developments. It is ironic that the Venetian was built as a totally internalized large block, next to one of Macao’s most delicate and beautiful areas, with Taipa Village and the surrounding waters. It is actually an environment that the Venetian tries to recreate inside but without any connection. Obviously such approaches are typical for casinos, but they might also occur in other contexts. Over the last years we and our students have studied the water space between Macao and Zhuhai. I think that the relationship between the two cities and the water space is one of ignoring the other side and the larger context. I would also say that there are many important questions, reaching from the small scale of street spaces to the bigger regional scale and the relationship between Zhuhai and Macao.²⁸

But what exactly is it time for, now, in Macao? That might be this essay’s main question. Faced with an inability to understand a present that is still too diffuse, this text sought at least to report on it. And report on it likewise as a time devoid of memories and milestones. According to Jorge Figueira:

What is fascinating in Macao is that it is not only the Las Vegas layer that counts, but the deaf battle between archaic, modern and post-modern forms, which gives it a much more complex texture. For example, how the replica, a pop methodology, meets the Chinese culture; how capitalism meets communism in the territorial planning; how the ‘authentic’ heritage will be the casinos and not so much the presence of the Portuguese... Macao is a future lab for these and other points of view, which are truly cultural battles waiting for ‘critical mass,’ where there is much to learn and create. The pop culture of Learning from Las Vegas is now for us a second skin, and therefore it is important to move on to the next step.²⁹

Thus, in the same way that we live to understand why we live, in Macao ‘we play to understand why we play’. And, in the end, realism’s victory lies in the consecration of the start of the game. **RC**

NOTES

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- 2

Diogo Burnay, 2014. Interview with Tiago Saldanha Quadros, 8 March.
- 3

Hans-Ulrich Obrist is an art curator, art critic and art historian. He is Co-director of Exhibitions and Programmes and Director of International Projects at the Serpentine Gallery, London. Obrist is the author of *The Interview Project*, an extensive ongoing project of interviews. He is also co-editor of the *Cahiers d’art* revue.
- 4

Pedro Gadanho is an architect, curator and writer currently based in New York. He is the Curator for Contemporary Architecture at the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA, in New York.
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Pedro Campos Costa, 2014. Interview with Tiago Saldanha Quadros, 5 November.
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Werner Breitung, 2014. Interview with Tiago Saldanha Quadros, 13 September.
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Wang Weijen is Department Head and Professor in the Department of Architecture at the University of Hong Kong. His research mainly focuses on Chinese architecture and cities, including the transformation of courtyard typology, urban fabric and public space in historical and contemporary Chinese cities and the typology of the Chinese temple.
- 10

Wang Weijen, 2013. Interview with Tiago Saldanha Quadros, 13 December.
- 11

In his professional and academic career, in both Macao and Vienna, Mário Duque has received several awards in architecture competitions and for realised projects. Presently he is conducting research into estuarine urban form at the UNESCO Institute for Water Education.
- 12

Mário Duque, 2013. Interview with Tiago Saldanha Quadros, 30 November.
- 13

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- 14

Thomas Daniell, 2013. Interview with Tiago Saldanha Quadros, 3 October.
- 15

Jorge Figueira is director of the Architecture Department in the Faculty of Sciences and Technology and Coordinator of the Master’s Degree in Art and Architecture Criticism in the College of Arts, both at the University of Coimbra. Jorge Figueira is interested in Macao and has been researching and writing on Manuel Vicente’s work and Macao urbanity and architecture.
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Neil Leach, *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*.
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René Huyghe, *Les puissances de l’image*.
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Marc Augé, *Non-places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, p. 93.
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Jorge Figueira, 2014. Interview with Tiago Saldanha Quadros, 13 September.
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Mário Duque, 2013. Interview with Tiago Saldanha Quadros, 30 November.
- 21

Jianfei Zhu is Associate Professor at the University of Melbourne. His research centers on social theory, theory in architecture and Chinese architecture. He is interested in spatial politics, Design Institutes in modern China, implications of architecture of modern China and critical consequences of Chinese culture and architecture today.
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Zhu Jianfei, 2014. Interview with Tiago Saldanha Quadros, 3 May.
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Pierre Levy, *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age*, p. 141.
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Still Life, 2006. Directed by Jia Zhangke [Film]. Beijing-Hong Kong: Xstream Pictures.
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Wang Weijen, 2013. Interview with Tiago Saldanha Quadros, 13 December.
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eXistenZ, 1999. Directed by David Cronenberg [Film]. Toronto: Alliance Atlantis.
- 27

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Hendrik Tieben, 2013. Interview with Tiago Saldanha Quadros, 28 June.
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Jorge Figueira, 2014. Interview with Tiago Saldanha Quadros, 13 September.

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