

We talked to Cristina Reis in 2016, at Teatro da Cornucópia. She was in a period of change, wondering what to do with all the work accumulated. She spoke about the present and seldom did her words reveal nostalgia for the events that were mixed with the history of the theatre company, her home for over 40 years.

We started with her career as a student of painting in Fine Arts, with a taste for ‘making with her hands’, together with the moments when she attended the informal teaching experience in Daciano da Costa’s atelier (1961): ‘things were happening...’. Cristina Reis was fully aware of those years of learning and training, of the privilege that life had offered her, and of the desire for change: ‘I was already working [in Daciano’s atelier] and the normal thing would be to stay there. But I ran away from here. I wanted to try something else’. So, she decided to move to England to study Graphic Design (1967–70), at a time when there was no such possibility in Portugal. She would return when called by Maria Helena Matos and Alda Rosa [see ERRATA-08], her fellow student, to prepare the 1st Exhibition of Portuguese Design. ‘I’ve always worked with people, joining in with things’—she said, as we talked at length about those *people* and those *things*—the work at Instituto Nacional de Investigação Industrial (National Institute of Industrial Research), exhibition design, the Cooperativa Dez.

Arriving at the Cornucopia theatre in 1975, she began by photographing the rehearsals and then worked on the scenery and graphic materials. There was a lot of work and ‘there were means to do it—personal means—we were capable of doing it, we did it (...) We had to make posters, we had to make texts, we had to do it. (...) I was always gathering everything together, without much concern for specialisation or career’. She unveiled the collaborative processes, from the logo—which, she corrected, ‘is not mine, it is Luís Miguel’s’—to the first calligraphic posters, dismantling the way of identifying authorship and correcting the way questions were asked; we thus removed the rigid approach of defined tasks from the conversation. The certainties were mixed up in the search for who did what, ‘we didn’t think that way’. *Her work is, and was, made of complexities and intersections: first with people, then with various needs: ‘Do you want to help? Yes. Right, I stayed here, I never left. After a while, besides taking care of the house, with Jorge and Luís, I started doing the graphic arts’.*

Cristina Reis spoke of the particularities of her trajectory, ‘I was lucky that nothing was required of me ... the commitments, the clients, life ... I was never interested in having a

studio. I would prefer something more mobile, a small space, with a chair and a table—at the time, an extra phone, if possible—good conditions, but without the enthusiasm of the latest trends. A good light and a working head are enough’. The work gains another body in this context of making and sharing, during the years that she was an internal element of the small structure, where her work went far beyond posters—with autonomy and without fear—‘they let me experiment and do things, and I would adjust to the circumstances’.

It seems easy, but it isn’t. In the absence of a rigid organisation, it becomes complex to analyse the dispersion of her activity, which is not confined to narrow tasks, positions, and professions. In the process, as on stage, the experiment begins with the text. The drawing informs the development of the other materials—sketches, photographs, models. On her desk, one encounters many possible readings of the material, counter-arguments between the word and the image, which is not always consistent or concordant (should it be?). Cristina Reis’s extensive activity raises more questions about models and professional identities than it offers answers, and it cannot be summarised in a selection of works: 40 years working for the same entity. Would this model of production in graphic design be possible today?

Working in a collective, her action is nevertheless individual and unique—‘I do things the way I want to do them’—and emerges from the meeting of these compatibilities. The experiences, the methodologies and the circumstances that are part of a taste for the journey, for indiscipline, without fear of disappointment ‘because it had to be done’, are exposed there. We learn to like the work of Cristina Reis as we become better acquainted with its extension, with the diversity of languages and resources, for not being easy to summarise. For demonstrating that the portfolio, the work, and life, are built by persistence and error.

If Cristina Reis’s professional career remains insufficient to include in one of the histories of graphic design in Portugal, this says little about this designer—to say nothing about the validity, and appreciation, of her work—but says much about the invisibilities that occur in historiographic processes and about those who deliberately perpetuate such erasures. Even if Cristina Reis is omitted from this inscription and has escaped a prominent place, she is and will be a reference for women designers to question their own practice.

*Joana Baptista Costa, Mariana Leão, 2021*