



## I am a Sponge

In his super-slick mimicry of ideological and political systems; Nástio Mosquito seeks truth in the form of postmodern coagulation rather than a modern singularity. **Ric Bower** met him on the eve of his solo exhibition, *Daily Lovemaking*, at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham.

Adopting alternative, often cynical, or foul-mouthed personas, Nástio Mosquito can poke and probe at the foibles of humanity from the distance of his characterisations. Paradoxically the establishment loves him – he was a joint winner of the International Future Generation Art Prize for artists under 35 at the end of last year.

Mosquito grew up in Angola, during the tail end of the Cold War, but was educated in Portugal. Although much of his time is

now spent in Belgium, it is Angola's recent bloody history that forms the conceptual backdrop for his posturing and profane, pseudo-pedagogical performances; gives them a ring of truth.

To understand Mosquito's work, the context of his homeland is important. In 1975, after 15 years of fighting for independence from Portugal, the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola

turned on each other. The USA and the former USSR were on hand to pick and arm a side. A quarter of a century of carnage ensued, killing more than half a million Angolan non-combatants. In the light of these facts, armchair interpretations of Mosquito's practice are unwise; it is meaning itself, the very idea of any ideology, which is on trial.

The three of us, Mosquito, Watkins and I, sit in the Ikon Gallery director's office as the final elements of the show are being installed

downstairs. I begin by asking Mosquito how much faith he has in any of the available processes of communication.

**Nástio Mosquito:** I believe that every human being has this desperate need to communicate. I have a profound respect for the tools of communication; they are a reflection of a basic human need to be understood and, through that understanding, to achieve some kind of fulfillment. The articulation of sound is a tool, as are the technologies that disseminate language.

**Jonathan Watkins:** The medium is the message. The mode of communication inevitably becomes part of its meaning. It may be a truism but it is entirely pertinent.

**NM:** Format is always content, especially if you do not have many resources and you need to make those resources speak efficiently.

**JW:** This has some bearing on the art versus non-art discussion as to whether something is framed within a dedicated art space. Much of your earlier work was made without any thought of an art context.

**NM:** Yes.

**JW:** You were making videos to post online then, but now you are working in the context we are in here at Ikon; that too gets caught up and used in the process of transmission.

**Ric Bower:** So the work and its context

cannot be separated. Can I ask about your awareness of potential audiences? An Angolan audience and a Birmingham audience are different beasts are they not?

**NM:** No, I make work for human beings. I cannot deny that my existence is contaminated by the context I am in, but the idea of a particular audience is not my departure point. The things that are important to me come out of a particular context, and from my own limitations too, but that is not what drives me. There is however a question of efficiency; the language I employ in a particular work, English, Portuguese, Spanish, French, will have an inevitable bearing on the potential audience. When I make a video, for instance, it is always at the service of a perspective. —>





Don't be  
**COOL**  
be relevant

**Yeap!**

**And if you can be  
relevantly cool,  
good for you...**



Hopefully, it will make sense in Angola and in Birmingham. What I am hoping, as a communicator of perspectives, is that it will 'be of service', and the best way I can achieve that is to be very much in touch with what moves me personally.

**JW:** This is interesting; both in what we have experienced here and with reference to the project we will be making for Venice, where there is the idea of being a representative of one national culture presenting formally to another national culture. That sense of national distinction, between Angola and the rest of the world say, is projected onto the artist. The artist is expected to speak for a culture and that is problematic. It is not as if Nástio is embraced by the Angolan government, or that he is thought of being as a suitable advocate of all things Angolan.

**NM:** I don't really give a fuck why they invite me, or even why they don't. That's their problem. I cannot focus too much on these things. You can ask my opinion on the subject of representation, and I will have one, but, then again, opinions are very volatile things. The reality is, I don't really care!

**RB:** But what about relationships, do you care about them?

**NM:** I think relationships are what make life worth it: good relationships, bad relationships, ambiguous relationships. If I am any good, if my work is to be consequent in what it brings, and what I bring is my sense of individuality applied to a community, I want to make that count. I use the word 'service' (and I choose it carefully), but that is the end result. More fundamentally, it is intrinsically connected to who I am as an individual. I am being fucking honest and I don't want to die alone. I want to be part of the community where I am. I am, after all, part of the fucking human community.

**RB:** So solidarity with the human condition is something you are *being-in*, in a Heideggerian sense, rather than being an intentional act.

**NM:** That may be so. I have a philosopher friend, Bill Hasselberger, who is a lover of Heidegger. A lot of the music on my last album was done with Bill. Because of my Christian roots and his atheistic outlook, we often discuss what this sense of 'service' is connected to.

**JW:** I think that is right, it is a question of what you assume, from your point of departure; rather than setting out with the intention of arriving at some kind of utopia.

**NM:** Can we be in society without being political? As a professional and as an artist, I would like to be like Miley Cyrus, to be exposed to bigger audiences, but that kind of stuff is just not what comes out of me and what does come out of me brings certain consequences. It comes back to what Jonathan was saying; I was never producing work to be part of the art community.

**JW:** I find it very interesting if someone moves freely in and out of the art world. I like that kind of fluidity.

**RB:** It seems that, with your practice, the familiar art community process of post-ratification is disempowered. In attempting to pin down your work within a comfortable and familiar semantic structure, the point is missed.

**NM:** Yes and no. The dialogue to have with me is not about how to pin it down. I am very excited, or even honoured, when people are trying to pin shit down because it means they are talking, but it does not mean I need to be part of that conversation. I have already done my job, you will never hear from me 'that is right' or 'that is wrong'.

**JW:** Then there is the idea of assuming different identities - just because we hear a particular

voice in a video, that doesn't mean that it is the artist's own position being presented.

**NM:** We have a very flexible way of dealing with our identities, I think. You can, for example, disdain what Britain has done throughout history as a global power without refusing to be British; rarely do you see people handing in their passports. We operate with different measures. The relationships with what we choose to be part of and what we choose not to be part of is something I apprehend within my practice. Allegiance, as a cultural phenomenon, allows me to assume different voices.

**JW:** So many people assume that Nástio Mosquito is not your real name; they assume it must be another persona.

**NM:** Indeed.

**RB:** I am guessing you are as immersed within your personal spirituality as you are immersed within your practice. Is this actually the case?

**NM:** No, there is a separation: my spirituality is a personal thing; my practice is my job. I am not my job. My job is one of the many things that I do. My spirituality invades my family space, my personal space, it informs my joy

and empowers me to get up every morning and engage with a new day. My practice is just one avenue of that. I don't share my practice with my mother, for instance, but I do love what I do. I didn't choose it, it chose me.

**RB:** Clowns, jokers and prophets, they all seem to end up suffering in some way for conveying a truth. Do you associate with those roles?

**NM:** I sympathise with those characters and I think they are present in my work, but perhaps it is too soon to know for sure. When I die you will have your answer. Life presents us with certain propositions, whether you are spiritual or not.

Some of us are prepared to accept what is proposed to us, some of us are not, and there are moments of profound fulfilment in that process. Sometimes you are invited to be the clown, or you are invited to be the joker or even the prophet. I do not think you actually have to make that many *real* decisions in life. If I am going to be true to myself, I do not have that many real options through life but I am constantly compelled to take positions. I am learning, through what I do, to embrace those positions and to make them consequent.

**RB:** I sense a deeper engagement with truth in your practice than mere correspondence. Has your approach to truth been particularly forged in Angola?

**NM:** I want to answer this not in a personal way. Truth is always at the service of a perspective, but my truth is my sense of integrity. I am aware that a truth residing within me is limited, but that is all I have. I am a sponge; I use everything and everyone to fuel my presentation of perspectives. —**CCQ**

*A new video and performance by Nástio Mosquito will be presented at the 56th Venice Biennale by Ikon and Nuova Icona in the Oratorio di San Ludovico, Dorsoduro.*  
ikon-gallery.org  
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*Nástio Mosquito at Ikon, Birmingham, Ric Bower, 2015*

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*Nástia's Manifesto, Nástio Mosquito, 2008, video, 4:10'*  
© Nástio Mosquito, courtesy the artist and Ikon

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*Demo Da Cracia, Nástio Mosquito, 2013, video 6:56'*  
Courtesy Nástio Mosquito

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*3 Continents, Nástio Mosquito, 2010, video, 7:45'*  
© Nástio Mosquito, courtesy the artist and Ikon

## Good News from the Future

In 2014 a group of physical theatre pioneers, whose work goes back to the 1970s, was reunited for a series of workshops with Mike Pearson. The flyer for the workshops announced that Pearson had “hopes for great happenings”. **Elaine Paton** joined them for this unique opportunity to revisit the starting point of her own career.

In 2014 Mike Pearson was preparing to recreate his solos from the production of *The Lesson of Anatomy*, as part of his Leverhulme Research Fellowship, *Marking Time: performance, archaeology and the city*. Pearson and Cardiff Laboratory Theatre originally performed the show in the opening season of the Sherman Theatre on 5 July 1974. To mark the 40th anniversary of this production, Pearson once more performed his solos on 5 July 2014, on the exact spot where, four decades earlier, he had performed in the highly physical mode that he and Cardiff Laboratory were in the process of inventing. At 64, he was curious to discover how his body would now react.

Video technology wasn't available to most artists in the 1970s and so, with little documentation, Pearson undertook an 'archeological dig' into photographs, memories and a few scattered notes to jog his memory.

In excavating the historical development of his physical training techniques, Pearson collaborated with Louise Ritchie, lecturer in Theatre and Performance at Aberystwyth University, and his long-term colleague, Nigel Watson. Both Watson and Pearson had been thinking of holding workshops for mature performers and last year devised a series for the over 60s. These were held in the old Gym at Chapter, the former 1970s home of Cardiff Laboratory Theatre.

My first encounter with physical theatre was in 1977 at a workshop audition with Director David Hughes and Reflex Action. Fresh out of drama school, I arrived with my heavily-rehearsed audition speeches, and instead we were asked to walk - no character,

no funny walks – just to walk.

This was curiously liberating and broke all the rules of the heavy Method-based training at drama school, where we wouldn't dare open our mouths without knowing our character's who, what, how and why. To my amazement, I got the job. It was an unfamiliar territory with a foreign language, and its physical emphasis was terrifying. Would I be revealed as a fake? Would they know that I wasn't one of them - these articulate directors and performers who knew the mysteries of Grotowski and Meyerhold? I consoled myself with the thought that I understood the notion of poor theatre, living on toasted cheese, Mars bars and Players No 6.

After a year of walking in a perpetual grid, performing 24 hour improvised shows and contorting my body in contact improvisation, it was time for something new. I was invited to teach in Australia. I packed my bags and started walking there, gathering fellow travellers on the way. I thought I would be away for a year. It turned out to be 35.

Back in 1977, I didn't really know Mike Pearson, as Chapter's Gym was isolated from the main building. It was out of bounds; a sacred, dark laboratory from which people would emerge for a quick nicotine hit and into which they would disappear with an air of intense earnestness. Pearson laughed at this: “We were just so cold, working in fridge-like conditions.” In July 2014, crossing the threshold of the old Gym again, not only did my 1977 insecurities return, but having left with the body of a 25 year old, I wondered how my 60-year-old one would react to being hurled back into physical work.

Taking a deep breath, I walked into what felt like a cocktail party. There were both newcomers and collaborators, such as Sian Thomas who started out with Pearson at Llanover Hall in 1973; Richard Huw Morgan from former theatre company Brith Gof; and Nigel Watson who has 'walked and talked' with Pearson for many years, driven by the passion they share in the pursuit of preserving and dissecting their combined experience.

Many of us have diverged into other areas of the performing arts. As Pearson observed, the room was full of funders, academics and artists. After the workshops, I discovered I wasn't the only one worried about how our bodies would cope with revisiting the creativity of our youth. However, as soon as we began walking around the space, there was a sense of coming home after a very long time. Like children let loose at a birthday party, we took off with a wonderful liberation because there was nothing to prove.

When I spoke to Sian Thomas afterwards, she said that all those years ago she'd discovered, “Here was something I could do and enjoyed doing”. She went on to become one of the founding members of Cardiff Laboratory for Theatrical Research. Their first performance back in 1974 was on her 17th birthday. Thomas now works as a creative producer. Returning to physical work last year, Thomas said, “It was quite a revelation for me, firstly because I discovered that 'muscle memory' truly does exist; my body immediately recalled the postures and spatial relationships that had been ingrained in my body all those years ago; like riding a bike, they returned almost immediately”. →

