

## Filmmakers' Archive Ernesto de Sousa

### Introduction Salomé Lamas

#### Brief presentation of Ernesto de Sousa

+ Info: [www.ernestodesousa.com](http://www.ernestodesousa.com)

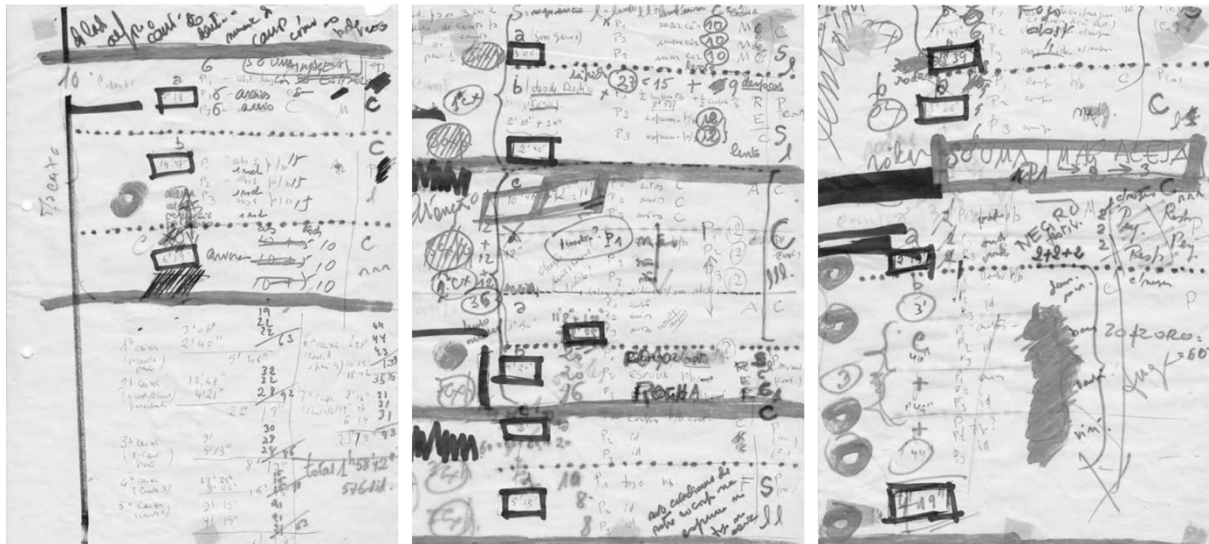
Director, photographer, visual artist of new media projects in which cinema and video merge with photography, design, typography, experimental and contemporary music; curator, professor, scholar of Portuguese popular art (namely Portuguese sculpture, being pioneer in the creation of a method of analysis of Portuguese sculpture), avid cinephile, unconditional fan of Almada Negreiros and anti-fascist during the Estado Novo period.



A man of the Arts and Letters, Ernesto de Sousa (Lisbon, 1921-1988) was one of the most complex and active figures of his time, a prolific humanist and artist and an avid promoter of synergies between generations of artists from the first and second half of the 20th century. A defender of experimental and free artistic expression, he devoted himself to the study, dissemination and practice of the arts, such as curatorship, criticism and essays, photography, film and theatre.

From a very young age, he dedicated himself to the study of art and photography. Open-minded, controversial and pioneering in many of the things he worked on, he

exercised a vast action in almost everything that belongs to the fields of art, in the broadest sense of the word. As a filmmaker, he is recognized as one of the founders of the Portuguese Cinema Novo, for directing the film *Dom Roberto* (1962), which won him two prizes at the Cannes Festival. After this experience, he continued to work in cinema for the rest of his life, although in a more open and freeway, bringing it closer to other artistic expressions, such as theatre, installation or performance. It can be said that his *Dom Roberto's* cinema moved from the dark room to the art gallery, or to the theatre stage, becoming a pioneer of new media practices in Portugal.



The life and acts of Ernesto de Sousa seem marked by rupture and discontinuity: from the neo-realist critical activity to the investigation of popular culture, from the film club movement to the making of *Dom Roberto*, from the critical and organizational participation in the definition of a new type of avant-garde experimental art to his condition as an artist/aesthetic operator, the protagonist of various exhibitions held from the mid-1970s. The courage to assume radical ruptures with his biography and with previously explored ideas indicates, however, a restless common thread, between the social concerns of neo-realism and the art-life relationship resumed from the Fluxus experiments and experimental art of the 1960s and 1970s, between the study of popular culture and Beuys' axiom that "every man is an artist". Transversal to all this activity, he worked extensively in photography since the 1940s, his reflections and practices were fundamental elements in the inauguration of artistic contemporaneity.

He dedicated his life to shaping new generations of artists and pushing them forward. Ernesto was a source of enthusiasm, dynamism and motivation. He was committed to everything that was new, original and creative, in other words, to modernity. And in a time of monolithic cultural policies, as was the case during the dictatorship, the presence of his "volcanic" personality was crucial.



### About the work of Ernesto de Sousa

It is also necessary to speak of necessity when we consider a work of art, and above all a film – the result of so many contradictories and limiting factors. This corresponds in part that which limits the creator, in the field of his conscience perhaps, but above all (...) in the framework of the economic, social and political reality of the world today... Such limitations often lead the creator to to express what is directly inexpressible, to make contraband art, to make the eulogy of madness against madness: to make an apparently pessimistic film to exalt man!"

Ernesto de Sousa, "Do Cinema Sem Definições."  
Imagem, no. 2, February 1954

Ernesto de Sousa's life and work have been the subject of study on numerous occasions over the last 30 years, in which several exhibitions dedicated to his work have been held, as well as the exhibitions he curated. Similarly, his work has been studied by various curators and art historians. One example is the publication of *Letters from My Maghreb* (by Tinta da China, 2011) which brings together unpublished texts that Ernesto wrote during a trip to North Africa, or *Vanguarda & outras Loas. Percurso teórico de Ernesto de Sousa* de Mariana Pinto dos Santos (Assírio & Alvim, 2007).

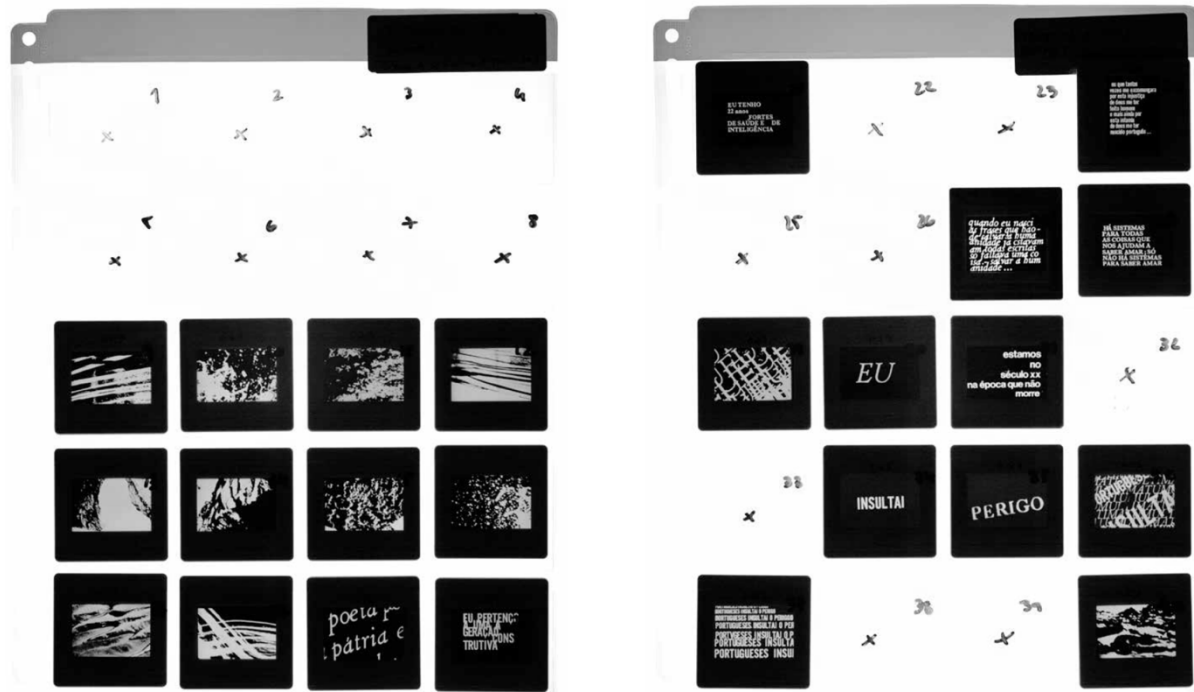
Ernesto de Sousa was a crucial figure in the Portuguese socio-cultural and political milieu and the archive of material he accumulated through his practice and throughout his life provides an important perspective on certain periods and moments in Portugal's cultural and historical life during the 20th century. The presence and influence of Ernesto de Sousa's artistic ideology is evident in contemporary national art.

The new media format of which Ernesto is a precursor, is the most in-depth and used by various authors in the creative industries.

"It would be manifestly little to say that ES has been, above all, someone who has known, better than any of us, how to stage, with the participation of us all, the space of contemporary art in which we are all involved. Because the value of ES's work is much more than that" ... "It would be difficult to point out someone to whom we owe so much having met him so few times and in such an oblique way. Ernesto de Sousa is certainly the most discreet, silent, clandestine and passionate master of multiple generations. That is his immense work: diffuse, transparent, transversal and fluid in that unmistakable way of knowing how to cross us".

Eduardo Prado Coelho, catalogue Itineraries, 1987.

On the curatorial side, based on Hans Ulrich Obrist's A Brief History of Curating, the emblematic cases of Harld Szeemann and Ernesto de Sousa were presented. These are founding examples of international and national independent curatorship that have enjoyed growing biographical interest in the art world.



We understand that Ernesto's figure does not enjoy the sufficient recognition he is due. In addition to his contributions to the national and international art scene, Ernesto de Sousa maintained a political attitude that led him to turn to his society as a disseminator of ideas of freedom and the fight against oppression, which earned him four arrests for political-cultural reasons. He was linked to student life and film clubbing and was a constant presence at round tables and colloquia of student associations. Free Voice, his articles in Vida Mundial and other newspapers were, in 1975, the immediate expression of the cultural revolution.

Where and in whom do the artists that today place in their film's hybrid narratives where the dialogues, the direction of the actors, the sequences of images, the sound and the music carry with them a plastic dimension draw their inspiration? They are

inspired by the new media projects resulting from the work of avant-garde authors like Ernesto de Sousa.

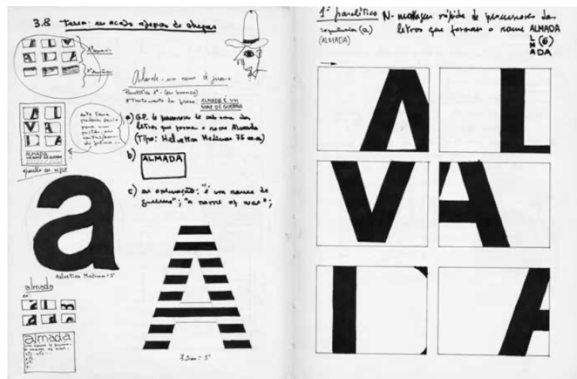
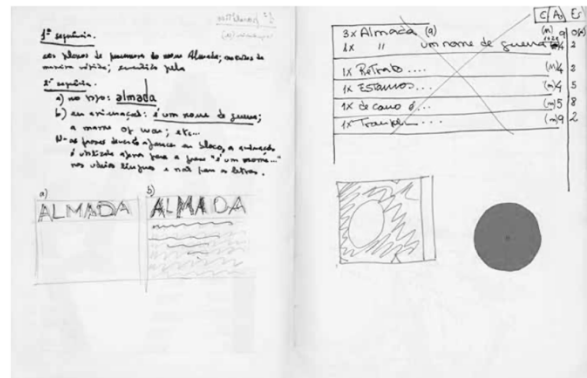
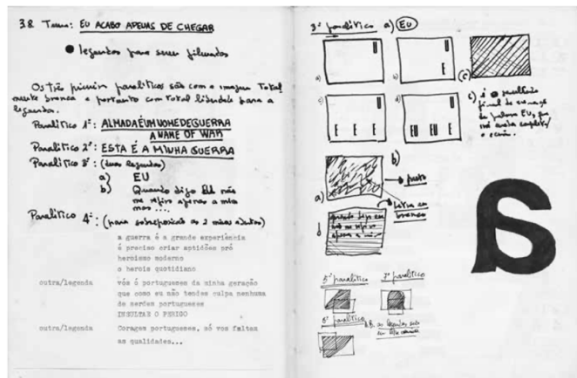
Nevertheless, what defines a new media author is his need to express himself in the different artistic disciplines that relate to the sensation that is intended to be transmitted. The need to create a sequence of images where, for example, there may not be any dialogue, but rather a man who tirelessly runs through dunes, sand, open fields, and falls on the sand of a deserted beach, wearing a dress that reminds us of an office worker – a reference to the experimental film "Havia um Homem que Corria", E. De Sousa, may once again highlight the need to talk about performance? Is it urgent to talk about the importance of multidisciplinary nowadays? Yes.

The presence and influence of Ernesto de Sousa's cultural, social and political ideology is evident in contemporary Portuguese culture but also in the international panorama.



## Pedagogy archive

In recent years, we have heard a lot about Ernesto de Sousa. In 1997 and 1998 the 20 years of Alternativa Zero were marked, respectively, with an exhibition at the Serralves Foundation that recovered, as far as possible, what had been the initiative commissioned by Ernesto in 1977; in 2002, a set of colloquiums was organised at the Faculdade de Belas-Artes de Lisboa over four months, to re-examine the role of Ernesto de Sousa and, once again, to mark the anniversary of "Alternativa Zero". The ten years of his death, with the exhibition "Ernesto de Sousa - Revolution My Body" at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, about his work as an artist, curator and cultural promoter. In the same year, the publisher Assírio & Alvim published a voluminous book with his main texts produced from 1970 onwards, based on a selection that Ernesto himself had made with a view to a publication that never took place in his lifetime.



Meanwhile, conferences, interviews, essays and reviews frequently mention his name as a tutelary figure of the most interesting experiences produced in Portuguese art during the period of the April revolution.

As for studies proper on Ernesto de Sousa, although João Fernandes, in the catalogue *Perspectiva: Alternativa Zero*, in a text focusing mainly on the 1977 exhibition, reviews his career and gives us a general picture of Ernesto's importance. Mention should also be made of Miguel Wandschneider's work in the catalogue *Revolution My Body*, which provides a deeper analysis and problematization of Ernesto de Sousa's work. The most recent of Ernesto de Sousa's works is *Vanguarda & Outras Loas*, by Mariana Pinto dos Santos, which contains an extensive theoretical overview of the artist's work.

Ernesto de Sousa's artistic heritage is shared between several Portuguese institutions. A large part of it is also in Isabel Alves's possession, including original texts, correspondence, hundreds of photographs and slides, business cards and invitations to exhibitions, as well as copies of materials deposited or belonging to the institutions.

Among these, we can highlight the following:

- (a) Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Modern Collection: Luiz Vaz 73, 600 slides and magnetic tapes and respective scans; Olympia.
- b) MNAC – Museu do Chiado: works by Ernesto de Sousa
- Collection of the Secretary of State for Culture: *Revolution my body* no. 2 and *Tempo*
- c) *Revolution*
- d) Cinematheque – Cinema Museum: *Almada, a name for War*, 35mm, 16mm and slides
- e) National Library of Portugal: written collections and memorabilia
- f) Photographic Archive - Lisbon Municipal Archive: slides
- g) The Berardo Collection: collection of posters by Ernesto de Sousa

h) Photographic Documentation Archive – DGPC: photography from the 1940s and 1950s

For a complete index of documents consult the bibliography attached and other titles here: <https://www.ernestodesousa.com/about>

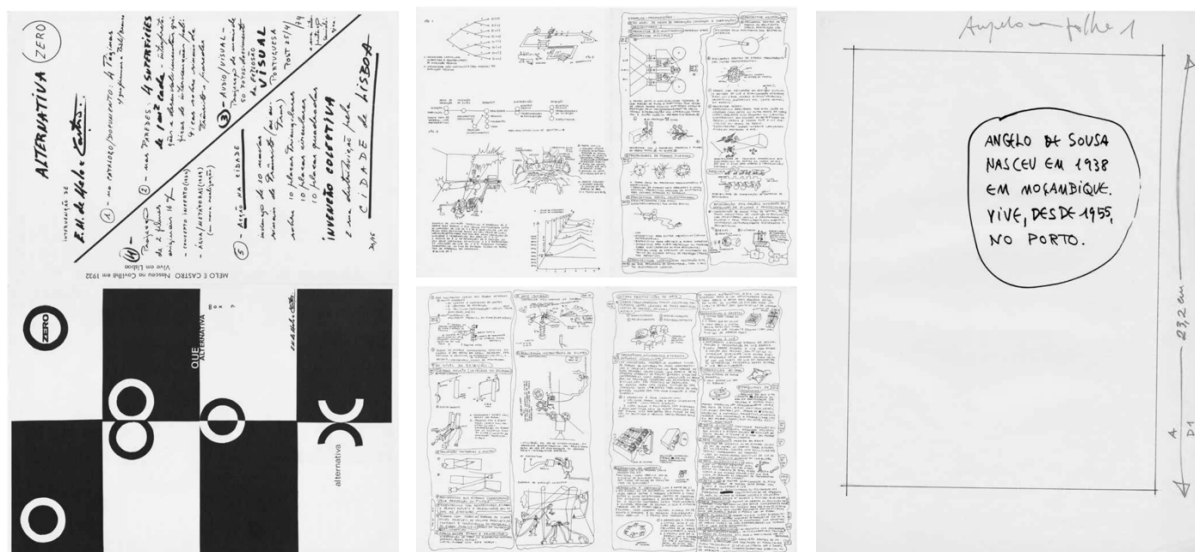
The importance of Ernesto de Sousa's legacy is defined by the way it continues to host new readings, so the resignification and exploration we can do with the archive is essential.

Creation of the work: definition of the concepts mobilized and method of structure (conception), definition of the method of presentation and production of the elements necessary for the presentation of the work (materials, environmental aspects, etc.).

Dissemination of the work: all the strategies used to present or disseminate the work. Although most often the dissemination of multimedia artworks is accomplished through exhibitions, the Documentation Template recommends the inclusion of any alternative or emerging methods that promote viewer interaction with the work. Activities associated with dissemination include installation, presentation, de-installation and critique. Depending on the nature and level of sustainability of the components of the work, these steps may also involve the production of the elements necessary to display the work for the dissemination activity in question.

Research: represents all activities that involve the study or critical analysis of a work, its components or associated sources, unrelated to a dissemination event.

Work's custody: includes the various facets of responsibility, storage and preservation, directly or indirectly, associated with ownership of the work and generally conducted by the artist, a collector or a heritage institution such as a museum. This category includes the steps involved in accessing (or acquiring), cataloguing (or documenting), curating, and managing and conserving the work.



## Short biography

From director to curator, from performer or performance director to artist, from art critic to art philosopher, from poetic inventor to video artist and photographer, José Ernesto de Sousa (1921-1988) acts in almost all fields of art in the broadest sense of the word. He was a "defender of free artistic and experimental expression, dedicated to the study, dissemination and practice of the arts". With a university degree in science, he dedicated himself to photography from an early age, an activity that has always accompanied him and led him to other areas, such as cinema and video art. Throughout his career, he combined creative activity with the promotion of other artists and creators, from his work as a filmmaker and film critic in the 1940s to curator and writer during the 1960s to the 1980s. He was someone who observed and understood the social and artistic context of his time and created (opened) new paths; someone who brought together, intervened and brought others together to share center stage.

In the 1940s, Ernesto de Sousa founded the *Círculo de Cinema*, the first film club in Portugal and was editor of the magazines 'Imagens' and 'Plano Focal'. He studied cinema in Paris (1949-1953) and directed his first film in 1954, the documentary *O natal na Arte Portuguesa* (winner of the Aurélio Paz dos Reis's prize).

In 1962, he directed the fiction feature *Dom Roberto*, a film financed by the *Cooperativa do Espectador*, with a strong social charge, produced at the height of the dictatorship. This work had a great impact on the history of national cinema, being a precursor of New Portuguese Cinema and winner at the Cannes Festival of the Young Critics and International Young Critics' awards.

It is precisely on his way to the festival to accompany the screening of the film that Ernesto de Sousa is arrested by the PIDE, under the pretext of an interview with the daily *Témoignage Chrétien* in the film. He was a politically committed artist, being detained and arrested four times by the PIDE. For Ernesto, being political had several layers that ranged from a political affiliation to the PCP, as "the only form of opposition and combative", to an awareness of the need for the arts to distance themselves from political power.

A video-performance sculpture *The Promised Land: Requiem for Vilarinho das Furnas* (1979) is definitely a political work that evokes the autonomy of a community still under dictatorship. But it is above all in the group of works, in various media, entitled *O teu corpo é o meu corpo* (Your body is my body) that the idea of a revolution operated in and by the body is exponentiated.

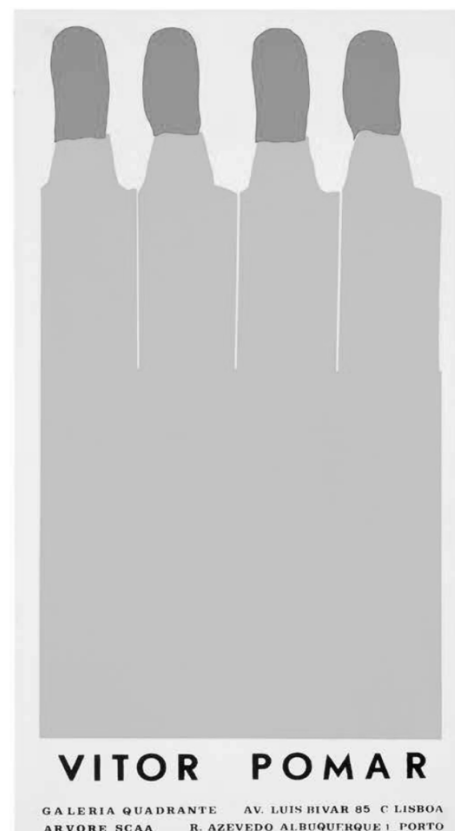
During the 1960s, Ernesto de Sousa showed a progressive interest in experimental new media practices and was the protagonist of a new Portuguese avant-garde. He developed critical and creative activities that linked him to the vanguards of the first Portuguese modernism, of which Almada Negreiros was the sole survivor. Almada Negreiros was a key figure in Ernesto's biography, an artist he admired, claimed and researched. At the end of the decade, he produced the new media work *Nós não estamos algures algures* with music by Jorge Peixinho, a founder of experimental languages in contemporary Portuguese music. Part of this exercise was filmed to be included in *Almada, um nome de guerra* (1969-1972), *novos media*, also with Jorge



Peixinho's collaboration. It premiered in Madrid in 1983, with subsequent presentations at the Gulbenkian in 1984 and at the Serralves Museum in 2012.

It was during the 1960s that he established contact with European and American artistic circles; the Fluxus movement became a fertile reference and Ernesto forged relationships with international figures such as Wolf Vostell, Robert Filliou and Joseph Beuys. Based on an original idea from Filliou, he organises the celebration of the 1,000,011st anniversary of Art, at the Círculo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra. This event aligns to the avant-garde discourse the sense of celebration, communication and collective participation that would become central objectives in all the initiatives that Ernesto promoted.

One of the most fruitful friendships that arose in this context was that of the artist Wolf Vostell, who in 1976 invited him to the Inauguration of VOAEX, an open-air sculpture in the natural park of Malpartida de Cáceres, future MVM. From 1978 to 1980 he participated in solo exhibitions and was curator of the participations of Portuguese artists to SACOM 1, 2 and 3 (Contemporary Art Week of Malpartida de Cáceres), being responsible for the presentation of a retrospective of Vostell in Lisbon, at the Gulbenkian. In 1980 ES had his first solo exhibition in Berlin at Ars Viva, the gallery that represented Vostell.



At the centre of this international movement, Ernesto de Sousa visited Documenta 5 (Kassel, 1972), curated by Harald Szeemann. There he engaged in various activities: he interviewed various artists and theoreticians, including Joseph Beuys, and

photographed the exhibition (see José-Augusto França, "Anarte em Cassel ou os 300 slides de Ernesto de Sousa", *Diário de Lisboa*, 1972). The public presentation of these slides of the works from Documenta represents a legitimisation of the avant-garde ideas that Ernesto presents in the Portuguese context. In the same way, he thus disseminates the name of Joseph Beuys and takes him as a reference, assuming in his work the axiom of the German according to which "every man is an artist".

Ernesto de Sousa was the first curator to bring together an art scene segmented by disciplines, creating a unity based on difference, through power plays, formal or conceptual analogies, in a certain spirit of the times. E.S. created context (with works, exhibitions and texts) through intergenerational crossings, uniting the first Portuguese avant-garde with a new generation of Portuguese artists, and an international openness very close to the Fluxus movement. In this environment, he produced works such as *Vazio à Pró-Vocação* (1972) and *Projectos-Ideias* (1974).

His project to create a Portuguese avant-garde in aesthetic and ideological dialogue with its international counterparts was synthesised in the exhibition *Alternativa Zero*. In 1977, he organises *Alternativa Zero: "Tendências polémicas na arte portuguesa contemporânea"* ("Controversial Tendencies in Contemporary Portuguese Art"), which brought together a whole generation of rupturist artists as well as the first Living Theatre pieces shown in Portugal. Assuming a critical awareness of the cultural nation, this exhibition assumes a synthesis of the productions of Portuguese conceptualism, with works by Alberto Carneiro, Helena Almeida, Clara Menéres and João Vieira, among others that "prove and exemplify the plural guiding line of the exhibition, at a time when the emptiness of the art market did not allow a true visibility of national works".

Ernesto does not manage to directly continue the experience of *Alternativa*, but the influence of his name and his ideas is considerably extended: for example, he will be the curator of the Portuguese representations at the Venice Biennale in 1980, 1982 and 1984. He also leads a whole group of Portuguese artists to take part in the SACOM (1978, 1979 and 1980) organised by Vostell at his Museum in Malpartida, Spain.

During these years he produced installations and performances such as *The Promised Land - Requiem for Vilarinho das Furnas* (video-sculpture and performance, 1979-80), presented at the SNBA in Lisbon in 1983 (Lyon); the *Ultimatum*, at the Experimental Intermedia Foundation, New York.

Ernesto de Sousa was a collaborator, editor and director of several magazines like *Plano Focal*, *Imagem*, *Seara Nova*, *Opção* and *Abril*; he edited books in several publishing houses and collaborated with several periodicals.

The retrospective exhibitions *Itineraries*, in 1987, organized by the Secretary of State for Culture (curated by José Luís Porfírio, Leonel Moura and Fernando Pernes) and *Revolution My Body*, in 1998, at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (curated by Helena de Freitas and Miguel Wandschneider) were dedicated to him. The Serralves Foundation presented, in 1997, a reprise of *Alternative Zero* in celebration of the

twenty-year anniversary of this exhibition and, in 2012, a reinterpretation of the new media *Almada*, *Um Nome de Guerra* and *Nós Não Estamos Algures*. The Centro Internacional de Artes José de Guimarães organised, in 2014, an exhibition entitled *Ernesto de Sousa e a Arte Popular*, around the exhibition *Barristas e Imaginários*.

Shortly after the artist's death, the Centro de Estudos Multidisciplinares Ernesto de Sousa (CEMES) is created, whose activity builds on Ernesto de Sousa's artistic, curatorial and essayistic legacy, which is fundamental to the study of contemporary Portuguese and international art. CEMES is created in 1992 and the Ernesto de Sousa Scholarship supported, until 2013, twenty young artists in the realization of intermedia projects during an internship at the Experimental Intermedia Foundation in New York.