

Helena Vaz da  
Silva in East  
Timor, 2001



# Remembering Helena Vaz da Silva

by Graça Morais



Helena Vaz da  
Silva in the 80s  
Taken on a CNC  
Sunday walk

Helena Vaz da Silva (1939-2002) was a unique example in the Portuguese cultural scene. She had an aware and open spirit, with a peculiar ability to understand the main trends of modernity in culture and art. She has always been able to connect intuition, information, knowledge and understanding of the world and life. Curiously, she started working very young, sitting at the very same desk in the advertising agency where Fernando Pessoa had worked. It almost seemed like an omen.

Intelligent and sensitive, with a sharp critical sense, she was

one of the first cultural and most influential journalists in Portugal, undertaking her job not only as a mere observer of events, but always seeking to be active rather than neutral in her interventions. She looked simultaneously for creation, innovation and protection of cultural heritage, because from her point of view they all meant the same. Her writing and action were thus always a demanding exercise of criticism and civic mobilization. She actively participated in the defense of political freedom and thus struggled for civil rights, throughout the sixties and seventies.

With the dawning of democracy after the *Revolução dos Cravos* (Carnation Revolution) of 25th April, 1974, she knew, better than anyone else, that people were searching to reinvent democracy through cultural creativity. Dignity itself was at stake. At a time that cultural journalism had not yet gained a significant strength, Helena Vaz da Silva was a pioneer. She sought for alternatives and knew how to connect the power of social movements and the renewal of arts. Culture requires discovery. Cultural citizenship required the search for alternatives and the ability to discover a true and multifaceted human development. She never ceased hoping.

By the late seventies she made her way towards social innovation and cultural creativity in the magazine *Raiz e Utopia* (Root and Utopia). *Raiz* (Root) focused on the need to preserve memory and historical heritage, while *Utopia* aimed at a demand for criticism and dissatisfaction, in the sense of wishing for a more human and better society.

Centro Nacional de Cultura (National Culture Centre) was an institution that gained a reputation in Portugal for being the focus of intellectual and civic resistance since 1945. This was particularly evident under the direction of Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, during the dictatorship, when the Portuguese Society of Writers was banned and shut down in 1965. After the revolution of 25th April 1974, Helena found it a place to promote dialogue, debate and modern creation.

Then, inspired by the title of a tale by José Régio, a poet who

cherished the so-called second modernism in the late twenties-*Davam grandes passeios aos domingos* (And they went for big Walks on Sundays) – she launched these walks, turning them into an opportunity for conviviality while studying, defending and safeguarding cultural heritage, paying great attention to the connection between tradition/memory and contemporaneity.

Rather than confining herself to the discovery of the heritage around her, Helena Vaz da Silva went looking for traces of the Portuguese culture worldwide.

This is when I had the opportunity of to get to know Helena better. On those trips, which aimed at deepening the historical and cultural ties between Portugal and regions where cultural diversity can be found, Helena would always take a writer and a plastic artist who would produce a travel journal. And so I was honored to be part of an unforgettable Portuguese Cultural Embassy to Japan. I could feel how special Helena was, leading a group of very heterogeneous people, eager for knowledge and exchanging experiences.

The pictorial and literary record of that trip brings wonderful memories to my mind. The Portuguese presence in Japan is touching. In each of the words we heard there that had Portuguese origin, there was much more than a language or a historical reminiscence: we could feel a true exchange of hospitality and affections. Helena certainly had that remarkable human quality of making people feel comfortable about themselves and with one another. In fact, culture stimulates interaction, the ability to give and

receive, the duty of sharing. In that trip to Japan, each one of us was truly marked by that universalistic experience of respect and communication. Looking today at those drawings, I can still feel signs of the heart and soul of two sister nations uniting.



Shortly after Helena passed away, I paid tribute to her by producing a serigraphy which can be seen in the libraries of schools all over the country, where I tried to picture Helena on a boat, travelling around the world. This spirit of adventure and travel was very much alive in this remarkable woman, whose example and experience still keep us moving on. In the myriad of activities that she undertook at Centro Nacional de Cultura, UNESCO, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, heading the European Heritage Journeys, in European networks such as *Europa Nostra*, Helena has always been a pioneer, able to enlighten new ways and new experiences.

Serigraphy by  
Graça Morais