

HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITY & ART

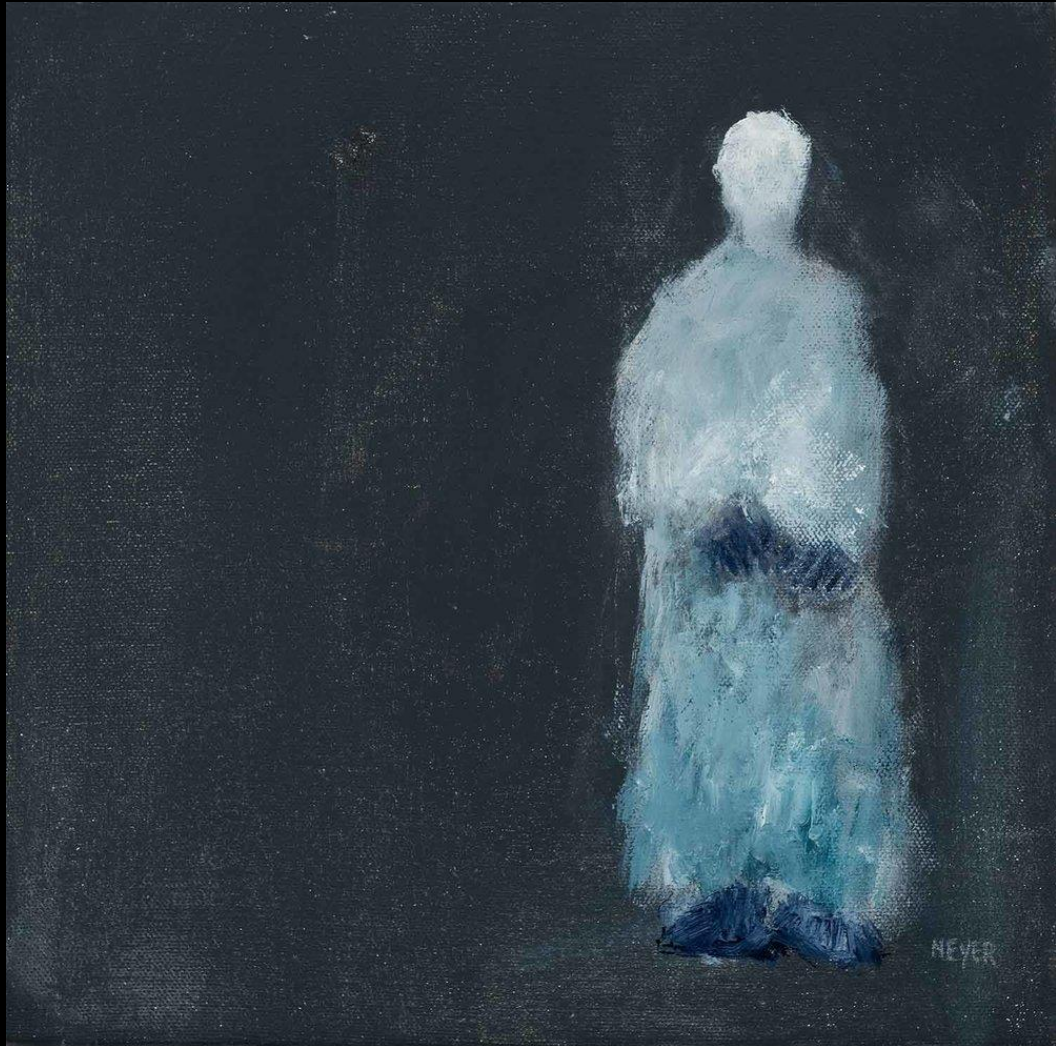


Luc Tuymans, 2017



William T. Ayton, *Cry for Humanity (A Warning Serie)*, 2016

(Acrylic on hardboard)



Jeanie Neyer, *Lost #5*, 2016

(Acrylic)



Marlene Duras, *Wall weeping*, 2009

(Oil on canvas)



Marlene Duras, *Wall Wailing*, 2009

(Oil on canvas)



Yang Shaobin, *Fighting*, 98-13
(Litography)



William Kentridge, *Art in a State of Grace*, *Art in a State of Siege*, *Art in a State of Hope*, 1988

(Silkscreen)



Anonymous, *Equality*, no date

(Graffiti, Mural)



Michael Kesselman, *Income Inequality Solutions*, 2016

(Assemblage)



José Luis Muñoz Rodríguez, *Inequality*, 2016

(Original Acrylic Painting)



Lauren Gohara, *Do you think you can tell #36*, 2013

(Graphite, coloured pencil, archival pigmented ink on paper)



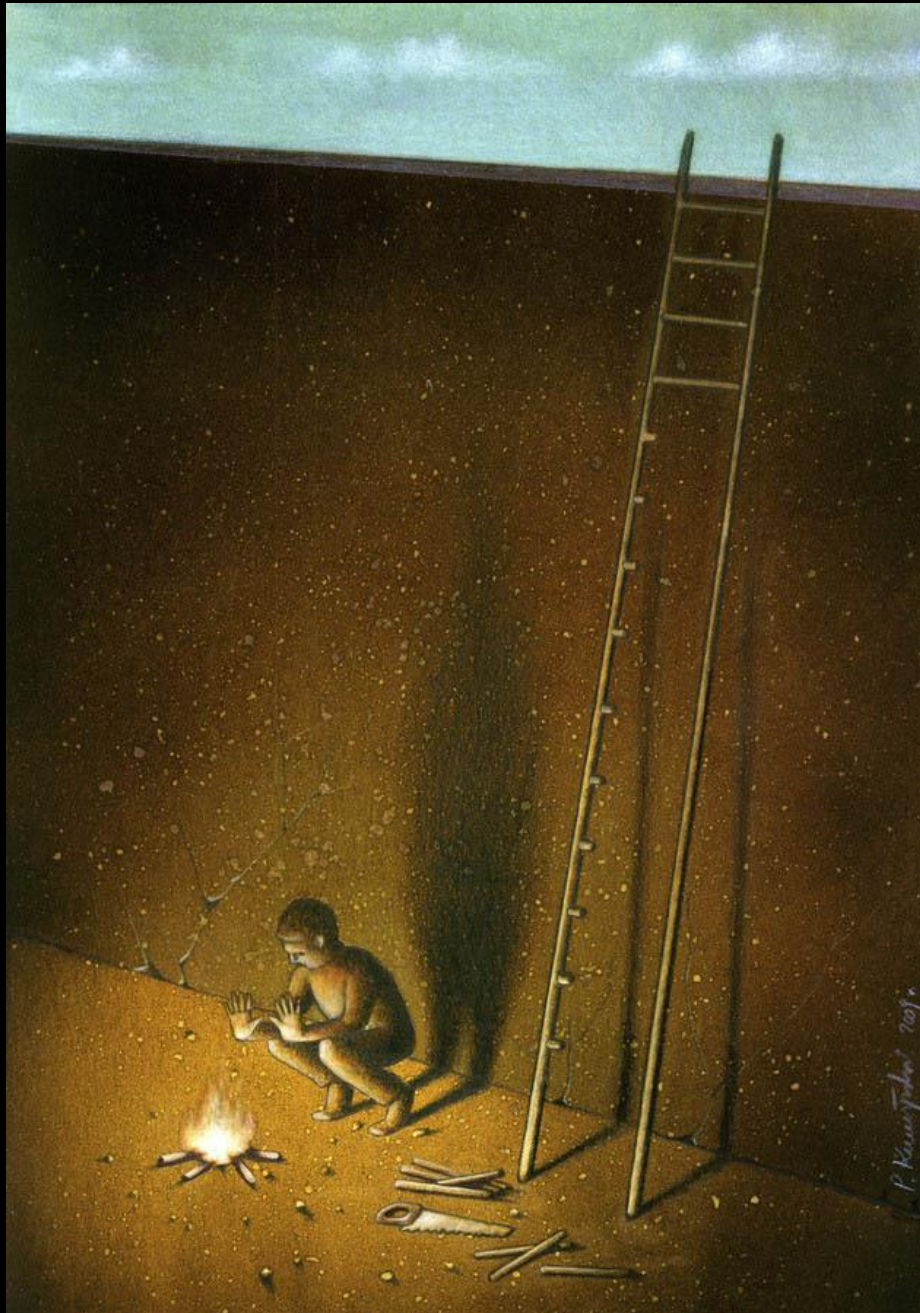
Jim Brossy, *Left behind*, 2009

(Installation, Philadelphia)



Pakkiyarajah Pushpakanthan's, *Untitled Chair (Inequality Serie)*, 2016

(Pen on Paper)



Pawel Kuczynski, *Permanent Poverty*, 2009

(Illustration)



Yaniv Janson, *No Poverty Dypitch, (Please Do Touch - Goal 1)* 2016

(Installation)



Titus Kaphar, *Behind the Myth of Benevolence*, 2014

(Oil on canvas)

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



Meek, *I Want Change*, 2004

(Melbourne Railway Station)



Vhils, Zeca Afonso, Lisbon

(Explosives on wall)

Legend

1. The face of an interesting year: facing 2017 with a squalid mix of shock and awe.

Is that the gaze of a dead person or just the mirrored effect of death on the face of a normal one? Luc Tuymans is one of the most significant painters of our time, being able to reflect upon his own art and its current meaning, while searching for the hidden meanings our times, under the ruins of memory and smashed by the multiple strata of realities generated by information technologies and its digital programming of the real. Simultaneously the portrayer of Queen Beatrix, David Cameron or Condoleeza Rice, and as few can be, of the indifference, silent violence, annoyance and tedium of the world, he avoids unitary and linear interpretations of his work.

2. Warnings of disaster: terrible omens and horrifying visions

E. T. Ayton, *Warning* (2016) is a series of 24 small monochrome paintings inspired in part by recent political events around the globe, and also intended as a warning for the future. (see <https://www.flickr.com/photos/billayton/sets/72157673728115263>).

Sometimes described as surrealist, expressionist or symbolist, Ayton's work explores the relations between beauty and imagination, with resource to mythical motives which create a visionary atmosphere. In 1991 & 1992, the artist did a series of colour paintings (and precursor black-and-white drawings) illustrating each of the 30 articles of the UDHR (*UDHR* series). At the same time, he started a series of ink drawings around focusing on the dangers the human race has bestowed upon herself, therefore challenging the idea of human rights. 36 drawings appeared in 2011, under the common title of *in Humanity* 1991-2011.

3. An impotent blurring: we feel lost, in an *hostile or just uncomfortable* environment, forced to *disoriented nomadisms*, like all those refugees escaping from new wars, famine and disease.

Lost #5, is part of a current series of paintings on the homeless, globally entitled "Lost", each one of which followed by a number to identify them specifically. Jeanie Neyer drew her inspiration from personal experiences of contact with the homeless population. «*In New York City, in the early 1980's, there were stacks of garbage shoved into the corners of buildings, piled against facades; a collection of miniature dumps, or so I thought. One day the garbage moved. It was a bag lady surrounded by her belongings. This was my introduction (...)*». Unfortunately, *homelessness* did not disappear in the meantime. Actually it grew again, in a devastating way, after the economic crisis of 2007. For that reason the author seems to associate her creation with her political campaign in support of Hillary Clinton, therefore showing how sometimes the artist population *doesn't get it at all*.

We lose a lot of things, so much that loosing becomes a Sisyphean condemnation and gradually turns into an existential condition, and a personal stigma: all things lost, even hope, the *Looser* cannot identify himself with the winning discourse of a real or imagined elite, no matter its left-wing tendencies, inclinations and sympathies, or its more or less sincere attention to well represented (and sometimes idealized) minorities. Understanding class differences, despite the tremendous complexities they involve nowadays, stands out as a preliminary challenge for those who want to organize social systems more justly, before responding to individual or group claims.

4. Walls – totems, shelters, constraints

Fascinated by the human head and the magnificence of the European tradition of portraits, the South-african Marlene Dumas moved to Holland decades ago, developing a prolific career as an artist, a writer and a teacher.

In the series of paintings these two works belong to, the usual prominence of the human face and body, normally pictured in translucent tones, gives place to the bigger composition, darker and dominated by the common theme of the wall, powerfully charged with good and bad, symbolic or functional, divisive or embracing meanings and currently made pertinent by the proliferation of the trope and the multiplication of its real tokens.

5. The *carnal desire of cannibal combat*: Freudian non socialized polymorphous perversity of our babyhood canalized through childish fights

In *Fighting 98-13*, two men, both rendered in watery light hues, are depicted in an intense clash of bodies, with one of them violently biting the cheek of the other, thus transmitting the traditional *discomfort and painful feelings* deliberately elicited by Yang Shaobin paintings.

Widely known for his near-abstract portraits of deformed, ghostly creatures, clearly influenced by Francis Bacon and Arnulf Rainer, and also dominated by red and pink hues – a colour whose accentuation supposedly intends to suggest human vitality and capitalist greed, while dialoguing with the iconography of the Cultural Revolution -, Yang Shaobin actually started working in a cynic realist style, before his later concentration on narratives and commentaries on the social and political changes in China. In spite of the fleshy almost baby-like bodies of the *contenders*, this the tension displayed in this paintings acts as a reminder of *war, revolution, and the agonizing restraints imposed on the individual by contemporary society*.

6. State of the art: even *art* itself, questions its *present state*.

Coming from a South-African Jew, son of two lawyers, famous for their defence of victims of Apartheid, Kentridge's protean activity, as a sort of late expressionist, benefits from a unique perspective on reality, triangularly transcending conflicts but always sensitively in touch with *pain and sympathy* (using the title of a documentary), in an authoritative interpretation and expression of social justice.

7. (In)Equality

7.1. Ironies and Sarcasm

a). Mr. Monopoly prefers equity

The importance of equity has been appropriated by capital, which had already managed to assume the shiny face of the nice gentle grandpa-like capitalist of monopoly. Even nicer than uncle Scrooge, the famous character seemed essential in order to normalise practices of monopolization and highly competitive profit earning by diffusing them throughout the American households, and by this mean, instilling the capitalist ideals as expressions of a natural game, perfectly compatible with family values and individual aspirations: *you too can be a rich man, if you win; bad luck if you lose; throw the dice and play it again. Keep on trying, because sooner or later, your time will come*. Well, it's obviously just a board game, whose tokens have even evolved in harmony with political correctness standards. But it is also a portrait of the hard game of capital, with its *winner takes it all* logic – the only difference being the fact that you cannot escape jail with a simple card nor avoid bankruptcies and their consequences, with a simple *endgame* or *game over* bailout.

In the photographed *graffiti*, keeping the pose and the appearances, the *capitalist*, as well as the anonymous *capital* forces he simply disguises (and hereby caricaturizes) ¹, remind us that they too were convinced by the alleged merits of equity. Converted to the needs of *difference* to the detriment of *similarity*, and glorifying the *particular* in preference to all *commonalities*, hegemonic forces tend not only to exclude or protract *sameness* as logically indebted (and thus conceptually misguided), but also to regard *singularity* as something of Leibnizian reminiscences, only intelligible in its guise of *individuality*, socially apt for a *consumerist* reading as *personally exteriorized market input* diluted in public pseudo-voting system of the general demand.

¹ Mr. Monopoly was originally known as *Rich Uncle Pennybags* and many have speculated the character was based on J.P. Morgan.

What is put aside with the *crossing out* of two words is exactly the inner segment *equal*, and the universal pretence and radical transformative potential of the idea of equality. Not only objects, but also subjects can be related and recognized as equal, as a matter of fact or in a normative way. The substantive version of equity, however, is merely objective in its reference (equitable). Despite the importance of modulating and adjusting solutions to personal individuals and particular situations, such concrete realization must maintain a tense dialogue with equality as universality besides mere generality, so as to discover and/or determine which differences are normatively relevant, thus justifying differentiations, and which are not. That this reasoning should take place inside the frame and against the framework of a common status of equality is obviously of utmost relevance, if we want to constitute a just society at the infra-structural, institutional and generally conditional level. Without that, the primary constitutional *aequalibertas* or *equaliberté* - to use Balibar's term - is in danger.

b). A profitable solution to inequality

Michael Kesselman decided to represent the belief in the magic of free markets with this humorous sculpture, which claims to be the logo of a new corporation just established precisely to solve income inequalities that keep sweeping his country (and the world). In his own words, «If we left Wall Street to correct this problem, *they would, no doubt, establish a new entity to manage and handle the task: Income Inequality Solutions, a company that could be publicly owned and traded and that would lay out metaphorically how solutions will come through the creative merging of spark plugs, a juice squeezer, a stainless steel colander, a twist tap and pressure gauge. Finding the solution might even give birth to a new financial instrument, like a hedge fund or sub-prime mortgage swap*».

7.2. Abstractions

Jose Muñoz makes recurrent use of gesso, acrylic and various palette knives in order to achieve a *highly textured palimpsest effect* (J. E. Raddatz), conceived as an analogy of the overlapping vestiges that many civilizations carved and sculpted in stone, like seed thrown to the wind of a the slower geological time. Its colours and motives evoke the geography, textures and atmosphere of the Iberian Peninsula, approaching the concrete from the abstract, to outline themes such as climate change, lost civilizations or urban sprawl. «*I try to express landscapes, the sea, mountains, small towns and cities of my environment and the mark left behind by different civilizations that made their home on the Iberian Peninsula over the ages while reflecting upon the splendour and decadence of these civilizations*».

7.3. Abstraction through concreteness

a). Collages

In this drawing Gohara has set up a contrast between the bottom left corner of a Mondrian painting that appears on the right, with a yellow field marked by black lines, and, on the left, a bar chart of predominantly primary colours that echoes the geometry and divided space of the painting. The chart illustrates the difference between people's perception of who shares the wealth and the actual stark reality. The suggested lyricism of the random musical notations makes for an uneasy juxtaposition.

Using the supposedly objective charts as mere aesthetical, almost decorative elements of the collage, she enters in a meta-dialogue with the history and theory of art represented by artists like the religious Mondrian or the *Suprematist* K. Malevitch. One would say that the information provided by the graphics is recovered at another level of signification, as if it were a symbol of itself, or better, the symbolization of its immediate meaning.

b). Crackpot realism

The real and profound tragedy of poverty consists of its disjunctive vulnerability to sentimentalism and laughter. In this case, the viewer is primarily diverted from piety, sorrow or even guilt, so as to feel himself uneasy with the lack of sympathy introduced by prosaic elements conveyed in the work. The pauper is fat, unlike our dear UNICEF postcard child, lost in a distant and mythical Africa, and if anyone, he could only resemble one of our nasty, unclean and bad-dressed neighbours.

Jim Brossy's life story explicitly supports its artistic options, whether with regards to the obvious themes and associations, or with the materials used. In his own words, «*the cruelty of American society covered up by hypocrisy, together with the impression of constantly being deceived by the government and corporations*», led him to develop «*a suspicion against every kind of authority*», and to adopt an «*attitude of skepticism and cynicism*». These are the ingredients of his self-proclaimed Crackpot Realism: a «*new perspective involving relationships concerned with social relevance, a variety of materials and emotional experiences. In Crackpot Realism there is no distinction between living and making art. The painting is not a representation of life, but a real thing, an object in a real space, that can be experienced as a picture. The integration of tar, cement, wax, latex, steel and other "non-art" materials along with traditional art materials, eliminates boundaries creating new form. We are able to experience these elements from an unconventional perspective with a certain freshness. The materials are real, forming rhythms and patterns obeying the same forces of nature governing all things. Physical properties are translated into mental sensations. Crackpot Realism constructs vehicles for emotional states that evoke contemplation with references to inner and outer worlds. Emotion seeks out certain patterns, rhythms, and form to penetrate beyond the superficial appearance of things creating a state of mind that is disoriented from the outside world. The perception is a new abstract realism (...)*».

7.4. Intimate symbolism

Pushpakanthan reflection upon inequality stems from his country's traumatic experience. However, keeping close to simple objects of our day-to-day life it relies on a potentially universal language of healing, trusting in the capacity of Art to narrow (if not to overcome) the biggest disparities between communities. Exploring unforgettable memories of death, disappearance, torture and wounds, he revisits and critically reviews his country's history, extracting generalizable lessons from the symbolical narrative thus reconstructed. «*The more we explore the hard truths, the more we will be able to open the wounds. Without first opening these wounds, we cannot treat them, we cannot heal them.*». «*Without first recognizing the inequalities that begot the war, Sri Lanka cannot initiate a reconciliation process in any real or meaningful sense. I try to explore these inequalities through my work, and I believe that my art opens a space for discussing, imagining, and critically thinking about equalities.*». To attain such a goal, he integrates drawing, painting, mixed media, installation, performance and video art in his works, and, in the selected painting he makes a peculiar use of dark shades to represent the obscure past of Sri Lanka and triangles, full of furniture, evoke tumults, like riots and war, and hierarchical bureaucratic power. «*The triangles also generate energy and power. They signify productivity and with this, pyramids of power and bureaucracy*». As for the pieces of furniture, they are naturally necessary to our daily *functionings*.

8. Poverty

8.1. Permanent Poverty

Pavel Kuczuinsky satirical illustrations are devoid of great aesthetic concerns.

They aim to provide acid commentaries to society, with the use of simple figurations of our worst habits, fashions, hypocrisies and contradictions. One image illustrates the entrenched self-referential difference between rich and poor people, depicting two children offering themselves to wash the front window of a toy-car from a little wealthy boy, who makes the traditional gesture of refusal.

The one reproduced above makes clear how the short-sided constraining effect that living in constant need produces in peoples minds, suggesting the need for public, transpersonal orientations in the use of resources, even when private.

8.2. Art-ivism, visibility and instalment as *reconfiguration of human space*

Yaniv Janson's *Please Do Touch* series of installations are part of the *Taking Action! Project* the artist launched about five years ago, in an effort to connect art, social and environmental topics with the issue of disability. A problem he knows very closely: "*I am on the autistic spectrum and live with epilepsy. I feel that this installation would be a meaningful contribution to community*".

Trusting on a true dialectic between problems and persons, especially in the prospects of a meaningful dialogue and interaction between the community, in general, and the people suffering from some kind of disability, Janson planned this artwork as a convergence point, a locus for encounter and an opportunity for mutual learning. On the one hand, it *«facilitates sensory art experiences for all audiences, including people with visual impairments and special sensory needs, such as people on the autistic spectrum like myself. I choose to challenge traditional art 'rules' by inviting the audience to touch the art and engaging with audiences that were traditionally excluded from the experience of art. Conversely, this demonstrates that the disability community is keen to participate in mainstream society – by experimenting with different experiences of art for all to try»*. On the other side, the series also shows how the disability community can in itself contribute to improve the sensory experiences of all community members, by drawing attention to the particularly vulnerable and therefore extremely cautious relation of the most vulnerable with their social, political and natural environment.

Not only he promotes better and wider access to the arts for people with disability, but also intends to listen to their opinions on subjects of general interest, addressed by his works. With such an input and goal, his artwork claims to be not only for this minority, but also from her, and simultaneously, benefitting from the particularly attentive view on developmental issues of its members, it acquires an universal interest, despite the necessary modulations and mediations. In fact, the exhibition comprises five diptychs, each of one comparing the results of sustainable and unsustainable approaches to the goals included in the *United Nations 2030 Development Agenda*. The 5 pairs of works are produced in acrylic on unframed canvas, and should be installed together so as to outline the tension of opposite outcomes. To give an example, according to the author, *«Poverty is when people become shadows of themselves - and cannot experience happy colours»*.

9. Remedies

9.1. *Benevolence is not enough*

Kaphar takes a portrait of Saint, Doctus and Superhero Thomas Jefferson and draws it back as a curtain to reveal another portrait of a black woman, erotically painted in an Orientalist manner. The work unveils itself, almost blossoming as a sculpture, after all, and the abolitionist himself emerges as a well-known owner of slaves.

The 'inferior' race comes out as a mystery, proof of our ignorance and obtuse understanding; mostly feared by its seductive power of attraction perhaps, the other exposes the insecurity and fragility of ourselves and the *precariousness* of our image, painted on the surface of the real, over and against other alternative, sub-cultural or marginal narratives. To alleviate uncertainties and conjure demons, benevolence is of the essence. But, in a performative contradiction, it reinforces the asymmetry of the parts involved.

9.2. We want change

The street artist known as *Meek* has specialized himself in stencil paintings, even though one can count among his activity the hijacking of billboards, as well as the use of wheat paste and stickers. He lived in London, where he was exposed to the influence of Banksy. A second version of the graffiti in the image appeared in London, under the signature of the British enigmatic artist (or collective of artists). The message is very clear, playing with the homonymy of the term change and our pre-conceived idea of the beggar's preferences.

10. Vhils – Zeca Afonso

Among many other young living artists of amazing quality (painters like Benedita Kendall, Susana Chasse, Rui Tavares or Catarina Pinto Leite), the Portuguese Alexandre Farto (aka Vhils), was fired into stardom mainly thanks to its exploded walls, where faces emerge, as if discovered underneath the façades of houses.

We have started with a face, immediately fading in the second picture and almost disappearing along this non pretentious and merely illustrative selection: now they return in big, as sources of the levinasian ethical demand, but also evoking the classical relation between ethos and stance or home, urging for a more personally caring and attentive urban life.

One of his works in Portugal portrays *Zeca Afonso*, famous protest singer during the Corporative Authoritarian Regime of António Salazar, a former teacher in our Faculty of Law. José Afonso started his carrier as a singer and writer in the Academic Association of Coimbra, interpreting the Students ballads, also called *Fados de Coimbra*, as well as traditional folk music which had been ideologically appropriated by the regime. Due to his political activities, he was persecuted, captured and jailed, and later had to run into exile, before completing his degree in History and Philosophy. He never stopped composing and singing, usually performing in the underground clandestine networks formed by the oppositionists. In the 25th of April, 1974, *Grandôla Vila Morena* was chosen by the rebellious captains as the radio signal to start the carnations revolution.

15 examples of his always renewable love of mankind and strive for social justice

Ballads from Coimbra:

- *O meu menino é d'oiro*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QIPQaomARM>
- *Tenho barcos, tenho remos*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jq1zvXEnApg>
- *Balada de Outono*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mu2tID1xy5Q>
- *Saudades de Coimbra*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79i2OulpZl8>

Activist/Protest songs:

- *Coro da Primavera*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSyg_dETC-Q
- *Grandola Vila Morena*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaLWqy4e7Is>
- *Epígrafe para a Arte de Furtar*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOcdjUrjJVA>
- *Menino do bairro negro*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsIG0BCFNSQ>
- *Maio Maduro Maio*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1NRLI2wgcA>
- *Os Índios da Meia-Praia*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7ntDFAF1AE>
- *Traz outro amigo também*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqAZ_1JhUOw
- *Filhos da Madrugada*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CbVQV1XNOCY>
- *Venham mais Cinco*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E47aslFITQA>
- *O que faz falta*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L29-aZXqZyk>
- *Os Vampiros*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUEeBhhuUos> (from his last concert)

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