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**Producing in common:
collaborative artistic
processes in Trás di Munti
and Lousal**

**Public Place and
Participation:
Theoretical Contexts**

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Collaborative artistic practices of social commitment seek, not infrequently, a dialogic process with citizens. Although in etymological terms there is still no stabilization, it is now clear that these practices are moving in a territory that involves art and politics. In turn, although this is an undefined territory, whose perimeter greatly depends on the ontological approaches of art and politics that are adopted, there is a set of shared elements, such as imagination and creativity, communication or, among others, the vision of worlds.

In terms of historical understanding, these artistic practices “play an important role in establishing a link between everyday cultural participation and the self-awareness of contemporary artistic practice (...)” (Matarasso, 2019, p.19), not resigning to the field of autotelic artistic creation. In turn, in terms of the social dimension, they also play an important role, practicing a vision of democratic culture (Bishop, 2012; Kester, 2015). Thus, collaborative artistic practices socially engaged are characterized by two axes of action: co-creation and dynamics and social conditions, with the first axis being the vehicle of interaction with the second.

In Portugal, collaborative artistic practices socially engaged have grown exponentially in the 21st century, especially in the last decade. This growth will not be unrelated to the national social and political context experienced since 2008. Since there is an objective social commitment at its base, it is a historical fact that whenever crises in economic and political systems – whether systemic in nature or not – manifest themselves, there is an increase in collaborative artistic practices of social commitment. In Portugal, since the Revolution of the 25th of April 1974 this has occurred.

Based on the assumption that “the definition of community artistic practices includes idiosyncratic elements such as, for example, the fact that people from a community are trained in the creative process itself, meeting for the purpose of creating artistic objects” (Cruz, 2017, p.34) is applicable to all artistic areas, its methodological dimension has necessary variations, depending on the disciplinary approach. And although these artistic practices tend to be transdisciplinary, it is a fact that they have an influence from the performing arts area where, in fact, their growth has been more pronounced, also in Portugal.

Nevertheless, the two projects that are confronted in this text are based on sculpture. And although there is an associated performativity in them, through processuality, there is a methodological dimension and a formal and aesthetic approach that distinguishes them in various aspects from other projects rooted in theatrical and performative practice.

Doing, in this case, has an objectual purpose, typical of the plastic arts, which implies the construction and edification in the place.

In turn, those are projects that articulate the artistic and the scientific experience, maintaining an intrinsic relationship with academia. Artistic research therefore assumes academic characteristics, both in terms of building projects and in terms of dissemination activities, many of them made for the scientific community.

‘Trás di Munti’¹

Between 2006 and 2017, the artist Virgínia Fróis developed two projects in Trás di Munti, a town in the municipality of Tarrafal (CMT) (Santiago, Cape Verde), with less than five hundred inhabitants. Community historically shaped by pottery production, the manufacture of clay pieces was an important economic resource for family subsistence until the 1980s, when it went into decline, becoming an activity practically non-existent in the 1990s.

The two projects developed by the artist – Guardar Águas (2006-2009) and Ar no Mar (2014) unfolded on different work fronts, systematized by Virgínia Fróis from a journey based on ‘Listening’, ‘Cooperating’ and ‘Interacting’. These components include the two projects but also other initiatives they have promoted. So, although there are specificities in all of them, it is possible to assume that there was a journey built in a relational constellation.

In this journey, ‘Listening’ began in 2006 with the project ‘Guardar Águas’. In an artistic residency in Trás di Munti, the contact with a group of local potters led Virgínia Fróis to adopt an “exploratory methodology based on observation, direct contact and exchange of stories and ceramic experiences with the group” (Fróis, 2017, p.203). Virginia Fróis proposed then the pottery workshop ‘Modelling the clay to reconstitute the past and build the future’ with the aim of “resuming the operative chain of the local pottery, as it existed in the past, and passing it on to the younger generations” (Madureira, 2012, p.32). This training was led by three women with local production techniques: Pascoalina Borges, Isabel Semedo and

1 In the absence of an official title for the project, the name of the location where it took place was adopted, which is in the municipality of Tarrafal on the island of Santiago in Cape Verde.

Saturnina Tavares, to whom they added about twenty women in formation². From this experience, Virgínia Fróis highlighted the “teamwork, proposing different techniques to achieve different forms.” (Fróis, 2017, p.203) (Fig.1). The ceramic works presented in the exhibition format by the artist in 2006, in Montemor-o-Novo and on the Ilha de Santiago in Cidade da Praia, were carried out with the same methods, shapes and materials as the pottery of Trás di Munti, exploring the idea of emptiness and lightness of water from the learning taken from the ‘Guardar Águas’ project.

‘Cooperating’ arose from the intention to stimulate the artisan activities of Trás di Munti, resulting in the requalification of a former local cooperative. The sculptor has again collaborated with the CMT which inaugurated the Centro de Artes e Ofícios (CAO) of Trás di Munti in 2009³ with the mission of promoting the population’s access to development. Since that time, the CAO has existed as an interpretative, formative, and educational centre, as well as a workshop place, a sales point, and an exhibition place. Virgínia Fróis considers that the creation of CAO was one of the results achieved with the mediation process (Fróis, 2017, p.204) that started in 2006. The interpretation made to the pottery of Trás di Munti and its traditional roots, poured into the project ‘Guardar Águas’, was used here in order to safeguard (Fróis, 2017) and promote the “patrimonialization of the pottery” (Madureira, 2012, p.40).

In this constellation journey, if ‘cooperating’ happened in the relationship established between the artist and the local community – both in terms of cultural mediation and in terms of artistic creation – it was also fulfilled in the relationship that other artists established with the locality, through the artist⁵.

Finally, ‘Interacting’, began in 2013, having been developed over several years, from the artist’s interaction with the potters. The ‘Ar no Mar’ project (2014), which resulted in the creation of a sculptural ensemble made up of several terracotta columns to be placed by the sea (Fig.2), was developed “in a participative model with and for the place”, assuming “the relationship

as a poetic exercise” and the “thought” of *Edouard Glissant* as reference and reflection” (Virgínia Fróis, 2017, personal communication, 28 January). According to the artist, “the creative process was developed from the relationship created between us, from the shared life stories (...)” (Fróis, 2017, p.205) and the work was born from “(...) modes of interaction and diversity of ideas, forms developed by each one, thinking and experimenting with the processes of ceramics, measuring our bodies to establish dimensions (...) building a shared space as a metaphor.” (Fróis, 2017, p.205).

As a whole, the journey taken by Virgínia Fróis in Trás di Munti can be understood as a way of relaunching local culture, seeking to enhance and revitalize pottery production. From the exploitation of the plastic resources of the clay, the constellation of ‘Trás di Munti’ sought to contribute to a thought centred on the empowerment of each one for social development.

In its different components, the initiatives and projects developed lasted for eleven years, and it can be said that there was a growth in the plot, like a network that is being stitched in a processual way, where the path followed was fundamental. In it, the cultural animation component stands out, as Virgínia Fróis refers (Madureira, 2012, p.34), but also the artistic and academic dissemination component, which consisted of exhibitions, workshops, and conferences. In turn, the relational component, which encourages interpersonal relationships, and the social component, also contributed to improving the living conditions of people who participated in different phases of the project⁶ (Fig.3). Although this component had ephemeral elements, the continuity of the platforms and structures created have a relevant social impact.

In terms of producing in common, it is important to mention the different shades present throughout the sculptor’s journey in Trás di Munti. The raw material explored has been for many years the material of choice in Virgínia Fróis’s work and here it was a common denominator in the projects ‘Guardar Águas’ and ‘Ar no Mar’. If ‘Guardar Águas’ is in the field of the cultural animation, there was on it “a very pronounced individual side” (Fróis, 2007, p.90). As the artist said, “Seeming to be the rehabilitation of pottery the main pole, it contains the desire for creation as an interior and silent act.” (Fróis, 2007, p.90), which reveal that the authorship was juxtaposed to the collaborative experience. In turn, the artistic project ‘Ar no Mar’ followed

2 In addition to paying for the training, the Municipality of Tarrafal (CMT) provided the material and allocated a monthly subsidy to the participants (Madureira, 2012, p.32).

3 It counted on the partnerships of the Municipality of Montemor-o-Novo and the Portuguese Cooperation in Cidade da Praia.

4 It also presents as results two academic works that used the work developed in Trás di Munti as a case study (Fróis, 2017, p.5).

5 In this regard, consult Fróis, 2017.

6 Namely for a regular payment to the training potters, the trainees who participated in the courses, the sale of the pieces, the creation of jobs in the CAO, etc.

a collaborative model in the production phase, concretized in the work between Virgínia Fróis and the potters, who conceived most of the pieces.

If we can say, on the one hand, that the collaborative experience constituted itself as an artistic exercise, on the other hand, we can consider that the authorial and creative responsibility of the projects was based on a pyramidal model, with no constant horizontal distribution of responsibility among the interlocutors involved along the journey outlined here. The collaborative practice existed in specific moments – of reflection, conception or production of works – but in general, the individual and object artistic creation of the artist, Virgínia Fróis, stands out.

A Monument to Lousal

The project 'A Monument to Lousal', started in January 2018 in the mining village of Lousal (Grândola, Portugal) and is still under development, at least until 2021. This village, today with about three hundred inhabitants, was created due to the exploitation of pyrite in the 1940s by the company SAPEC, which developed a control over its territory but also over the social life of the population. The shape of the neighborhoods built there had a precise social stratification, dividing the population from their posts and functions in the mine. In addition to housing, all the existing infrastructure in the village – the school, the health center, the church, the grocery store, etc. – were owned by SAPEC, and there was an ubiquitous paternalistic model (Rodrigues, 2005), coinciding with the fascist dictatorship in Portugal.

The Lousal mine started operating at the beginning of the 20th century and reached its peak between the 1930s and 1960s. The process of declining ore mining took place in the 1970s and the mine finally closed in 1988. With its closure, what were the specific ways of life, practices and symbolic experiences of the villagers faced a new phase. The mine was the centre of the Lousal community and the primary cause of its existence. Its absence determined a traumatic social experience that was somehow irrecoverable.

This project began with the signing of a collaboration protocol between the Municipality of Grândola (CMG) and the Faculdade de Belas Artes da Universidade de Lisboa (FBAUL) on 16 November 2017, under the initiative and coordination of the sculptor Sérgio Vicente.

Based on the protocol, FBAUL invited researchers from different areas and academic institutions to join the team responsible for carrying out the project. This team was composed of nine specialists (in Multimedia Art, Anthropology, Architecture, Sculpture, Geography and Art History) and five

students of Sculpture⁷. Although aware of the social fragilities of the place, the project aims to “return art to society” and therefore the techniques, strategies and aesthetic and artistic dimensions were central from the beginning.

As in 'Trás di Munti', the first approach was to the territory and outreach the local community to work together for the public recognition of the collective identity of the inhabitants of Lousal. To this end, several entities were involved – the Municipality of Grândola, the Parish Council of Azinheira dos Barros and the Associação Cultural e Desportiva das Minas do Lousal. Although playing a role of mediation between the artists/ researchers and the population, these entities equally participated in the whole creative process.

The project was structured in two phases. The first, between January and June 2018, corresponded to the development of the collaborative process, through monthly work sessions, open to the entire population and to local entities and associations, and aimed to design the monument (Fig.4). In each session, using collaborative methodologies, the community reflected on Lousal, collectively creating stories about that place and territory, concrete and imagined objects and the scale models of the sculptures. Oral, written and visual registration was used, based on the construction of three-dimensional objects, in relation to which concepts and procedures of the sculptural language were introduced. Progressively and collectively, the theme was decided – the mine –, the concept, the space, the shape, the material and other elements necessary for the realization of the sculptural project (Fig.5).

The second phase, starting in July 2018 and still in progress, will correspond to the production and deployment of the work in the territory. This is a technical phase, related to the execution of the sculptures, under the responsibility of the coordinating sculptor and the team architects.

The process of working with the community, the understanding of how the village space is organised and used and the particular experience in each neighbourhood were taken into account, and from the implantation of one sculpture, seven sculptures were taken into consideration, scattered throughout the neighbourhoods and places of symbolic communion,

7 Team: Catarina Monteiro, Cristina Pratas Cruzeiro, Diana Pereira, Fernando Fadigas, Filipa Ramalheite, Helena Elias, Joana Jordão, João Quintela, Maria Assunção Gato, Maria Elisa, Mariana Vinheiras, Miguel Condeça, Pedro Costa e Rogério Taveira.

such as the hall, the market or the road to Tapada. The first sculpture was inaugurated in December 2019, next to the Association parlour (Fig.6), and two other sculptures are planned for the next two years.

In this project, all the procedures, stages and purposes have been decided together. Thus, the multidisciplinary team prepared each of the work sessions without knowing what would result from it. The roles and resources of each were exponentiated in technical matters, but there was no hierarchy. All participants, be they inhabitants, researchers, artists, technicians, or local politicians had the same authority to negotiate, share and decide.

The artists and researchers assumed the role of stimulating the creation of the group, in the sense that they invited the population and the different local entities to produce an artistic work together. But they tried not to lead or manipulate the results. For their part, the population and the members of local entities — political and recreational — responded to an initial invitation that was understood as a challenge to cross self-imposed limits in artistic matters and which, once accepted, was structured and transmuted into mutual self-confidence.

Final considerations

In common, the two projects have the fact that they use collaborative methodologies, the development of sculptural practices, the relationship to the academic community and local institutions and the fact that they have been carried out in small localities which, in their own distinct context, are dominated by social difficulties of various kinds.

Both still have in common the social commitment that motivated them, albeit from different perspectives. In the case of 'Trás di Munti', social action is more visible, in the sense of promoting and creating cultural structures and jobs. In the case of 'A Monument to the Lousal', creative empowerment of the community stands out, in the sense that there is a strong commitment for the working sessions to contribute to it.

If the two projects share a commitment to communion that involves artists and other participants, the community, academic institutions and local government, when we consider the purposes of local power structures, the distinctions become evident. The CMT aims, through the project, to increase tourism, promoting the revitalization of a traditional activity. The collaboration with CMG integrates the camaraderie purposes of social empowerment. Although tourism can also be boosted here, the Lousal

project does not recover or intend to revitalize mining activity or any other activity linked to the place.

Finally, in the case of the project developed in Trás di Munti, there is an aesthetic compromise shared between the conceptual vision of the sculptor Virginia Fróis and an identity interpretation of the pottery tradition. This commitment determined an aesthetic compatibility between the artist's individual plastic work and the work done in collaboration with the potters, following a mixed model where collaboration coexists with individual creation. In the case of the project developed at Lousal, it is the collaborative model that takes revenge.

But despite the distinctions, quoting Grant Kester, transformative nature is present in both projects, evident in the "ability to produce new looks (...) on the constitution of power and subjectivity." (Kester, 2015, p.79). And it is achieved by producing in common. The degree of interdependence of all those involved and the recognition that none of them alone could achieve the same result is what characterizes them.

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