

N.03

NOTE  
BOOKS  
PRIORITISING  
THE ANCIENT ART  
OF LISTENING  
ART  
AND  
COMMUNU  
NITY



CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN  
FOUNDATION

VANESSA  
RODRIGUES

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ART, CULTURES AND COMMUNITIES:  
**PRIORITISING  
THE ANCIENT ART  
OF LISTENING**



**VANESSA  
RODRIGUES**



## Foreword

What happens when professional and non-professional artists come together to create a play, an opera, a film, a photo exhibition, a performance, a choreography, a musical or a concert, among many other artistic initiatives?

Authors like François Matarasso<sup>1</sup> argue that this encounter is a conscious co-creation that results in something new: it is not amateur art, it is not professional art; it is precisely in this blurring of boundaries in (un)conventional practices that a new cultural, participatory language emerges, and without taking into account individual capabilities, these practices would not come to fruition.

This notebook grew from reflections on the importance of this blurring of boundaries to find common ground. This publication was commissioned by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (FCG), which co-organised the ‘International Conference for Building Capabilities: Rethinking the Social Value of Culture’ on 6th June 2022, in partnership with [Traction](#)<sup>2</sup>.

The event brought together artists, researchers, policymakers and consultants, the general public and the mother of one of the young prisoners. She took the floor to share the importance of compassionate listening and the ability to care about what others have to say. When her son was challenged to participate in an opera in the Leiria Youth Prison, he discovered that he was capable of being moved by an art form that until then had been unknown to him.

My relationship with art and communities began precisely in a prison. During the five years I worked as a journalist in Brazil, I was introduced to a project carried out by the Afroreggae NGO in the Talavera Bruce women’s prison in Rio de Janeiro. There, I became acquainted with their artistic practice, which offered percussion workshops to young women. For one hour, their drumsticks beat the drums while rehearsing for their performance. The outcome was important, but the process itself was a lesson in (re)building trust among musicians, teachers and the women in prison.

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<sup>1</sup> See [Art and Community Notebook N.01](#) of this collection, entitled “Ethics and Participatory Art” by Goldbard and François Matarasso

<sup>2</sup> European project comprising of 9 International partners and funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Traction brings together a group of experts in the fields of art, technology and academia to research and develop new technologies and devise ways of involving local communities in the co-creation of operas in Barcelona (Spain), Dublin (Ireland), and Leiria – The Youth Prison (Portugal).



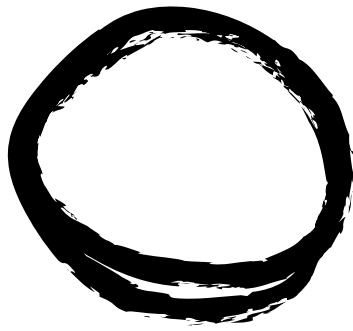
## ART AND COMMUNITY

Years later, thanks to the Associação Social e Cultural (Social and Cultural Association) PELE, in Porto, I was back in another prison making a radio programme on the play *Inesquecível Emília (Unforgettable Emilia)* about the correspondence between female inmates and their families. The play, which premiered in the Special Prison Facility in Santa Cruz do Bispo, in Matosinhos, Porto, was attended by the general public and featured Manuela Azevedo, the lead singer of the band Clã. In 2012, the play was performed at the Portuguese Parliament.

In a transversal way, these two projects show the relevance of culture's social value in developing the capabilities of vulnerable and non-vulnerable communities, offering space for reflection, and turning discourses and interventions into a political act; and through action and civic participation, creating a secure space for individual and collective transformation.

The same occurred at this conference. Thus, this publication attempts to sum up some of the ideas and practices that came about, reflecting on lived experiences, sharing ways of doing and living, embracing these diversities, and raising awareness of the need to cultivate humanity through projects that value the capabilities of the people involved in artistic practices to promote social change.

Vanessa Rodrigues



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1

## Culture as a core element of human relations

Is Culture good for us? This is how community artist and researcher François Matarasso invites us to reflect on the role of culture in the lives of each one of us. A priori, it seems like a relatively simple question. However, if we analyse how politicians, philosophers, ancestral communities, artists and contemporary citizens approach the concept, we realise that it requires more detailed responses. This is due to its complex context, particularly if we want to understand the scale in which it is circumscribed and because it is one of humanity's defining characteristics.

“There is no human being without culture, just as there is no culture without human beings,” states Matarasso. Firstly, “culture is the immensely complex system of symbols by which we create, communicate and understand meaning in our lived experience, and thus build a community.” Therefore, the term culture will always be problematic to define as an abstract category in a transdisciplinary field, as Cultural Studies reminds us. It is along these lines that authors such as Clammer (2012) advocate that its definition should be linked to its historical location, the contemporary intelligibility of the relationship between culture and nature (e.g., indigenous cosmogony), the policies in place at the time, the uses in social theory being applied and its intrinsic local nature (Clammer, 2012, p.37).

In principle, in line with Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.” Therefore, those who cannot participate are excluded from the human family. Matarasso gives examples of how social exclusion begins with cultural exclusion: African peoples during slavery; Jewish people under the Nazi regime; the Uyghur people in China; the Rohingya minority in Myanmar.



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The main reason why culture is necessary and good is that it enables us to fulfil our human potential, namely expressing values, performances, languages, symbols, images, and sounds, protecting our place in the human community, asserting our dignity, equality and organising experiences. These ideas were understood by thinkers of the Classical Period, whose legacy still defines European culture.

Culture is a route for self-fulfilment; that is why it shares etymological roots with the word cultivation, adding value to human nature. Since culture is at the centre of human relations as a way of cultivating different identities, it is undeniably a context for communication. Culture is the spiritual and sentimental education that inspired the construction of museums, opera houses, and cultural institutions. It has become a leading role in relations among people, both in leisure and entertainment, providing opportunities for fruition and access to knowledge.

In Europe, the ideal of culture has been constructed as an asset and a root of civilisation, influencing cultural policies. It is perceived as a matrix that allows people to fulfil their human potential. This is, in fact, a vision that has been attracting politicians, citizens and philanthropists such as Calouste Gulbenkian under the banner of cultural democratisation. This creation of space for culture as a basic terrain of life at the centre of human relations has provided opportunities for a number of artistic initiatives.

Nevertheless, culture is problematic, says Matarasso, because it is very hard to reconcile the principles of democracy. If people with such different cultural identities – whether in their own countries or worldwide – do not agree on what human flourishing is, how can we expect to agree on how it might help us get there?

The challenge of cultural democracy remains and runs the risk of succumbing to relativism due to the subjective nature of cultural values resulting from human diversity, which are not fully acknowledged. This is a fundamental problem to the civilising mission. Another perverse and bewildering approach is the idea that culture is good for some, not as a pathway to human flourishing, but because it can solve social problems along the paternalistic line of “doing good through culture” with communities that are poor, marginalised or at risk of social exclusion.

Although the idea that participation in cultural programmes can lead to positive social outcomes by creating positive changes in these communities and providing more comprehensive access to culture, it faces conceptual and practical problems of ethical and philosophical nature. And these are much more complex to solve.



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If culture is a positive and important pathway to human flourishing, why does it apply only to some humans? Are vulnerable and social minority people less able to fulfil their human potential through culture? Evidently not. However, this is the implication of using cultural projects to bring about social change. So, what right does an artist or a cultural institution have to set out to change a person, a group, or a community without their consent or knowledge?

That is why the Traction consortium uses a methodology that integrates and values the capabilities of the people they work with based on an initial question: what are people capable of doing and being? This is in line with the work of American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2011), who advocates that human dignity depends on the possibility of action (agency) and operationalisation of their capabilities, focusing on what each person is capable of being and doing.

In other words, it starts with the singularity of an individual involved in a participatory art practice, A “restless art” (Matarasso, 2019), where the boundaries between individuals who create art are fluid. Community members are also artists, and artists become part of the community, so co-creation offers a new artistic place, resulting from this incidence, this dialogue, and this exchange of individual capabilities as raw material to promote changes.





## 2

# Humanising capabilities

Human capabilities are contingent and constantly evolving. For example, suppose that in one particular art project, we work with children and later with the same individuals as young adults. In that case, we witness a basic progression in how they experience the world. Later outcomes may change depending on opportunities of access, cultural and ideological contexts, historical period and its problems — e.g., we haven't yet grasped how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected and/or limited human capabilities.

There is still no consensus on how to include these human capabilities over time, integrating the diversity of human cultures in cultural policies. Nevertheless, this has been the guiding idea of community arts when developing new skills, gaining social capital, and promoting knowledge and self-knowledge.

However, when addressing the topic of capabilities, we should observe that they are not just skills intrinsic to a person but also the freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social and economic environment (Nussbaum, 2011). For example, women only gained the right to obtain a degree in 1920. The first time a woman could cast a vote in Portugal happened in 1911. And today, in line with female authors such as Spivak (1988), — particularly in her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* —, Nancy Fraser (1992), Patricia Hill Collins (1991, 2011), Grada Kilomba (2020) and even Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2008, 2018), in the theory of epistemologies of the South, abysmal exclusionary conditions still persist, preventing women, minorities and socially marginalised groups from taking the floor and effectively participating in the public discursive sphere, which remains elitist.

The concept of social exclusion is central to the work conducted by the Traction consortium in integrating capabilities as actions in its dual dimensions. As stated by Madanipour and Allen (1998), social exclusion can be understood as a social process across society rather than a way of categorising individuals and groups within that society.



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In other words, social exclusion results from the imposition of interest by the privileged minority, marginalising the most vulnerable groups.

For example, many people taking part in the Traction Opera trials experience different kinds of social exclusion: social processes, poverty, discrimination, geographic distance or disability. These dimensions contribute to their social exclusion, perpetuating disabilities and limiting individual capabilities.

Given that the variables of the surrounding environment and the context have not changed, it is not always easy to tell whether the implemented participatory projects have enhanced the capability of the people involved, and these factors must be problematised in the equation of the proposed social change.

Thus, this premise recognises that opera co-creation trials cannot, and do not, aim to solve broader problems contributing to the social exclusion experienced by many participants. It is beyond the power of these initiatives to change people's legal status, health conditions, and geographic isolation. Even though these aspects are contextualised in the study, there is no expectation of changing or solving them just by participating in the project.

Where change can be expected, states Matarasso — and must be identified — it is in the social structures in which the participants engage directly, cultural institutions, social services and private institutions involved in the trial. It is clear that the organisations carrying out the projects have become more open to people who experience social exclusion, acknowledging the obstacles standing in the way of flourishing.

With regards to the Leiria prison inmates taking part in the Opera in Prison project, directed by Paulo Lameiro and the team of Sociedade Artística Musical dos Pousos (Artistic Musical Society of Pousos) SAMP, it is fundamental to question to what extent it may have contributed to a greater willingness to use the arts within the Portuguese criminal justice system.

Thus, Traction has to answer two related questions. Firstly, has participation in this opera co-creation extended a person's capability to do and be what they choose? And does this choice protect human dignity? Secondly, how far do the social institutions within which participants aim to exercise their capabilities enable them to do and be what they choose?



2.1

## **Opera in the Leiria Prison: building capabilities**

On 4<sup>th</sup> July 2022, the opera *O Tempo (Somos Nós), Time, (it's Us)*, premiered on the grounds of the Leiria Youth Prison (EPLJ). Twelve days later, it premiered at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon. The opera, guided by the words 'door' and 'journey', was performed by young offenders of the Leiria Youth Prison and their families, professional artists, prison guards and staff, using augmented and virtual reality technologies, engaging the entire community inside and outside the prison.

This is Traction's first project, in collaboration with the Sociedade Artística Musical dos Pousos – SAMP, an independent music school in Leiria, and other partners such as the Irish National Opera of the Irish Republic and Barcelona's Gran Teatre del Liceu in Spain. Since 2003, SAMP has been promoting the Opera in Prison project, bringing together professional artists of the Classical music world and young prisoners to share artistic experiences in a Mozart-inspired operatic production.

On 6<sup>th</sup> June, Paulo Lameiro, the project director of Opera in Prisons, participated in the International Conference. Via live streaming from the Mozart Pavilion on the grounds of the Leiria Youth Prison, Lameiro presented six young offenders taking part in the Opera trial. He also introduced the mother of one of the young inmates (Tiago): 53-year-old Joaquina, who works as a cleaner and has five children. The photograph of their embrace illustrates the visual identity of the conference.

Before being invited to attend the rehearsals of the young offenders in prison, Joaquina had never heard of Opera. "Tiago liked it, and I liked it too. I've seen many performances in the Leiria prison. And whenever I get a chance, I'm in front of the TV, watching it," says Joaquina.

The project's primary goal is to reduce the reoffending rate among young inmates. The project also aims to bring together and involve the young offenders' families, who play a crucial role in helping change these young prisoners' lives. Opera is a pretext to enhance individual capabilities and build other inner capabilities: the knowledge of an artistic language that deals with emotions, lives, conflicts, and changes, that is, singing about their lives as part of collective work and developing interpersonal communication skills.



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That is why, when Joaquina takes the floor, she is addressing society: “When these young people leave prison, give them a hand, give them a job,” she is asking for support not just because they are ex-prisoners but as a change in attitude with regards to giving opportunities. As Paulo Lameiro states, “we can’t change the lives of all Tiagos within the prison walls”.

If we try to respond according to the prison system rules, it is impossible to work on their capabilities. It is necessary to humanise, to identify their singularities. “We have to look at the system not as the inmate’s mother, but as people,” reflects Lameiro.

And so, why Opera? “It’s a complete work of art. It’s true that they find it strange at first, and when we begin the vocal warm-up exercises, it is all laughter. Still, they quickly discover that Opera is a tragedy: a politician dies, and a young man avenges his death. You can’t imagine the power it has.”

Like great literature and art, Opera deals with universal themes: love, power, hate, etc. The life experiences of these young offenders are radical and intense. Due to its intense, dramatic narrative structure, a two-hour performance of an opera sums up part of these youngsters’ experiences and speaks to them. According to Lameiro, it is thrilling to be able to tell symbolically snippets of their life stories through music, words and theatre. In addition, they become fascinated by the uniqueness and power of the voices of the professional singers with whom they share the stage.

But this project is not just about voices because some young prisoners would rather work backstage. There’s room to collaborate on costumes and set design; there’s room for everyone because opera is a musical genre that is welcoming and inclusive.” Later, when they join a professional orchestra, like the Gulbenkian Orchestra, “they gain the capacity for abstraction, and the result is compelling.”



## 3

## What is the role of cultural institutions?

## 3.1

### The case study of the *Opera Prima* at the Gran Teatre del Liceu

In the previous section, we find that reversing the paradigm of entering a prison to educate for citizenship and participation through art creates ruptures with a rigid, conservative and punitive system. Along these lines, a fundamental question emerges: “How can we transform societies if many institutions are still stuck in the past?” Valentí Oviedo, director of the Gran Teatre del Liceu<sup>3</sup>, raises this question regarding “the cultural institution’s mission”. So “if we can’t transform ourselves, how can we transform societies?” adds Valentí.

The mission of a cultural institution varies according to its cultural context. Still, it should be committed to creating a sense of belonging and building relationships with the surrounding community. According to Valentí, culture has the power to change policies.

After working for the municipality in Barcelona, Spain, for a while, Valentí was appointed director of the Gran Teatre del Liceu, where he was keen to test the theory that to create change, you need to provide opportunities to as many people as possible. But to do so in a cultural institution as elitist as an Opera House founded in 1847 proved challenging from its outset. After six months working at the institution, Valentí learned that some influential people wanted to fire him for introducing “too many changes.”

For instance, instead of hiring a company to design the Opera sets on site, Valentí invited urban artists (e.g. graffiti writers) to paint the ground of a square in Barcelona outside the theatre. Thus, promoting the idea that art is born in the streets and not in a production facility. This has changed the perception of how stage sets should be made and the theatre staff’s

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<sup>3</sup> “The opera house at La Rambla, Barcelona, Spain, founded on 4 April 1847.”



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mindset. “We should change how we work in the present, and when everything is in place, it will be easier to design these sets in the future.” This strategy aims to build relationships with our surroundings and the outside world.

While reflecting on opera’s role in the city and questioning how people perceived their institution, Valentí and his team realised that if they didn’t change their institution’s role, there would be no need for their services in the future.

The world has changed. Societies have also changed. Human beings’ needs have changed too. Nowadays, we must divide our attention across myriad demands and problems. Valentí illustrates: today, we talk about people’s needs, migration, climate change, etc. Therefore, we were not in tune with the community when we talked about art, music and theatre from a rigid, conservative and narrow-minded view as the Gran Teatre del Liceu’s. There was an urgent need to change it.

*Opera Prima*<sup>4</sup> is a community co-creation initiative in partnership with Traction, bridging the gap between participating communities. The chosen location for the first Opera Prima was El Raval, the most densely populated district in Europe, with 55,000 inhabitants per square metre, where people from many different countries and cultures live. “There are many conflicts, many nationalities and many associations that work with the community,” says Valentí, highlighting the importance of having a well-planned mission in conjunction with key community members.

And so why again Opera? “Because it’s the art that encapsulates what Europe is, the essence of Europe because it unites it in a transversal way”, he argues. “And if we all perceive Opera as the essence of European culture, it is vital to provide access to it.”

But, if this cultural and artistic initiative is still regarded as elitist and, therefore, not inclusive and not in touch with the general public, and given that there is so much diversity of cultures and people who experience social exclusion in El Raval, how can a project like *Opera Prima* have a positive outcome?

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<sup>4</sup> According to Traction, “Every three years, the Liceu will produce a new opera through community processes in which professionals will coexist with citizens, who will be involved in the whole artistic creation process; from dramatisation, to musical interpretation and technical construction. In fact, this is the main challenge of the project: to find the link between professionals in the arts and residents in the neighbourhood by sharing experiences and knowledge that can contribute to producing an opera.”



“For four years, we talked, explained, and ran seminars. The music is simple, and the citizens write the story of the [El Raval] district. When they see the Opera, the community members immediately identify with what happens in their neighbourhood. So that’s why we make sure that the Opera we bring to the citizens deals with aspects that affect their lives and that the music touches people because music is emotion.”

The result of the first co-creation initiative is *La Gata Perduda*, which premiered in October 2022. It is a story in Catalan that incorporates several languages, with fantasy and mystery, with classical music as the primary guiding thread. At the same time, the voices of the community choirs include Catalan rumba, hip-hop, rap, rock, punk, and urban and ethnic music.

### 3.2

#### **Breaking systemic barriers to build capabilities**

In her book *Cultivating Humanity*, Martha C. Nussbaum (1998) argues that freedom of thought and human dignity are central capabilities to be developed in order to produce free citizens, who are free not because of wealth or birth, but because they can call their minds their own.

Nussman advocates the idea of “new education” rooted in Seneca’s ideal: the citizen who scrutinises tradition critically and respects the ability to reason in each individual. She establishes three core values of liberal education for citizenship: critical self-examination, the ideal of the world citizen, and the development of the narrative imagination.

According to Maria Vlachou, executive director of Acesso Cultura (Access Culture) — the mission of a cultural association is to promote physical, social and intellectual access to cultural participation — this should be the starting point of any institution, as well as promoting individual creativity and collective imagination as raw material for democracy, in line with Deborah Cullinan’s work (2017).

However, Vlachou acknowledges that social barriers inside institutions need to be overcome. For instance, they are gaining a better understanding and greater awareness of what access, inclusion, and equity mean and how this exercise can be reflected in practice, as it is not just about discussing the meanings of the subject per se but admitting what needs to be changed in the institutions.



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Vlachou states that because many cultural institutions are still founded on a rigid hierarchical system, they act as a systemic barrier that shuts the doors to any potential paradigm change in favour of valuing individual capacities. “We are neither open to nor curious about who these people are, what their potential is, and what they can bring to the team,” she argues. Acesso Cultura has been developing initiatives to promote these “changes,” such as public debates, training, and conferences.

Still, decisions are being made in a top-down logic carried out by others without listening to what participants have to say. This paternalistic, hegemonic mindset is still very much prevalent. There is a desire to create access and democratise culture, but the institutions define what is worth having access to. “There is a lack of a more cosmopolitan mindset.”

In turn, Richard Willacy, General Director of the Birmingham Opera Company, speaks of the need to break the rules, in other words, “to change the rules of interaction”. It is not about rebellion but rather about keeping up with developments. Funded cultural industries sometimes find it harder to change because of the structures around them. That is somewhat limiting.

According to Willacy, it is crucial to find ways of making the work accessible. In this regard, at least since 2003, the Birmingham Opera Company has brought opera to more than 200 venues. They have performed in youth centres, homeless shelters, disused factories and even in the iconic Tower Ballroom in Edgbaston. The aim is to showcase Opera to the city, to make people reflect on the city with its inhabitants: via the audience, the performers, the inhabitants and the stories they tell.

Birmingham has one million inhabitants. It’s a city with 20% young people, and in terms of ethnicity, it is divided as follows: 58% are white, 27% are Asian, and 9% are black. “So, If I put on a production of Othello, it has to be with a black singer, a black Othello. It is a shame for the industry to acknowledge how long it took us to do that, just in 2009,” explains Willacy while analysing the work methodology of the Birmingham Opera Company and its attempt to include different identities which make up the city’s human ecology.

“Most important is the representation of the people you are trying to reach. We don’t have to be faithful to the text. It’s not about naturalism. It’s not about being faithful to the text. You can do all those things by thinking more broadly. And what is being faithful to the text is trying to ensure that the audience feels represented, and part of it,” argues Willacy. Art doesn’t exist without an audience; it needs to be experienced.





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Therefore, all our artistic choices are made following the same reasoning: opening doors, including people from different walks of life, fostering representation and, above all, co-creation, blurring the boundaries with artistic quality and creating social impact. “The most important thing is ensuring people have access to the initiative. And how do we achieve this? We go to them, try to find where they are and then move forward. That’s how we plan things.”



## 4

# The 'we' of culture and cultural communities

Thinking about culture and creation means focusing on people's individual work capabilities to democratise access and participation in cultural spaces and their initiatives. The emphasis is on co-creation and how to transform the peripheral areas (at the edges of cities) into actual centres, preserving their features and turning them into leading sites. Thus, the idea of a cultural centre – as alien to people's lives – shifts, and culture takes centre stage as part of people's daily life and in connection with the community. This enriches the encounter: being part of their journey and sharing art and culture.

Luís Sousa Ferreira (23 Milhas and Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II) adds another transversal and symbiotic layer to this methodology: the people who make up the humanised landscape linking the community and its surrounding context. "I often see this relationship between us, guided by culture, to grasp reality."

According to Ferreira, culture is the route for creating something different, fostering citizenship dynamics, which simultaneously establishes the dynamics of the polis, promoting debate, maintaining identities related to one's environment, raising critical awareness and giving people a voice to express their views.

As Ferreira points out, the opposite view is the infantilisation of cultural communities because "popular art is frozen in time. We are still experiencing the paradigms of the Estado Novo: we have dances about our daily lives, telling us things like how to fold a shirt twice. Otherwise, it is not popular culture". Besides, "our culture lacks civic dynamics." Ferreira also points out the issue of Portugal's ageing population in the countryside, where communities lack renowned cultural activities because "art is ghettoised in urban spaces."

According to Ferreira, seeing, mapping and listening ("it's not about us: it has to do with us, but it's not about us") and co-creating are the principal coordinates of an intervention work encompassing many projects. Firstly, Aldear, the multidisciplinary art project, brought together 11 villages and 11 municipalities in the Douro, Tâmega and Sousa regions. We invited them



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to discuss the present, rethinking their different heritages and bringing together 15 contemporary artistic creation structures from various parts of the country. These regions were chosen because they are one of the poorest areas in Europe. This experimental project aimed to showcase these villages' cultural richness by presenting their stories, legends, traditions and architectural and intangible heritages.

The project comprised meetings, assemblies, community dynamics, performances, and artistic journeys. It was an initiative for the communities and not for tourists, so they would be better acquainted with their own heritage, creating links, understanding the ongoing tensions and knots between the local and the global, and between creativity and planning.

Secondly, the Festival Milha (Milha Festival) – a Festival of Music and Musicians from Ílhavo, which evokes the community's current times, engaging the community and working with various musical languages performed by professionals, amateurs and curious musicians. The festival brings together philharmonic bands, choral groups, *ranchos* and vocal groups, and other bands and professional musicians. The municipality's musical production is revitalised in this project, "bridging the gaps between the various agents and creating an annual challenge that will constitute a permanent platform for contact among peers." Furthermore, it promotes a space for developing Ílhavo's music scene, supporting training courses in communication, management and editing.

Next is the Bons Sons (Good Sounds) project, a Portuguese Music Community festival which takes place every August in the Cem Soldos village in Tomar. Organised by the Cultural Association SCOCs, it works as a platform for promoting Portuguese music, creating a dialogue between emerging projects and renowned musicians. The local population also organises this initiative as a "village manifesto", i.e., a politically committed action proposal seen as a learning process geared towards transforming people's mindsets.

Finally, the Projeto Planteia (Planteia Project), which is an initiative in tune with nature. It comprises the creation of a garden on the square outside Casa da Cultura in Ílhavo. It consists of 138 modules that aim to redesign the public space and discuss the challenges faced by the people who live and frequent it. The garden comprises flowerbeds, over 200 plants, street furniture and tools that facilitate the work, fulfilling several functions: a leisure space, a pedagogical challenge, and a venue for concerts or other performing activities. Local participants took part in all stages of the project: from choosing the plants and equipment to conducting the programme activities. The aim is to occupy the place and create a public space offering weekly activities related to the environment, culture, intergenerational dialogue, etc.



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All these four examples include the participation of the community in these artistic practices. Community members are not just mere “extras” but participants in every step of the way, thus, obtaining a comprehensive knowledge of the project, sharing their goals and promoting capabilities. “To work with a community is to work in partnership. Artists have their own techniques, knowledge and references, and it’s an exchange that effectively creates a site-specific art, which can’t be replicated”, explains the designer and cultural programmer.

“It’s in the rural areas that one can see the quality of a country: how we take care of our villages works as a wellbeing barometer of what we are promoting and what we regard as development,” says Ferreira, highlighting the political abandonment of rural areas, in addition to the lack of social cohesion in rural regions.

This strategy supports cultivating a participatory culture to promote more plural and representative communities in tune with popular democracy.



## 5

# The social role of art and inclusion: an idea of collective proximity

Cinema and dance. Art and disability. Pedro Sena Nunes and Ana Rita Barata. The result is Vo'Arte – a cultural association to promote contemporary creations: performing arts, cinema and visual arts, through festivals, training and residencies, founded in 1998. Today, “the strength of Vo'arte is humanity,” building dialogue in education, culture and economy, bringing decision-makers to the forefront. Vo'Arte promotes art projects, which include interpreters with and without disabilities. For example, in July 2022, INART – Community Arts Festival staged the performance “3.50 x 2.70 [three and a half vs two seventy]”, which included Portuguese language and Portuguese sign language.

According to Ana Rita Barata, transformations that projects of this nature can promote are not immediately visible, as changes take time. “We recognise, however, that some of our initiatives have sown the seeds and have been carried out by others. I am very grateful to see that these initiatives can be replicated in different ways, and the seeds are there,” explains Barata on behalf of the collective. The aim is to listen, discover and share.

The choreographer and dancer, Ana Rita Barata, recalls stories that make up the Vo'Arte community, specifically of CiM - Dance Company (2007) and the story of Joana Gomes.

*Joana Gomes became blind at the age of six. We met her in 2012 when she was 19. Joana wanted to dance and heard that we were looking for blind dancers to include in a creative initiative. At the time, she was studying at the University of Porto, and without her parents knowing, she often took the train to Lisbon. Two years later, she became a member of the Company. And only much later did her family discover that she had been commuting to Lisbon. She learnt several contemporary dance techniques and experienced things that made her perceive what was already there: her vocation to become a dancer and realise her dream. Her ability to listen to space, to see others – despite being blind – to engage in gestures and social causes became her driving force as a dancer and human being. Today she is part of the production team at Vo'Arte and the dance company.*



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To empower people, says Ana Rita Barata, it is necessary to create equal opportunities for all in many areas. Unfortunately, this hasn't happened in education, where access is still limited. "Art can be a guiding compass for the barometer of humanity," she states.

Raquel Gomes, coordinator of community projects at SAMP, supports a humanising approach towards art that relates to people, mainly when working with the family of young inmates at the Leiria Youth Prison EPJL. "At the beginning of the Opera in Prison trial, we did not engage with the families of prisoners at all. Over time, we realised that it was harder to create change without involving the families: how can we enter prison and contribute to something better?". By observing other SAMP projects, the role of the family becomes clearer. There was also the need to abolish formalities and work as equals, from human to human. In other words, getting to know the inmates, their names, where they come from, and exchanging and sharing these pieces of information.

David Ramy illustrates: "There has always been this duality of inside vs outside. I can't separate them. From the beginning, we brought photos of our family, our children our mothers to the cells. These objects proved to be important for those inside the prison."

Despite these families' hardships, social problems and daily chores, they become genuinely interested and close to the project when they are willing to listen and learn more about the Opera project. David recognises it is a "dangerous place, but a necessary one and with the right control and monitoring in place and a great deal of trust, we think it is of the utmost importance: we are talking about human beings who are taking part in the project."

The Opera in Prison project allows young offenders to show their families that they can do something different from what their families expected from them before entering prison. "Art can transport us to another place, and mothers rediscover the sons who had lost their way and could not find the way back, proving that they are human beings capable of expressing emotion and creating something beautiful, which in turn moves us. This creates new value."

Ramy points out the need to rethink society in terms of "how far we have gone," bearing in mind that we need to promote a conference entitled "rethinking the social value of culture", segmenting arts and culture. "Something is at stake if we need to question it in the 21st century."

Raquel argues that the element of affection is crucial in this project. Many of these youngsters don't know what love, respect, and appreciation are. "We use art because it is easier to reach people. The problem is not inside the prison but within us, on the other side."



## 6

# Technology and the social impact of artistic projects

Social impact and assessment, on the one hand, and the role and importance of artistic practices, on the other hand, are the four strands of reflection proposed by António Miguel, who works for Maze — a non-profit company created by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.<sup>5</sup>

According to António Miguel, the impact is clear, particularly regarding PARTIS & Art for a Change, an initiative launched in 2022 in partnership with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and “la Caixa” Foundation “to foster and promote the civic role of Participatory Culture and Art in creating change and social transformation.”

Studies like the ArtsFund Social Impact Study (2018) in the UK provide insight into the impact of artistic projects not only in the lives of their participants but also in the communities engaged in the projects. This study shows that artistic practices provide positive outcomes in people’s lives on three levels.

Firstly, in terms of youth and education, showing that arts can improve academic results and provide positive social and emotional outcomes, including fewer behavioural challenges. Secondly, in terms of health and wellbeing, music and art therapy are strategies that are widely recognised for reducing stress and anxiety and helping people deal with these symptoms. According to the study, it has had a more significant impact on older adults, resulting in fewer visits to the doctor, less medication, and less depression. Finally, it promotes neighbourhood vitality, community cohesion, social connection and inclusion.

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<sup>5</sup> A Social Impact Investment company that ventures to develop solutions to social and environmental problems.



Thus, using technology in artistic projects provides scalability. It helps participants to grow, either by making sure that artistic initiatives reach a more significant number of people (which would not be possible otherwise) or by allowing more accessibility, blurring or helping to mitigate geographic, economic, cognitive, mobility, reducing costs, etc., making projects more efficient.

This efficiency level is assessed by measuring the impact, which is usually perceived as an imposition by the funding entity. However, António Miguel explains that this is not what he experienced while working with Partis & Art for a Change. By assessing and managing the impact, one has a clearer idea of lessons learned in implementing the projects and how to help inform future visions: i.e., how can one turn social impact management into a day-to-day tool to better serve project participants? Impacts are related to social outcomes and how well they perform: what works and what doesn't. It should also bring out the best in the projects and participants, enhancing and fostering their capabilities.

António Miguel believes that technology has enabled a wealth of data collection, cross-referencing data and visualisation, interacting with participants to assess the impact of projects. And at a later stage, it can be used to foster activities and participation as a product which has resulted from the projects, providing an additional route.

“It is in the confluence of the use of technology, social impact, the quality and artistic content and, of course, the dedication of those on the ground, that we can aspire for sustained social change to happen over time.”

James Bingham, the outreach producer at Irish National Opera, is currently running an opera entitled *Out of the Ordinary*, a virtual reality community opera which integrates new digital and immersive technology to reach excluded communities and engage community members.

Bingham points out the importance of defining what he means by community opera and virtual opera. Community opera is an opera created by professionals and non-professionals involved in the creative process of making an opera, engaging the communities and their experiences. The Virtual Reality (VR) component included in *Out of the Ordinary* opera requires wearing a special VR headset for 18 minutes<sup>5</sup>. This imagined VR world has been created in collaboration with the communities through games and interactive dynamics.

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<sup>6</sup> According to the website, *Out of the Ordinary* is a VR Opera. The work is a fully immersive, 360-degree digital experience. What people see on their headsets becomes a reality which they can investigate and explore in all directions. It's also an opera they can literally experience anywhere because they carry it around on their heads. And their interaction with the work will also influence the endings that they see.





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The Irish National Opera, aligned with Traction, has been working on an adaptive video, VR and 360-degree multimedia content to develop tools that allow the co-creation of the opera based on the experiences of working with three communities:


- i) the migrant communities in Tallaght (the largest satellite town of Dublin in Ireland), in partnership with The Civic Theatre;
- ii) the rural communities in partnership with Music Generation Offaly/Westmeath;
- iii) and the Gaeltacht (areas in Ireland where the Irish language, Gaelic, is spoken as a community language), in partnership with Conradh na Gaeilge – a social and cultural organisation which promotes the Irish language in Ireland and worldwide.

The project involves these communities in different ways. Many participants had never been to an opera or experienced VR. So, to approach communities and ask them to talk about themselves, and collect their testimonies for the project, could be intimidating, comments Bingham. Therefore, it was necessary to create a sense of trust with the community during the preparation stage of the project, which started during the pandemic in 2020.

Therefore, they began working entirely remotely, running Zoom workshops in creative writing, composition, and visual arts to generate ideas during the course of four months. The visual arts workshops were led by Ceara Conway and Shane Sutton; the creative writing by Darach Mac Con Iomaire and David Lordan; and composition by Finola Merivale, who wrote the opera *Out of the Ordinary / As anGnách*. These workshops generated stories, images and sounds which were put together to create an opera. Then they went back to the communities and began researching, analysing the stories and looking for common themes based on Irish folklore to create a narrative, music, etc. During this phase, they explored themes that had emerged during the online workshops, such as love, pain, change, a sense of belonging, journeys, the supernatural, and climate change, among others.

Thus began the experimentation with the opera *Out of the Ordinary*<sup>7</sup>, which tells the tale of a community forced to flee their barren homeland, which, due to their own actions, can no longer sustain them. Nalva, the main character, builds a boat to take her people on an epic journey to find a new home. In one of the scenes, for example, the participants wore special costumes

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<sup>7</sup> <http://outoftheordinary.irishnationalopera.ie/en/experience-the-opera> 



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to create the illusion that they were fish swimming in the sea. In other words, it is an interactive and immersive experience. This opera can be experienced while standing or moving around.

It is an interactive and immersive experience which places audiences in a virtual world, with a pre-conceived narrative that the user can explore. In 2021, the project won the prestigious 2021 FEDORA Digital Prize.



## 7

# Conclusions: ideas for the ephemeral present, essays for the near future

One of the main gaps in initiatives that produce knowledge is the lack of systematic assessments of lessons learned. To stop and think is a luxury that few can afford. We are currently immersed and anaesthetised by the atrocious speed of human experience, amplified by today's technology, which can either distract or make us focus.

However, as some people have noticed, I like taking notes. At some point, I extract and edit these notes based on people's testimonies, stitching the intersecting ideas, turning the pieces of paper into the melody of an improvised thought. This is why, at the end of this notebook, I compile not only the notes of the events I chaired at the International Conference on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2022 but also snippets from the conference recordings in an attempt to bring together the dimensions of culture, artistic practices and community participation, throughout the different interventions and presentations of good practices. Ten main ideas emerged from this conference.

Firstly, that culture is the key element in the development of communities. Without culture, participatory projects become meaningless and are doomed to fail.

Secondly, the importance of co-creation in community artistic practices as a way of cultivating humanity: nurturing humans as acts of solidarity, empathy, respect, tolerance, inclusion and happiness. Culture means celebrating together what unites us and our diversity.

Thirdly, a pressing need to change work processes in artistic institutions. And in the case of opera, to break conservative, non-outreaching operating rules, transforming organisations. Institutions that fail to reach out to communities will become irrelevant to society. Art only exists if it is enjoyable and inclusive.



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The next point is that there is no cultural democracy without the ability to listen to people. Although this might seem obvious, paternalistic practices still persist, imposing methods of running cultural community projects from a top-down approach.

Furthermore, the emphasis on using a bottom-up approach based on people's capabilities should be found in the individual experience when promoting equity and respect at each individual's pace, allowing each person to contribute with their own worldview.

Additionally, there is a lot to be done to promote accessible practices in various institutions, which are still systematically rooted in outdated patriarchal practices and not in tune with times when incorporating, for example, the use of Portuguese sign language in their day-to-day practices or promoting inclusive relationships and culture.

Another critical point is the necessity to assess the impact of cultural projects so that the actual needs of the communities are met, ensuring that projects can be unbiasedly self-assessed and adjusted to create a positive impact.

The eighth point exemplifies how technology can be used to co-create a community opera, working with virtual reality, telling stories of isolated, rural and Irish-speaking communities as part of a cultural programme, proving that the will to change can result in well-recognised and high-quality practices.

Transversely, it is clear that culture as a common ground for sharing and creating has been undergoing many changes. If we want to keep it alive, we must find creative approaches to cultural practices and planning projects. Therefore, technology may play a key role.

Finally, there is no future without memory. Creating a tangible and accessible database is essential, as storing good practices (and necessary changes) and promoting transformations that may be replicated and valuable for all.

In other words, if in this day and age we still have the urge to organise a conference with the subtitle 'Rethinking the Social Value of Culture,' we need to redefine ways of cultivating our lost humanity and oppose the superficiality and neutrality hindering critical thinking. As the young inmates in the Leiria Prison sang, "time is us/ time is ours," what we know should be used as a tool to think together and find solutions as an active part of this change, which doesn't emerge on its own: it is co-created.



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## Biography

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### VANESSA RODRIGUES

Vanessa Rodrigues is a journalist, documentary maker, university lecturer and researcher. She holds a PhD in Studies in Communication for Development, focusing on social documentaries, journalism, human development, and counter-public spheres. She is a member of MEXE Culture Association, a non-profit association that also organises MEXE - International Meeting of Art and Community.

She lived in Brazil, working as a correspondent for DN and TSF Radio, and in Jordan, as a researcher and co-writer of a documentary about Palestinian refugees. Her audio documentary *Palestine, Diaries of an Uncertain Place* won the Honourable Mention the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize. She developed projects in Guinea Bissau (Female Rural Workers from the Bissagos Islands) and Mozambique (Creative Youth Profiles for ACEP and Camões Institute). She is the author of *Ala Feminina* (Female Ward) (2018, Desassossego), a non-fiction book about 17 female prisoners in Brazil and Portugal.

In 2017, she directed and produced the feature documentary *Batismo de Terra* (Land's Baptism) about the lives of Portuguese Immigrants in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Her work focuses on translating complex narratives into engaging and humane stories. Justice and attentive listening are her driving forces. In 2009, for four months, she backpacked across the Brazilian Amazon forest, searching for local stories. Along the way, she worked as a volunteer in a hospital-boat circus for the Health and Happiness NGO, which uses circus activities to provide health education and health care to river communities on the banks of the Tapajós River.



## ART AND COMMUNITY NOTEBOOKS

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's main purpose is to contribute to the creation of a cohesive society that offers equal opportunities and promotes the well-being and quality of life of vulnerable groups. In order to do so, the Foundation has been working for over a decade to demonstrate the importance of art — setting up co-creation processes that encourage an active participation by everyone — as a privileged channel to foster change and social transformation.

In 2013, with the launch of the PARTIS initiative, this plan gained a broader visibility, which was in turn increased in 2020 with the launch of the PARTIS & Art for Change initiative, a joint collaboration with “la Caixa” Foundation, which boosted the work both foundations have been undertaking in this field for many years when it comes to supporting artistic projects with a social impact.

By launching these initiatives, the Foundation aims to highlight the civic role arts and culture play in Portugal. Democratizing access and opening up participation to everyone are key elements to building more sustainable, cohesive and just communities.

The *Art and Community Notebooks* intend to share considerations and learnings stemming from the PARTIS and PARTIS & Art for Change initiatives with everyone committed to broadening the horizon of art, renewing hope in the future we have in common.



### GULBENKIAN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

**DIRECTOR** Luís de Melo Jerónimo

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### NOTEBOOK N. 03

### ART, CULTURES AND COMMUNITIES: PRIORITISING THE ANCIENT ART OF LISTENING

**AUTHOR** Vanessa Rodrigues

**TRANSLATION** Christina Baum

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