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NOTE BOOKS

ARTISTIC PRACTICES IN PRISONS



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ARTISTIC PRACTICES IN PRISONS





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ART AND COMMUNITY

Introduction

Why do artistic projects with people deprived of their liberty matter?

Over the past decade, the Gulbenkian Foundation has strengthened its commitment to participatory arts and cultural democracy, supporting dozens of initiatives that reveal how artistic practices shape lives and resonate with communities. Within prison walls, growing evidence shows that these practices nurture personal development, strengthen relational skills, and support more sustainable pathways for social reintegration. From this understanding emerges the need to open a dialogue, one that recognises these practices as an essential part of education, training, and reintegration programmes within the prison system.

On 6 and 7 October 2025, the [Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation](#), together with [Acesso Cultura](#), hosted the conference [Artistic Practices in Prisons](#). The event brought together artists, project participants, prison staff, and partner organisations to reflect on the role and impact of artistic practices in places of deprivation of liberty, sharing knowledge and experience from the field and fostering informed dialogue about the paths that lie ahead.



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On the first day there was a public debate with artists, researchers and institutional representatives – including Avelina Macedo, Filipa Francisco, Catarina Claro, Luís Vaz Couto and Francisca Van Dunem – alongside professionals involved in projects such as *Trégua*, *Ópera na Prisão*, *República do Vento* and *RadioAtividade*. There was also the presentation of the book *corpoemcadeia: dança, prisão e gestalt*, by Catarina Câmara, a powerful testimony to the transformative potential of art in prisons, based on a project implemented at Linhó Prison.

The second day featured workshops for artists carrying out projects in prisons, or interested in doing so. These sessions fostered the exchange of methods and the shaping of a strong and informed community of practice, committed to the humanisation of the prison system.

This publication compiles the key contributions from the conference and is intended as a helpful resource for people working at the intersection of art, justice and social inclusion. The aim is to enhance the exchange of knowledge, encourage closer collaboration between those involved, and affirm art as a space of connection, dignity and transformation – even, perhaps especially, where physical freedom is restricted.



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1

Art and Freedom: experiences of artistic practices in Portuguese prisons

by Sara Belo Luís

She didn't say it outright, but implied as much. When she was younger, she had what people call "big dreams". She dreamed of becoming a great writer, crafting eloquent texts, becoming a film star, going to Hollywood, and winning an Oscar. Today, she no longer wants any of that. She describes her days as more "settled" and in the way she speaks one senses a deep contentment, a quiet happiness with what life has offered her.

And yet, life has not been easy for [Avelina Macedo](#) . Born in Venezuela, she lives in Madeira since 1997. At 26 and pregnant, she found herself in prison in Funchal, her eldest son entrusted to his grandparents, growing up with neighbours and schoolmates "reminding" him that his parents were behind bars. "I'm going to let you in on a secret: anyone can fall, any one of you can end up in prison. It might be a minor offence, but it can happen. This is what I tell my children," said Avelina Macedo, in conversation with choreographer [Filipa Francisco](#) , artistic director of Mundo em Rebolicho. Their exchange opened the conference *Artistic Practices in Prisons*, held at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, in Auditorium 3, on 6 October 2025.

Avelina Macedo speaks with a disarming honesty, and this is what makes her story so powerful and moving. She recalls the long nights spent reading in prison, joking that she only failed to complete a third full reading of the Bible because, fortunately, she was released before she could finish it. She also shares how, while she served her sentence, taking part in the artistic project led by actress Paula Erra completely changed her. "It made me who I am today." Artistic practices, she says, gave her different ways of connecting with other prisoners, what she calls a "touch of humanity", explaining "we formed a group of eight to ten people and suddenly we are doing exercises together. The dingy mood disappears, we forge connections and talk about our children and our dreams." They constantly talk about dreams, change and, above all, inner transformation. "I went to prison at 26 and, when I came out, it wasn't Avelina



who came out, it was a phoenix. Prison is where I was reborn, where I got to know myself,” she explains. The choreographer also shares how the project (R) existir, which she implemented at the prison of Castelo Branco, changed her “completely”. She explains, “Before, I worked in a studio, dancing, with the windows closed to the world. After that project, I realised that dance should be in places where it didn’t exist, breaking down walls, symbolic ones and, perhaps, even real ones too...”

For Filipa Francisco, time, and continuity above all, is essential for participatory art projects. “Whenever there’s a break or pause, things take a step backwards,” she says. Artistic work opens pathways to self-awareness and understanding others, nurturing essential values such as tolerance and trust. In prison environments, she adds, it makes a difference because it is “more flexible” and “less hierarchical”. “It helps us,” Avelina concludes, “see the future”.

“A peace, slowly taking root”

Before the conversation between Filipa Francisco and Avelina Macedo, [Cristina Casalinho](#) , representing the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, opened the conference, speaking of the Foundation’s ongoing support for projects like these through PARTIS and, since 2020, PARTIS & Art for a Change, in partnership with the Spanish foundation “la Caixa”. “Art is a space for connection and transformation, especially in places where people are deprived of their liberty,” she said. “Participatory arts help develop social and relational skills and increase people’s chances of success after leaving prison.”

[Rita Pires dos Santos](#) , President of the association Acesso Cultura, reflected on the role of these practices “within a system that seeks not only to punish but also to support reintegration”, and on the need for “alternatives to punishment; paths that rebuild trust in others”. Finally, [Orlando Carvalho](#) , from the Directorate-General for Reintegration and Prison Services, spoke of the importance of these projects – which, over the past decade, have involved around one thousand participants in Portugal – enabling “people to return to society stronger”.

The morning was concluded with a panel entitled *Impacts, Challenges and Potentials*, bringing together [Catarina Claro](#) , cultural and artistic mediator and executive director of the Trégua project, [Luís Vaz Couto](#) , governor of Guarda Prison, and [Francisca Van Dunem](#) , public prosecutor and former Minister for Justice. The session was moderated by [Vanessa Ribeiro Rodrigues](#) , journalist and author of *Ala Feminina*.



During the discussion, Catarina Claro acknowledged that the first challenge faced by *Trégua* – a multidisciplinary visual arts project implemented at the prison of Funchal for the past four years – was “acceptance”. In other words, they struggled at first to show that the project was “credible”, “that we weren’t there simply playing ‘projects’”. “There was a great deal of resistance. We often felt like giving up,” Catarina admits. In time, they realised that the best approach was to “work with the system”. Luís Vaz Couto points out that, at the prison in Guarda, this was not a problem, as he himself had taken the initiative to invite the artists. “Balancing safety and social reintegration projects is sometimes difficult. But we had an honest conversation and clearly defined what could and couldn’t be done.”

“We obeyed all the rules, save one: no physical contact,” says Catarina Claro, again in relation to *Trégua*. It is easy to understand why. In the workshop held the next day at Gulbenkian, one of the exercises was done in pairs. One person “drew” on their partner’s back with their fingers (we say “drew”, but it could just as well be described as “massaged”), while the other tried to match the intensity of those movements by drawing on a sheet of paper. Regarding “touching”, Luís Vaz Couto added that “the problem isn’t touching or hugging. I don’t see that as a safety concern.”

In recent years, the association Terceira Pessoa has been working at the prison in Guarda, in a project called *RadioATIVIDADE*, focusing on the writing and performing of radio plays (in another workshop, participants worked together to create a short sketch based on texts exploring the, arguably absurd, notion of the “ideal prison”). Vaz Couto also stresses the need to evaluate the real impact of these participatory projects. “Our belief, although not scientifically proven, is that these projects can deeply transform people”, he says. “And because we believe this, after 30 years we still invest heavily in artistic projects, so that, together with education and other activities, they can support what we refer to as ‘social reintegration’.” Later, the prison governor would add, “The process is what matters most. It is within the process that learning and change happens.” Catarina Claro talks about the small, yet profound changes that emerged after months of artistic practice in Funchal. The first signs of change appeared in “self-care, from attention to hygiene to a gradual reduction in medication”.

They also began to notice “a lightness in the places the group moved through”, “in the air”, “a peace, slowly taking root”. She also recalls a comment made by one of the participants in a documentary they later produced: “When I take part in *Trégua*, my mind expands at the speed of light.”



Advocating for a sustainable approach

Catarina Claro also acknowledges the importance of studying these projects, although she says she has “many images and many experiences” that allow her to assess, “albeit only empirically”, their effects within the prison “ecosystem”. “Including among prison officers, which means a lot to us. They are already part of the process with us.”

Because of the positions she has held, Francisca Van Dunem had a different kind of contact with artistic projects in prisons. She says she did not directly see “transformation”, but did notice their “transformative potential”. As Minister for Justice, she saw the “joy” with which some prisoners engaged in performances, even beyond prison walls. And also felt the anguish of returning to prison, after the applause and public recognition had faded. The magistrate touches a raw nerve by bringing up the issue of the “underfunding of the prison system”. “The system is not sustainable under the current model. It survives largely on the goodwill and institutional support of organisations that step in.”

The conversation turns to funding, and Luís Vaz Couto echoes this concern. “The greatest challenge is to sustain these projects over time. We have a future. We want that future. And we do not want to compromise it,” says the governor of the prison of Guarda. Beyond financial considerations, there is also a need to look at organisational conditions and the material realities within prison walls. It is important to remember that artistic practices are from the twenty-first century, but they are being introduced into a prison system created in the first half of the twentieth century, and in some cases as early as the nineteenth century.

“The system must open itself to these practices; above all, it must be willing to speak with people,” Van Dunem warns. She also points out that we need to keep in mind the times we inhabit, shaped by a “risk-focused” mindset, where prisons are increasingly seen as “places of punishment”. Francisca Van Dunem speaks plainly, “It is only going to get worse. Regrettably, we are no longer living in a time guided by the concern that everyone should live a decent and dignified life, regardless of their temporary or permanent circumstances. We are moving towards a world where people turn inward, primarily concerned about themselves. Some live at the centre, while others are pushed to the margins and are expected to remain there.”

When asked by the moderator to suggest a change in public policy, the former minister said she believes that the 2012 reform, which placed safety and security and social reintegration under the same directorate-general, “ended up weakening” reintegration. For this reason, Francisca Van Dunem insists, “we need to rethink integration”. “When financial resources are limited, there’s



always a tendency to direct them to areas that are politically and publicly more visible,” she explains. One possible solution, she suggests, would be to create an independent institute to identify the most meaningful artistic partnerships.

And since artistic practice in prisons is developed through practice itself, the afternoon of 6 October included two panels dedicated to specific projects. The first, guided by sociologist [Ricardo Loureiro](#), brought together [Maria João Mota](#) (*PELE*), [Paulo Lameiro](#) (*Ópera na Prisão*), [Pedro Gil](#) (*República do Vento*) and [Óscar Silva](#) (*RadioATIVIDADE*). The contributions opened a window into each project, and into the reflections of the artists themselves. Speaking about the inner tensions that come with artistic practice, Óscar shared an important point. “We are not judges. In a prison, we come to understand that this work has already been done. People have already been judged, and it is not for me to judge them again in the small, almost imperceptible hearings we end up conducting.”

During the conversation, experiences moved between hard-won achievements (as in the cases of Paulo Lameiro and Óscar Silva), the uncertainty of those starting out (Pedro Gil), and the many doubts of someone who, after 18 years working in prisons, chose to step away. “I am a well of unease,” confides Maria João Mota. The artistic director of PELE spoke of how willing prisoners are to taking part in artistic practices, while also raised questions about what she called “the responsibility of the spaces we create”. “It’s easy for artistic projects to stir things up. Afterwards, the people who live there have to deal with what we set in motion. And collective energy inside a prison can be perceived as something threatening.”

The second panel, moderated by cultural manager [Mónica Guerreiro](#), turned its attention to *corpomcadeia*, a project implemented since 2019 at the prison of Linhó by Companhia Olga Roriz and later documented in a book published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The panel included [Catarina Câmara](#) (dancer, choreographer and coordinator of a dance project based on Gestalt psychotherapy), [Joana Pedra](#) (rehabilitation officer at Linhó Prison), [Susana Paiva](#) (photography team coordinator) and Jackson Teixeira (a participant in the project). Like Maria João Mota, Catarina Câmara speaks openly about the unease she often feels. “Many times we don’t know what’s going to happen, and still we push forward,” she says.



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The following day, as she led a workshop offering a glimpse into the work of *corpoemcadeia*, the words spoken the day before by Jackson Teixeira still echoed: “It is because of this project that I know who I am today. I work with 16-year-olds and try to do for them what no one had the chance to do for me.” There is still much to be done. Many parts of the “system” don’t work well, and, of course, not everything runs smoothly. A simple first step is to think about all the Avelinas Macedos and Jacksons Teixeiras. Their stories are important, and they should be shared as widely as possible.

Sara Belo Luís is a journalist. She has been part of the editorial team of *Visão* magazine since 1998, serving as deputy editor from 2018 to 2025.



2

Reflections on the conference

Artistic Practices in Prisons

Over the two days of the conference, reflections and shared experiences led to a series of contributions, organised here into three strands that weave together the transformative potential of art, the challenges of putting it into practice, and paths towards sustainability.

2.1

Transformation: potential and impacts

- a) From an individual perspective, artistic practices in prisons have significant transformative potential. They develop self-awareness and nurture essential values such as tolerance and trust (both confidence in oneself and trust in others).
- b) Institutions recognise the humanising role of these projects within environments shaped by strict rules, hierarchy and authority. Art opens space for imagining futures, for building new perspectives, and for introducing moments of greater flexibility, with fewer rules and less tension, into everyday life.
- c) Artists also say that they themselves are changed by these projects. They often describe feeling like “a different person before and after” the experience, noting how this transformation influences their work outside prison walls.
- d) While there is a shared recognition of this potential, caution is urged when attempting to measure the impact on social reintegration. Some projects collaborate with universities to assess personal development during their implementation. Yet measuring the role of artistic practices in reintegration and in reducing reoffending remains complex. Their true value resides in the process itself, and in the learning that comes from it.



2.2

Unease: issues and challenges

- a) The balance between artistic practice and safety – which must be ensured – is delicate, though not impossible. On both sides, prisons and artists alike understand the need to follow clear rules and define roles.
- b) Some artists say that, at first, it was difficult to adapt to the structured routines of prison life, and prove the legitimacy of their work. Working together with the system is seen as essential. There are also tensions linked to the nature of artistic practice, especially regarding how these projects might affect daily life in prisons.
- c) Artists also speak about doubts and mixed feelings, which are understandable given how unusual these initiatives are. Uncertainty, instability and precarious conditions place heavy demands on those who carry these projects forward.
- d) Participants note that these projects require openness and a willingness to show vulnerability. This is not seen as weakness, but as a necessary part of transformation, involving closeness, being seen by others and often physical contact (a “touch of humanity”). These gestures stand in contrast to the distance imposed by and control of prison life. And yet, it is precisely within this tension that participants develop the tools to strengthen their relationship with themselves, and with others.
- e) Challenges posed by the shortage of prison officers and frequent strikes by staff, also disrupt, and at times halt, the continuity of these projects.



2.3

Sustainability: futures and pathways

- a) For these projects to fulfil their potential in helping to humanise the prison system, continuity is essential.
- b) This requires considering the conditions in which they are implemented, particularly within prison facilities that often date back to the early twentieth century, and sometimes even the nineteenth. This includes the organisational structure of the prison system, the lack of suitable spaces, and the need to coordinate schedules with other prison activities.
- c) These projects should be seen as a strategic part of social reintegration work for people temporarily deprived of their liberty, and given a more central, structural role. They should not simply be classified as “sociocultural activities”, but instead recognised as “educational” and/or “training” initiatives.
- d) Strengthening awareness and training among prison staff, such as officers, psychologists, reintegration specialists and teachers, would be highly beneficial. These projects need to be better understood and more systematically integrated into individual education and reintegration plans.
- e) Their continuity and sustainability ultimately depend on addressing the chronic underfunding of the prison system. Initiatives such as PARTIS & Art for Change (implemented by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in partnership with the Spanish foundation “la Caixa”) are vital.
- f) From a public policy perspective, reinforcing the role of social reintegration is seen as crucial to ensuring the long-term sustainability of artistic projects in prisons.
- g) Artistic practices in prisons cannot be discussed in isolation from the world we live in today. They unfold against the current, at a time when issues of security and safety are particularly sensitive in political and media debates. A more security-driven, less human-centred approach to punishment is taking hold. As a result, given the shortage of funding across the prison system, resources are often redirected to more critical areas, often at the expense of social reintegration programmes.



3

Projects showcased at the conference



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Corpoemcadeia

Prison of Linhó

Corpoemcadeia is an artistic project led by Companhia Olga Roriz and, more recently, by Creative Connection, in partnership with the Directorate-General for Reintegration and Prison Services and the Gestalt Institute of Florence.

Coordinated by Catarina Câmara, the project combines contemporary dance with the principles of Gestalt psychotherapy, creating a space for experimentation and reflection on existence and identity. This dialogue gives rise to both individual and collective transformation.

The project has been supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation since 2019 and also receives funding from the Directorate-General for the Arts. It has been implemented at the prison of Linhó since 2019 and, since 2025, at the Padre António Oliveira Educational Centre in Caxias. It is currently being implemented in the prisons of Faro and Alcoentre.



Ecoar e Laboratório de Arte e Cidadania

Prisons in the Greater Porto area

Artistic collective PELE has been running projects in prisons since 2009. It started with *Entrado*, a theatre project at the prison of Porto, followed by *Inesquecível Emília* at the prison of Santa Cruz do Bispo, involving women deprived of their liberty. Building on this work, in 2016 PELE implemented the project *ECOAR* in prisons across the Greater Porto area, engaging more than 160 young people in a range of artistic creation activities that formed the basis for certification of personal and social skills. Later, between 2019 and 2021, it implemented the *Laboratório de Arte e Cidadania* project, working with 70 young people in conflict with the law and continuing the approach used in *ECOAR*.

Both *ECOAR* and *Laboratório de Arte e Cidadania* were supported by the EEA Grants, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Bissaya Barreto Foundation.



© Paulo Pimenta



Ópera na Prisão

Youth Prison of Leiria

Ópera na Prisão is a project implemented by SAMP – Sociedade Artística Musical dos Pousos, since 2014, at the Youth Prison of Leiria (EPL-J). Through the creation and staging of operas – inspired by Mozart’s work, including *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro* –, prisoners, musicians, technicians and families come together in a collective artistic process that nurtures communication, empathy and personal transformation. A key milestone of the project is the Mozart Pavilion, a purpose-built space within the prison dedicated to artistic creation. Here, participants become performers, set designers and producers, shaping performances that extend beyond prison walls and into the community.

The project is supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the “la Caixa” Foundation.



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RadioAtividade

Prison of Guarda

RadioATIVIDADE is an artistic and community-based project that, between 2022 and 2025, transformed the prison of Guarda into a laboratory for the creation of radio drama. Implemented by the association Terceira Pessoa in partnership with the prison of Guarda, the project engaged artists alongside men and women deprived of their liberty in a three-year process of co-creating radio drama, integrating writing, music, performance and studio recording. These voices were broadcast through *Rádio Guarda-me*, a station created and run by the prisoners themselves, echoing across the prison's yards and corridors, and beyond, reaching national audiences through Antena 2 and digital platforms. The project culminated in a four-volume publication and a three-part documentary series, bringing together the works, testimonies, outcomes and reflections that emerged along the way.

RadioATIVIDADE is supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the “**la Caixa**” Foundation, and the Directorate-General for the Arts.



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República do Vento [🔗](#)

Prison of Montijo

República do Vento is a theatre project implemented at the prison of Montijo since June 2024, led by theatre company Razões Pessoais and directed by Pedro Gil.

It is an artistic and social initiative carried out in collaboration with the Directorate-General for Reintegration and Prison Services, with support from publishing house LEYA, and funding from the Directorate-General for the Arts.



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Trégua

Prison of Funchal

Trégua is a multidisciplinary participatory arts project focusing on visual arts, developed with people deprived of their liberty at the prison of Funchal and with visual arts students from the University of Madeira. Implemented since 2022 by cultural association Casa Invisível, in partnership with the Directorate-General for Reintegration and Prison Services and the Funchal City Council, the project has seen three editions of artistic programmes for the prison population. In addition to artistic production, the project has generated an important debate around the visibility of lived experience within prison and on the social transformation that often takes place behind the scenes.

Trégua is supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the “la Caixa” Foundation, and the University of Madeira.



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corpoemcadeia – dance, prison and gestalt, by Catarina Câmara, documents the 2019-2022 cycle of the project at the prison of Linhó. Published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the book is available online and in bookshops.



3

Interview with Catarina Câmara **“We have to dive into violence”**

What motivated you to create the *corpoemcadeia* project?

I was always a very intense person, with lots of stories intersecting within me. So I guess that's the question: what do I do with all this intensity inside me? It's a long story, but I went to law school and when I finished my degree I thought, “this isn't what I want to do, I want to dance”. So I went to a dance school.

Dance has always been closely aligned with how I feel. I always had the feeling that when I danced, I danced my experience, my relationship with the world. So there was this thing about self-awareness, about wanting to dive deep inside myself. I feel the tension between movement and idea, between what we call the body and the mind, emotion, and I need to sever alignment to calm my inner voices. When I started dancing, I began to feel a restlessness that was transforming, but I also wanted to have a repertoire for what was happening to me in terms of movement. This dimension between theory and practice became increasingly clear, and then, as a dancer and teacher, I began researching approaches to movement that had to do with psychology and philosophy, until I came across Gestalt psychotherapy.

Where did psychotherapy take you?
And how did you find yourself working in prisons?

Gestalt psychotherapy is an approach that is more philosophical than psychological, based on existentialism, and has a lot to do with body work and asking questions through movement. Existentialism raises a fundamental question for me, which is freedom and responsibility. What does freedom mean? This already connects with prisons.



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On the other hand, Gestalt psychotherapy also borrows from phenomenology, which involves working with the phenomenon, not interpreting, but rather describing, being in the “here and now”, understanding the body as something temporal. Existence precedes essence. Basically, it is about tearing down these identity boxes and understanding that life is a flow and that we are in perpetual creative adjustment, which ultimately means dance. While I was with Olga Roriz, the need arose to do the Gestalt internship. Violence was a subject of particular interest to me, because I hate violence, it tears me apart, and my way of diminishing that force is to work closely with it. So I thought about prisons, which are violent places, where the body does not move, where there is a lot of masculinity, which is also a theme that interests me – the dialogue with feminism, the need to talk about the emancipation of men alongside the emancipation of women; because violence, patriarchy and crime are part of the same cycle. And, of course, dance is provocative in a prison.



© Pedro Pina



The book was among the end goals of the project, as a manual of best practices, but it ended up becoming a book of over 300 pages. How did that happen?

It came as a result of a limitation I have, which is a significant inability to summarise. There is a phrase that resonates strongly with me, which says that “art is the non-violent synthesis of the dispersed”. It is the possibility of reducing something, but without destroying it. Because art leaves space for the viewer to complete it. But one never does, a work of art is always incomplete. It is still a closing gesture. Initially, when I thought about it as an outcome, it was a manual, but then I realised it wouldn’t work because there is so much to talk about here. How can I make a manual of good practices that sticks to a recipe for something as vast as Gestalt, dance, and prisons? As a result, this book arises precisely from a recognition of the dignity of Gestalt, which could not be conveyed through a presentation of techniques. And, in this process, I kept on expanding and expanding for almost four years. I needed this to remain faithful to Gestalt, to dance, to prisons, and to what the project was.

The book includes photos by seven photographers. How important is the dialogue between the text and the photos?

From the very start of the project, we developed a fantastic partnership, almost self-managed. Everything was connected to us, but organised independently, under the coordination of Susana Paiva, with photographers who shared a common vision, each with their own unique style. I really liked not knowing what was going to happen, being detached from that process myself. And that, in the book, is reflected by an absence of a figurative relationship of mimetisation, of explanation, of what the project is through the images. The images have a life of their own, they speak for themselves, they have their own logic. In other words, neither does the text instrumentalise the photos, nor do the photos instrumentalise the text. Another thing that happens within the project, according to the logic of Gestalt and dance: there is an agency, a collaboration of forces, but one that cannot be absorbed or instrumentalised.

After so many years of experience, how does working in a prison and being exposed to violence impact you?

I’ve become more aware of the complexities of human nature. And I’ve experienced more pain too. When you enter a place like a prison, it’s as if you are doing a kind of X-ray of the society.



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When you dive deep into the shadows, something inside you feels flooded with an awareness of the world, of others, which is inseparable from an experience of pain and limitation, but also brings you communion. You touch other people's pain, you share pain, you step out of your bubble, off the stage, out of the studio, you dive into human misery, but it's a shared human misery, experienced with love, with dedication, and then it's almost as if you were in a post-war scenario and you saw a plant sprouting. I'm not optimistic about what we're going through, I don't have much faith in humanity as an abstract and universal concept. But I do have faith in relationships with people: there's a flame that keeps flickering.



© Pedro Pina

Hence the need to engage with violence in order to deconstruct it.

We have to dive into it. We have to dive into violence. Dive in and get immersed in it – not in the sense of replicating it, but of understanding it, of dancing with it. And when I say violence, I mean my own as well. We live in a very violent society. We don't think so because we're polite, because we eat with cutlery and sit on chairs, but there's a degree of violence against bodies. Today, we are increasingly exposed to a terrifying level of violence via television and social media.



And in doing so, is there any hope to be found?

Yes, and it's wonderful. For example, in the Guard Corps, which I consider to be a very oppressive and violent organisation, we find movements, words and actions that deconstruct violence. What interests me, when it comes to violence, is what decentralises violence. It's what agitates whatever has been imposed in a determined way. When I am in a prison and I see these gestures, and I see the laughter, the dancing, the gestures of kindness, it is as if we are subverting violence. A bit like folding clothes inside out. There is an energy, a force. And I think that the artistic experience helps to refine this sort of flow that is urgent and intense.

One of the most common statements you've heard from participants is, "I'm in prison, but when I dance, I am, in all senses, a free man." What impact do you think the project has had on participants and the prison community?

I have no doubt that the experience of dance is liberating – and at the same time, it gives you responsibility. Freedom only exists because there is responsibility, not the other way around. And in dance, especially the kind we practise at *corpoemcadeia*, which is a dance of relationships, we find this relational tension with the other, which has to do with possibility and limitation. They feel free, not because they can do everything, but because they can make choices. Choices of weight, choices of movement, choices regarding touch, and you only choose because there is another person. There is otherness. So when they say they feel free, they are saying that they feel responsible for themselves and for others.

This responsibility also makes me think of the idea of empowerment that you mentioned earlier, about the liberation of people.

Absolutely. For me, empowerment means being in your body. To empower is to embody. When they are in that place in their bodies, they dismantle law and authority. Law is neither the penal code, nor the charter of human rights, nor the constitution; these are authoritarian systems that have been internalised, originating in the unconscious. We cannot think about freedom without thinking about the unconscious. When they dance, they discover themselves in caring relationships, they discover themselves in circular movement, in horizontality, in the logic of mutual aid rather than competitiveness. And what the patriarchal legacy dictates is that you have to be strong, you can't show tenderness, because one thing is better than the other, this is our sense of justice. But I believe that justice is a process, a relational



ethic. As a result, the legacy of masculinity collapses. And why are relational ethics experienced in dance so effective? Because it is discovered, not taught, not explained. When you discover something, that's it, there's no going back. Obviously, we also work on these things and talk about them, but it is in this relationship between bodies – and I try to ensure that there aren't only men in the sessions – that they understand all of this.



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Which stories or moments have had the greatest impact on you over the past four years?

I always enjoy those moments when characters are taken apart. I remember that during the pandemic we sent letters to the boys, and those letters were not given to them directly, but the director read them aloud. And they were philosophical, poetic letters. So suddenly you had a prison governor in the company of inmates saying, “my dear ones, I open the window, look at the sun and think of freedom”. And these unlikely scenarios happened here and there. I love it because everything is turned upside down. We also had a young man who joined us recently, from the commandos, who hardly moved. You could see the tension in his body; he wanted to try, but didn't know how. So I said, “just sit down and watch”. After watching the group, he joined in, and his face began to relax. I really enjoyed witnessing this process, when courage overcomes self-prejudice. And we see this happening all the time: the skin peeling off – and that hurts – and another skin forming.



What role can foundations like the Gulbenkian play in the development and continuity of these projects?

Gulbenkian has been the heart and soul of these projects. What I would like to see is more Gulbenkians so that these projects can flourish. But I don't think of Gulbenkian as an influencer of cultural policy. It doesn't influence cultural policy, it makes cultural policy, because culture is political. The Foundation plays a very important role, because it not only provides financial and human resources, but also creates a space for debate, education and growth, and for questioning these artistic practices. This is a remarkable approach, and it also shows confidence in our role as creators of these public policies, which are policies of social justice.

**How do you expect this book to contribute to this field?
And how can these kinds of practices shape the future of prisons?**

I would very much like the book, in the same way that it dialogues with many voices, to capture the attention of many different people who work in prisons. From artistic and social agents, especially people linked to the Directorate-General for Reintegration, to social educators. I would like it to have a diverse readership. I would also love it if, by reading the book, people would think about how they can make a difference based on their own authenticity. I ultimately wanted to bring a more human, more critical approach and, above all, to advocate for something I consider essential, which is the importance of art in shaping the individual. I truly believe that we transcend ourselves in three dimensions: creation, care and education. We are very busy producing, making progress, developing technology, but what I would like is for us to rethink our social paradigm and place participatory artistic production at the heart of our civilisation. I think that when that happens, I will have more faith in humankind.

Interview led by Sara Ramos

– Communications Department, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation



ART AND COMMUNITY

Annex



ART AND COMMUNITY

Conference Programme

Artistic Practices in Prisons

[Watch the video the conference](#) 

In partnership with [Acesso Cultura](#)



06 Oct 2025 / Conference

10:00 Opening session

Cristina Casalinho

Director of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

Rita Pires dos Santos

President of Acesso Cultura

Orlando Carvalho

Director-General for Reintegration and Prison Services

Impacts, challenges and potential

10:20 Talk

Avelina Macedo

Cultural agent, former participant in an artistic prison project

Filipa Francisco

Choreographer, Artistic Director of Mundo em Rebolço

11:30 Panel

Catarina Claro

Cultural and artistic mediator, Executive Director of the *Trégua* project

Francisca Van Dunem

Lawyer and former Minister for Justice

Luís Vaz Couto

Guarda prison governor

Moderator

Vanessa Ribeiro Rodrigues

Journalist



ART AND COMMUNITY

14:30 Artistic projects: learnings and aspirations

Maria João Mota

Artistic Director of *PELE*

Óscar Silva

Actor and director, Artistic Co-director of the *RadioAtividade* project

Paulo Lameiro

Musicologist and educator, former Artistic Director of the *Ópera na Prisão* project

Pedro Gil

Actor and director, Artistic Director of the *República do Vento* project

Moderator

Ricardo Loureiro

Sociologist

16:30 *corpoemcadeia: practices beyond good and evil*

Presentation of the publication *corpoemcadeia: dança, prisão e gestalt*, by Catarina Câmara. The book is based on the experience of *corpoemcadeia*, an artistic project that combines dance with Gestalt psychotherapy, implemented at the Linhó Prison between 2019 and 2022.

Catarina Câmara

Artistic and Social Coordinator

Susana Paiva

Photography Team Coordinator

Joana Pedra

Re-education staff member at Linhó Prison

Project participant

Moderator

Mónica Guerreiro

Author and cultural manager



ART AND COMMUNITY

07 Oct 2025 / Workshops

09:30 Reception

09:45 **'Dance & Gestalt psychotherapy': Creative Disobedience**
with Catarina Câmara (*corpoemcadeia*)

Prison as a metaphor for the body and contact experience in creating new ways of feeling, moving and thinking when relating with the other. Shifting from the core to the extremities, widening the boundaries of the "I", the poetic and collaborative forces of a collective and singular body are intensified. This workshop follows the *corpoemcadeia* methodology, a project that combines dance with Gestalt psychotherapy.

11:30 **'Participatory Drawing'**
with Cristiana de Sousa and Catarina Claro (*Trégua*)

This workshop focuses on the methodology development by the *Trégua* team and explores some of the exercises carried out in the prison. Drawing is used as a participatory tool that helps build relationships and support collaborative work, and as a way of expressing personal perspectives and ways of seeing oneself and the world around us.

11:30 **Ethics and Narrative Creation**
with Ana Gil, Nuno Leão and Óscar Silva (*RadioAtividade*)

Sessão de reflexão e experimentação artística a partir de premissas que inspiraram a criação dos textos de 24 peças de teatro radiofónico desenvolvidas no projeto *RadioAtividade*, no Estabelecimento Prisional da Guarda, e transmitidas pela Antena 2. Escrita, música, fotografia, poesia, histórias mais ou menos biográficas ou a obra de William Shakespeare nortearam a criação dos textos de Regina Guimarães e Serge Saguenail (2022-2023), Maria Sequeira Mendes (2023-2024) e Miguel-Manso (2024-2025), nos três anos do projeto. Nesta sessão teórico-prática, os coordenadores do projeto partilham alguns dos desafios criativos lançados ao grupo de mulheres e homens em privação de liberdade.

16:15 Outcomes and conclusions

17:00 Closing



Biographies

Avelina Macedo

Born in Caracas, worked at Teatro Experimental do Funchal for nearly 24 years. She has also worked with Teatro Feiticeiro do Norte and the Baltazar Dias Municipal Theatre. Avelina has written theatre scripts, and works as a stage director, stage manager, light, sound and video operator, producer, actress and writer. She is the president of Associação Cenas&Limitadas and co-founder of Mac-Parker productions. She started her career in theatre by participating in a project at the Funchal Prison, called "Experimental Sentir".

Catarina Câmara

Dancer, choreographer, social activist and a collaborative researcher at the Institute of Criminal Law and Criminal Sciences (FDUL). She holds a bachelor's degree in Law (FDUL) and Dance (ESD-IPL) and is a Gestalt Psychotherapy counsellor, trained at the Gestalt Institute of Florence. Her work explores the dialogue between artistic practices, social reintegration and criminal law, cutting across the fields of dance, Gestalt and restorative justice. She is the Artistic and Social Coordinator of corpoemcadeia, a project implemented since 2019 at the Linhó Prison and supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

Catarina Claro

Cultural and artistic mediator who works in the field of art education. Her projects cover and cut across a wide range of disciplines, and she is particularly interested in exploring the links between creativity and critical thinking, the visual arts, theatre and literature. In 2016, she founded the cultural association Casa Invisível and headed to the island of Madeira. In 2022, she conceived and implemented the project Trégua at the Funchal Prison, of which she is the Executive Director. Trégua is currently being supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian and 'la Caixa' Foundations under the initiative PARTIS & Art for Change.

Cristina Casalinho

Cristina has a degree in Economics and an MBA in Corporate Management and Business. She took up the position of executive director on the Foundation's Board of Trustees on February 2024, having held non-executive positions between July 2022 and January 2024. Previously, she chaired the Board of Directors of the Treasury and Public Debt Management Agency (IGCP, E.P.E), having also been a member of its Board of Directors. She has also held the positions of Chief Economist at Banco BPI, as well as Director of Sustainability at the same institution.



ART AND COMMUNITY

Filipa Francisco

Choreographer, performer and the current Artistic Director of the association Mundo em Rebolço. Her work includes "Bicho" (2009), with Idoia Zabaleta, "Íman" (2009), with Wonderfull's Kova M, "Força" (2015), with Companhia Maior, and "saal" (2018), as part of the Artéria network. Filipa implemented the Rexistir (Re-exist) Project with inmates from the Castelo Branco Prison (CENTA, 2000-2006) and was a guest artist in the Reinserção pela Arte (Reintegration through Art) project promoted by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (2007).

Francisca Van Dunem

A lawyer, Francisca graduated in law and joined the Public Prosecutor's Office in 1979, where she built a distinguished career. She was a member of the Attorney General's Office (1999-2001), director of the Lisbon Department of Criminal Investigation and Prosecution (2001-2007), the District Attorney General of Lisbon (2007-2015), Minister of Justice (2015-2019) and Minister of Internal Affairs (2019-2022).

Joana Pedra

Joana has a degree in Social Work. She served in the Portuguese Air Force for seven years. In 2016, she joined the Senior Technician Career through Casa Pia de Lisboa, where she worked in shelters as an educator and a social worker for 5 years. In 2021, she joined the DGRSP as a Senior Re-education Technician, where she has been working in the Sentence Monitoring and Enforcement Services, Prison Treatment and Preparation for Release. It is in the context of activity management that she has been monitoring the Corpoemcadeia project since that date.

Luís Vaz Couto

With a degree in Social Work, Luís Vaz Couto began his career in 1983 as a senior social worker. He has been the Director of Guarda Prison since 2012. Among other positions, Luís was Deputy Director-General of the Directorate-General for Social Reintegration and of the Directorate-General for Reintegration and Prison Services, and Vice-President of the Institute for Social Reintegration. Since 2019, he has been President of the Association of Prison Directors and Deputies, and is also a university lecturer, trainer and speaker.

Maria João Mota

Maria João holds a postgraduate degree in Human Rights and Democracy and in Theatre as an Intervention Tool in Socio-Educational Contexts. She is co-founder of PELE and of Núcleo de Teatro do Oprimido do Porto, where she has been the Artistic Director and Coordinator of National and International Projects since 2007. Maria João focuses her work on continued action and reflection in the field of Community Art Practices. Since 2009, PELE has been carrying out ongoing work in prisons in the Greater Porto region, including ECOAR project, supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.



ART AND COMMUNITY

Mónica Guerreiro

Mónica holds a bachelor's degree in Communication Sciences, with a specialisation in Arts, and a postgraduate degree in Emerging Cultures and Discourses (FCSH-UNL). A journalist and critic, she published regularly in the relevant trade press between 1996 and 2010. She is the author of the biography Olga Roriz, the monograph O Essencial sobre a Companhia Nacional de Bailado and the handbook Manual para um Recrutamento Inclusivo. Mónica carried out functions at the Directorate-General for the Arts, the Municipal Directorate for Culture of the Municipality of Porto, and on the Board of the Coliseu do Porto Ageas. She is currently Artistic Director of Ponto C – Cultura e Criatividade in Penafiel.

Orlando Carvalho

Orlando Carvalho is the Director-General of Reintegration and Prison Services. Before taking up his new position in 2024, he was Director of Coimbra Prison and Re-education Advisor at the Directorate-General for Prison Services. Throughout his career, he has held management positions in several prisons, such as Vale de Judeus and Aveiro, having started his career in the prison system as a senior re-education technician in 1990. Previously, he worked as a social services technician in institutions such as Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Aveiro and Segurança Social do Funchal.

Óscar Silva

Creator, director and actor. He graduated in Theatre (ESTC), attended the Postgraduate Performance programme (ECA-USP), and completed his Masters in Performance and Practice (UAL). Between 2010 and 2014 Óscar lived and worked in São Paulo where he was assistant director of SP Escola de Teatro and led several educational and artistic projects. He participated in École des Maîtres 2017. Óscar is currently the Artistic Director of Terceira Pessoa, where he has been co-directing the RadioATIVIDADE project at Guarda Prison since 2022, supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian and 'la Caixa' Foundations under the initiative PARTIS & Art for Change.

Paulo Lameiro

Musicologist and educator. After a brief career as a baritone, he dedicated himself to teaching and took over the administration of different music schools, including the Lisbon National Conservatory, and the SAMP Arts School in Pousos. He has been developing educational and artistic projects in early childhood and community art projects. He was Artistic Director of Ópera na Prisão until 2024, a project implemented since 2014 with young inmates at the Leiria Prison and supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation under the initiatives PARTIS and PARTIS & Art for Change. Paulo has directed projects in prisons in Catalonia and Luxembourg and is the Artistic Director of Musicalmente.



ART AND COMMUNITY

Pedro Gil

He acts, writes, stages, researches and produces. He co-manages the theatre company Razões Pessoais, where he has directed over a dozen plays. As an actor he has worked with companies such as Artistas Unidos, mala voadora and O Bando, and with creators such as Miguel Castro Caldas, Francisco Salgado, Jean-Paul Buchieri, Mónica Calle, Tiago Rodrigues, Rui Horta and Tonan Quito. Pedro began his work in prisons in 2002 at Lisbon Prison. In 2023, he took part in the corpoemcadeia project, implemented at the Linhão Prison. In 2024, he began implementing the República do Vento (Republic of Wind) theatre project at Montijo Prison.

Ricardo Loureiro

Ricardo is a sociologist. He is currently a senior technician at the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG), and a researcher at the European Prisons Observatory. Since 2007 he has worked in NGOs, public administration and academia focusing on human rights, gender equality and non-discrimination, prisons, violence, social and community intervention, and vocational training. Ricardo was the social manager of the Lado P project, implemented in the Caxias Prison and funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian. He has been involved in prison-related issues in Portugal since 2009 and is currently a member of social reintegration association CONFIAR.

Rita Pires dos Santos

Rita Pires dos Santos is a cultural mediator. She began her career in 1998 at the National Theatre Museum in Lisbon, working as a museology technician. From 2001 to 2022, she was part of the team at the Carmo Archaeological Museum in Lisbon, where she created the Education Service, developed and led its educational programmes, and also held coordination responsibilities. She holds a degree in Art History from the Faculty of Arts of the University of Lisbon and a postgraduate qualification in Museology from FCSH – Nova University of Lisbon. She has been a member of Acesso Cultura since 2014, where she served on the governing bodies and has been President of the Board since 2023. She is currently working again as a freelance cultural mediator, developing educational projects in schools and cultural institutions.

Susana Paiva

Creator, curator, editor, educator, performer and producer of visual arts projects and events. Since 2012, Susana has been the coordinator of the Escola Informal de Fotografia do Espetáculo (Informal School of Performance Photography) project, a long-term educational project for creators in the field of photography. Between 2019 and 2023, Susana was coordinator of the photography team of the corpoemcadeia project, by Companhia Olga Roriz, a PARTIS/FCGulbenkian initiative. She is currently attending Forum Dança's 33rd edition of the course in management/production of performing arts (CGPAE).



ART AND COMMUNITY

Vanessa Ribeiro Rodrigues

Documentary film director, university lecturer, freelance journalist, researcher at CICANT and media literacy educator. With a PhD in Communication Studies for Development, she has focused on creating narratives about social issues, ecofeminism ("As Guardiãs de Sementes" [The Seed Guardians], 2025) and memory ("Baptismo de Terra" [Baptism of Earth], 2017). "O Feitiço de Areia" (The Spell of Sand), her upcoming feature film, questions what to do with so many silences in the colonial memory in Mozambique. As a journalist, Vanessa has written for The Guardian Visão, Público, Expresso and DN, and radio station TSF. She is the author of the book *Ala Feminina* about incarcerated women in Brazil and Portugal.



ART AND COMMUNITY NOTEBOOKS

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is an international foundation based in Portugal. It promotes the development of individuals and organisations through art, science, education, and philanthropy, contributing to a more equitable and sustainable society.

A key area of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's work focuses on promoting access to culture, acknowledging the fundamental role of art in the development of people and societies. The Foundation has continually affirmed the role of the arts as a powerful catalyst for social transformation, through processes of co-creation that open space for shared participation.

This work became more prominent in 2013 with the launch of PARTIS, an initiative supporting participatory arts projects in Portugal. It was further expanded in 2020 with the launch of PARTIS & Art for Change, in partnership with the “la Caixa” Foundation, strengthening the shared commitment of both foundations to artistic projects with social impact.

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation has also supported initiatives that aim to put the principles of cultural democracy into practice, by supporting organisations and projects that encourage cultural participation and involve communities in decision-making. This approach strengthens the belief that widening access to and participation in artistic and cultural creation and enjoyment are key to building more sustainable and equitable communities.

The Art and Community Notebooks share reflections and learnings from the Foundation's work in democratising access to culture, helping to broaden the role of the arts and to promote a shared future in which everyone can take part in cultural life.



EQUITY AND SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAMME

DIRECTOR Luís de Melo Jerónimo

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NOTEBOOK N. 04 ARTISTIC PRACTICES IN PRISONS

EDITORIAL PRODUCTION Sara Ramos, Narcisa Costa, Maria Vlachou, Inês Henriques



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