

## Searching for sustainable alternatives and socio-cultural innovation through participatory art and design

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**ABSTRACT:** Participatory arts and design belong to an area of knowledge characterized by transdisciplinarity. Based on this understanding, it is useful to look for influences in different social engagement practices with communities, namely the different methodologies and methods, and the appropriate means of expression for developing participatory actions and their communication with other audiences. This is the logic that runs through the initiatives that we have created and that we present here as case studies: *More South*, *Catapult*, and *Shifting Ground* projects.

Before presenting the projects, an argument is woven based on the development of disciplinary knowledge and the existence of intersubjectivity between all areas of knowledge. In participatory visual arts and design, the empirical experience is also valued alongside the theoretical and/or practical domain of a particular area. Some artistic practices that demonstrate the paradigm in question are examples and features highlighting the holistic character and ethical dimension of participatory artistic practices.

We highlight the tradition of disciplinary knowledge as a fundamental area for deepening artistic knowledge, but we argue that it should coexist with other information and understanding sources. Innovation in participatory art and design depends on the simultaneous development of both approaches; one more focused on the medium of expression and the respective discipline, and the other on the expansion to other domains and agents.

**Keywords:** participatory art and design, social innovation, socio-cultural sustainability.

### 1 STRUCTURE AND POROSITY OF DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE

For Foucault, the Renaissance culture developed in the 15th century was characterized by establishing an autonomous and abstract perspective, which sought to separate possible interactions between objects. This was a particular way of thinking for a deeper understanding of specific issues, preventing any unforeseen type of subjectivity. In science, this philosophy originated the creation of natural laws, and in the arts sphere, determined the implementation of principles for aesthetic analysis (Wicks 2005).

In *Les Mots et les Choses* (1966), thought is described not as something rational, to achieve an exponential perfection, but by establishing countless possibilities of knowledge. The source of the problem is the rupture between the classical culture episteme, which began in the 17th century, and the modern episteme culture, which began in the early 19th century. In the transition from the 18th to the 19th century, the system of representation rules, of language, of "natural orders," has a profound change, where the

representation theory sees its importance reduced and language becomes more dissipated (Foucault 2000).

Regarding the rupture in the history of knowledge, Foucault refers to the existence of an interruption between truth and subjectivity. The ancient philosophers had as the main theme of their thought the knowledge of themselves (*gnóthi seauton*) and their care (*epimeleia heautou*). One of the possible reasons for abandoning these principles was Christianity's development, which considered this logic to be selfishness and the Judeo-Christian belief in a God who gathers all knowledge (Stone 2010).

Another determining factor for the Renaissance thought solidification was the rise of Descartes' rationalist philosophy, which attributed a new meaning to self-knowledge and devalued the concept of care for oneself. The Cartesian theory, developed in *Meditationes de prima philosophia, in qua Dei existentia et animæ immortalitas demonstrator* (1641), introduces the idea that self-knowledge is something given and from which one proceeds to divine knowledge, mathematics, and physics. It is a thought that discards spirituality, an expression that Foucault (2005) uses,

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not with a religious sense, but as a way of being based on seeking, practice, and experience to obtain the truth.

The main focus of Descartes' philosophy is to perceive what leads the subject to obtain truth, disregarding reflection on the manner and consequences of this enterprise, thus separating knowledge from ethics. Based on these assumptions, Cartesian knowledge advocates an epistemological method to reach truth (Stone 2010). This postulate makes incongruous situations possible, such as the case of an immoral thought that, at the same time, is in search of truth, whereas before Descartes, this would not be possible (Foucault 1997).

Cartesian thinking represents a way of knowing that allows us to understand the disciplinary problem in the domains of art and participatory design, specifically the fact that many projects developed in these fields have more similarities than differences. These are areas of knowledge with a common purpose to develop actions for vulnerable communities' social and cultural sustainability. However, although they share some methodologies and methods, these are two fields that show a certain distance and a constant demand to isolate know-how within the respective discipline. The same can be said for other social art practices, besides the visual arts, with convergent objectives aiming at society's social and cultural sustainability, such as the performing arts, literature, or multimedia art.

While disciplinary knowledge is an important tradition for deepening certain aspects, it is also crucial to expand this knowledge to other fields. This is an innovative way of contributing to know-how based on the simultaneous development of both approaches, one being more specific and focused on understanding the medium of expression and the discipline that serves as its primary support, and the other acting as a constant questioning of other possibilities of knowledge that may be informing the matter in question.

In a society that aims at pluralism, where communication is increasingly efficient and specific information more accessible, the encapsulate development of art forms based on the participation of people and communities is not the best way to take advantage of the existing knowledge in this field and contribute to the evolution of the common good.

Concerning the territories of art and participatory design, the search for an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary language informed by several participatory art practices, the social sciences, among other theoretical areas, is important, as is the systematization of integrating empirical knowledge.

## 2 SOCIAL ARTS AND DESIGN

Western culture has maintained the tradition of autonomous art, whose aesthetics were disconnected from the social dimension. This art perspective emphasized individuality, was depoliticized, and the

market economy logic conditioned the artist's supposed independence. However, art cannot be considered only in aesthetic terms. It is never wholly independent because it always exists in a particular context (Gablik 1992).

In this sense, the development of art and design projects focused on social intervention and the search for alternatives in society have been occurring systematically in various expression areas since the counterculture movement from the 1960s. The existence of several crossings between artistic disciplines and the social sciences became common through manifestations of a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary nature, as well as by the use of various means of expression, with the main objective of producing reflections and actions according to society's problems (Gorgel Pinto 2019a).

A recurrent feature of such practices is that they create interactions between the observer and the social context to develop a territory of free thought in social relations and stimulate communication between its actors (Bourriaud 2006).

The relational nature of reality is perceived through dynamic interconnections. Art must develop according to the environment, meaning it must materialize with the observer's active participation, resulting in a dilution of the boundaries between the public and art. In these conditions, where the public is no longer separated, the meaning is no longer in the observer or observed, but in the relationship between both. The interaction makes possible the fusion between observed and observer, going against the aesthetic autonomy of art (Gablik 1992).

In conventional art, the space that joins observers is occupied by the artistic object, just as in traditional design, the space that unites users is taken by the industrial object. Regarding artistic practices developed with communities, this space is filled through the relationship between the artist or designer conducting the project and the public. In this context, the artist's guiding strategy, which determines the public's degree of collaboration, is of particular importance. The collaboration uses intersubjectivity as a means of expression, involving openness, respect, responsibility, and trust. In other words, the intersubjectivity developed replaces the subjectivity of the artist or traditional designer that is expressed through visual objects, which represent his experience. Assuming itself in the context of plural discourses of the people involved, art based on collaboration is inherently ethical (Lacy 1995).

In general, this kind of art focused on social action takes place over a long period, involving the formal mechanisms proper to disciplinary knowledge and how interaction with the public occurs. Regardless of the social theme that is at the origin of the development of the artistic project, there are several elements involved in the creative process, such as the organization, the performative and participatory component

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of the events associated with the project, as well as the planning of communication and dissemination, namely through the elaboration of an archive of visual and audiovisual documents, among others. The most significant contributions in art forms that actively participate in political and social life are those that produce innovative images and forms of communication and those that question and get involved in daily social life through initiatives that take place over an extended period (Lippard 2006).

One of the most consistent examples of social art is the *new genre public art*, an innovative practice that went beyond the representation and interpretation of certain social realities, namely through the intervention of artists in local communities, with whom various strategies of social action were developed aiming to contribute to the resolution of existing problems, as well as redefining the notions of public and spectator (Lacy 1995).

It was through the book *Mapping the Terrain* (1995) that Lacy presented the *new genre public art* concept, in which the author expresses her disagreement with the predominant public art, and where she highlights the existence of common strategies and objectives in some artistic practices of social engagement, such as performances, events and conceptual art installations (Lacy 2008). Among the most addressed political and social issues were relations of race, gender, cultural identity, the homeless, the elderly, crime, and ecology, with which some artists developed innovative models for art whose logic of public and commitment methods constituted a significant part of the aesthetic language. These artistic practices expanded the notion of public art based on a specific medium of expression, seeking other means besides the visual, such as transdisciplinary experiences, political positions, and relationships with other audiences (Lacy 1995).

### 3 THE UBIQUITY OF DESIGN FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

As far as the sphere of design is concerned, it is important to note that it is an activity shared by various social actors whose initiatives are based on the same principles of creativity and reinvention of interaction forms with the environment. What defines design is the ability to meet the human being's needs, whether material or non-material. This logic has allowed professionals from different areas, even if they do not consider themselves designers, to refer to their work using the word design and thus describe the creation of systems, organizations, programs, among other actions (Mau et al. 2004).

In this context, some designers with scientific knowledge, more proficient in this design vocation, have been looking for other ways to relate with empirical designers to participate in creating objects and

functions that better contribute to society. Simultaneously, more and more design initiatives for social innovation are also taking place, which are promoted without design experts' participation, but through citizens acting in isolation or organized groups and specialists in other arts and areas of knowledge. This is a relationship between *diffuse design* and *expert design*, representing a synergy that will be fundamental for the social body's future development. It is a new design paradigm, not only oriented towards solving concrete problems, but also towards building social values and qualities (Manzini 2015).

Despite the ubiquity that characterizes design for social innovation, with manifestations that demonstrate a greater or lesser organization of ideas, it is in the disciplinary design field that some of the main methodologies and methods have been deepened. For the various practices that have contributed to the development of this domain, different designations have been created, such as participatory design, co-design, meta-design, social design, amongst other forms involving the participation of users in the design process.

A core aspect of the different design manifestations is the involvement of participants in the perception of the eventual problem so that the obtained results become more effective. This is a commitment established with a particularly vulnerable social group through an action contrary to the dominant possibilities of creation and production, that is, a form of social intervention and systematic use of creativity that diverges from the logic of power hierarchy that determines and imposes on users what they supposedly need (Fuad-Luke 2009).

The participatory design model has its roots in the 1950s in some US and Scandinavian companies involving workers in decision-making. Later, it emerged with more intensity through the influence of the social and cultural circumstances that marked the 1960s and 1970s, namely by expanding a culture of community action and activist movements in defense of democracy and social justice. Critical design projects emerged regarding the dominant logic of functionalism and formalism, and alternative proposals were developed, from which systems open to the inclusion of user sensitivity and experience emerged (Lee 2006).

A crucial feature in the development of participatory projects in this field is establishing a firm commitment with the group of people involved, which is sometimes difficult to predict or control by those conducting the initiatives. A proper commitment is a basis for participatory project productivity, influencing future projects with the same community. In this context, eventual participants are placed between a collaboration closer to those who started the project, acting as partners, or a more passive collaboration and subject to a process of constant encouragement (Huybrechts et al. 2014).

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The African concept of Ubuntu is a significant contribution to the understanding of participatory design methodology. The expression Ubuntu is related to humanity's idea, namely the relationship between the human being and the community where he is inserted. The existence of the individual being is verified because of the collective experience, which in turn is the reason for the existence of the individual being. It is an inclusive logic that seeks to integrate the participants with different ways of thinking to build consensus. In this way, Winschiers-Theophilus et al. (2012) claim to be able to interact with people at the center of each initiative of their projects, spending more time listening and talking to participants as carrying out more collaborative tasks. Through dialogue, participatory environment optimization aims to develop mutual knowledge and counteract the separation between those who are intelligent and those who are ignorant since all those involved in a participatory project have their own knowledge and can contribute validly.

### 4 ETHICAL AND AESTHETIC COMMITMENTS OF PARTICIPATORY ART AND DESIGN

Another relevant circumstance in participatory art and design projects is that this is an artistic practice with the capacity to generate a specific place and moment. It is an activity related to space and time constraints, in which approaches with different scales are verified, which are interconnected in a global logic. In this field, it is recurrent the creation of collaboration platforms between the project leaders and local institutions to enhance the development of initiatives (Gorgel Pinto 2019b).

According to Guattari (1989), the concerted intervention of institutions that act locally and creative agents, such as artists, designers, among others, for the implementation of specific practices that aim at the transformation and creation of procedures in social contexts is a collective way of being that develops through communication networks and through individual transformations that concern the subject.

In the philosopher's view, the social and human sciences have diverted the focus from fundamental aspects in subjectivization, replacing them with scientific references, and as such, the creation of ethical-aesthetic models is necessary. Thus, all areas with the capacity to influence individual and collective domains, namely culture, education, media, and art, should assume a more active role in developing micropolitical and microsocioal practices with an aesthetic dimension.

The development of an integrated vision of place is an important characteristic of the community's artistic interaction. The place must be understood, in its complexity, while the relationship between human, biophysical, geographic, economic, political, social,

cultural, historical, and ecological factors that characterize and determine the life of that same place (Reaes Pinto 2013).

Consideration of place, in the development of participatory projects, implies aesthetic nature assumptions related to artistic production, as well as those of an ethical nature, where the concern with vulnerable citizens and the valorization of people through their participation are a way of alerting to the relevance of these places and the role that populations play in their permanent renewal (Reaes Pinto 2013).

A relevant concept to approach this perspective is the notion of *place-specific*, which Lippard created in the 1990s to designate an artistic practice based on the lived experience of space instead of *site-specific* practices that only considered the physical and visual dimensions of space. The experience of place comprises more than just its geography and construction, incorporating the people who inhabit it, the economic and historical dynamics, among other factors that may influence the existence of place (Lippard 1995).

With roots in the new genre of public art, this artistic field defends the use of integrating strategies as *modus operandi* in the development of art projects with communities. A designation began by challenging the prevailing public art discourse in the 1980s to later experiment and solidify a public art model based on working with and for communities, valuing personal and local narratives more than universal ones. This is a more effective way of drawing attention to and producing results from social issues that concern people who belong to communities (Lacy 2008).

The relationship with the *site-specific* concept is also evident in the practice of the artist Tania Bruguera (n.d.), who refers to the idea of *political timing specific* as one of the characteristics of her work with communities. Bruguera's methodology stems from the political context simultaneously as the artistic work unfolds or is materialized. The art object exists while certain political circumstances occur, from which it results, becoming a document of a particular political period as soon as those circumstances end. This is a dynamic situation that informs the understanding of artistic work and is part of its structure.

The *timing specific* criterion is one of the requirements of the *useful art* practice advocated by Bruguera. It aims to develop a medium for artistic expression according to a specific social and political problem and the expansion of art to people's daily lives (Gerrity 2011: n.p.).

The artist's role in *useful art* is to find the best means of expression to develop what he has idealized and achieve the goal in question. The purpose is that the selected medium is not restricted to the artist's aesthetic and technical options but focuses on social and political objectives that can be achieved. The limits of a *useful art* project are linked to the interaction established with the social group for which the action was idealized. In this context, conditions are created

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Figure 1. *More South* project – cloth bag workshop with visual poem printing.



Figure 3. *Shifting Ground* project – ceramic sculpture workshop.



Figure 2. *Catapult* project – wallet with cyanotype printing on fabric.



Figure 4. *Shifting Ground* project – exhibit/celebration.

for the occurrence of the ideal moment, which arise in the course of the project, above all, when participants become aware of its purpose and appropriate the initiative (IMI, n.d.: n.p.).

### 5 MORE SOUTH, CATAPULT AND SHIFTING GROUND

The art and design projects we have been developing have the objective of social intervention and the use of creativity to build alternatives to support vulnerable communities. We give as examples three initiatives that have occurred since 2017, the *More South* (Figure 1) and *Catapult* (Figure 2) projects, developed in the regions of Oeiras and Sintra (Portugal), and the *Shifting Ground* (Figure 3 and Figure 4), project that took place in the city of Cedar Rapids (USA).

These interventions had in common the fact that the participants were mostly immigrants and their descendants. In the projects developed in Portugal, citizens from Portuguese-speaking countries such as Cape Verde, Angola, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea Bissau, and immigrants from Senegal and residents belonging to the Roma community. In Cedar Rapids, the participants belonged to two communities: a group of immigrants and descendants from Mexico and Honduras and a group of refugees and immigrants from Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

*More South* and *Catapult* projects were initiatives developed in partnership with the Aga Khan Foundation Portugal, whose expertise in developing social actions to support children's education in combating social exclusion and poverty in the Lisbon metropolitan urban context is well known. Within the scope of the foundation intervention in Oeiras and Sintra municipalities, a collaboration was started to promote art projects with the communities.

The *Shifting Ground* project was also started from a collaborative platform, namely with the artist Jane Gilmor and the Iowa Ceramic Center and Glass Studio, with support from the City of Cedar Rapids, Iowa Arts Council, St. Paul's United Methodist African Nationals Congregation, and Immaculate Conception Church's Hispanic Ministries.

The three projects also had the important support of local institutions for the organization of exhibitions and conferences, among other actions. In this way, it was possible to deepen the intersubjectivity as a means of expression, creating bonds of citizenship and participation through art and design.

Disciplinary knowledge in the sphere of visual arts and design informed the participatory practice with the different communities, not only through their own processes but also through the interaction with the public involved and the resulting knowledge. The various aspects that influence the creative process are highlighted, such as the design of the strategy and service

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provided to the community, the educational activity concerning the production of artistic objects, visual, audiovisual, and multimedia communication for the creation of a project archive, which reproduces the artistic and social interventions to other audiences.

The fusion between disciplinary knowledge and empirical knowledge is necessary for a meaningful involvement for participants and the community. Simultaneously, another way of perceiving the vulnerability context is the specificities of place and its present time. The place must be understood through the economic, social, cultural, political, and historical dynamics, among other dimensions that may contribute to a deeper understanding of the situation.

Within the projects in Portugal and the communities of immigrants and descendants who took part in the initiatives, the aim was to value their culture through the respective creativity and to reveal to society the existence of places, which although vulnerable in social and economic terms, are exemplary in terms of multiculturalism, solidarity, and creativity.

The project created in Cedar Rapids was marked by the USA's political context, whose leaders advocate a less favorable system for immigrants. Based on this premise, it was the citizens - artists, public organizations, and social solidarity institutions, who organized themselves in defense of the social and cultural inclusion of refugees, immigrants, and descendants, knowing that it is the integrity of society that is being preserved.

We intend to continue developing art and design projects focused on social action and searching for alternatives to valorize vulnerable communities in the near future. To this end, it will be crucial to emphasize the systematization of joint interventions with institutions that act locally and other artists and designers, addressing at the implementation of methodologies and methods of an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary nature. This is a firm commitment and a significant contribution that visual arts and design can make to sustainable development.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was financed with Nacional Funds through FCT – Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, within the scope of the project: CHAIA/UE (UI&D 112)/2020 – [Ref. UIDB/00112/2020].

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