Art and community: critical perspectives

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This special issue of the journal Estudo Prévio is the result of presentations, ideas and exchanges that took place during the 2018 conference "Art, Materiality and Representation" organised by the Royal Anthropological Institute in collaboration with the British Museum and the Department of Anthropology at SOAS in London. Though the organising institutions and the venues where historically loaded sites of anthropological legacy, the event attracted researchers, practitioners and activists from a wide range of backgrounds and disciplinary traditions: visual and performing artists, designers, museologists, curators, art historians, architects, urbanists, as well as anthropologists and those locating themselves in transitioning, often undefined domains.

It was in this eclectic milieu that, together with the contributors to this issue, we discussed, among other things, the implications of making art with and for communities, and what this entails in terms of practice, ethics, participation and identity politics. Artists have engaged with communities since ancient times in both consensual and conflicting ways. Indeed, art has represented, moulded and reinvented communities through artworks that still puzzle contemporary observers (see Wong on this issue). Conversely, artistic works have been "socialised" in different epochs depending on the specific social, cultural and historical context in which they were situated. That is, forms and strategies of community engagement also depended on what Rànciere defines the "regime of the arts" in which artistic works were produced

(Rancière 2010). In "The Painter's Studio" (1855), for example, Courbet brings together on a canvas a representative cross-section of the world that informed his social and moral life. Shareholders, art lovers and intellectual friends are summoned in his studio together with (but separated from) people of everyday life, the poor and the wealthy, to form an allegoric community with the painter at the centre, as a mediator (Rubin 1980). During the 20th century, art engagement with communities shifted from this representative mode toward an interactive one, by placing the viewer/audience at the core of artistic processes (Bishop 2012). Avant-garde artists of the first half of twenty century challenged modern foundations of art culture and bended art to everyday life and materiality. Neglecting individual authorship, they engaged in collaborative processes and collective actions such as the surrealist "revolutionary crowd" (Baker 2007, Bishop 2012). Inheriting these experimental art processes, 1960s saw a shift from the ideal of the individual artist, working in a studio and creating for her/himself or for commissioners, to artistic collectives that pursued audience inclusion (see Gablik in Lacy 1995). Against the institutionalised world of the art culture and galleries, artists created works with and within communities and politically challenged social establishments (see, for example, Kate Crehan's 2012 history of the Free Form Arts Trust which started in the 1960s). Thus, while the articulation of art and community is not new in the history of artistic production, it has gained particular scholarly attention in the last decades, when community-based artistic projects came out more explicitly to the fore. Contemporary watchwords for these interactive artistic approaches are expressed in terms of social, relational, participatory, collaborative and empowering forms. Today, "community art" may refer to artistic practice that is anchored in a community setting involving some form of interaction or dialogue with the community. On the other hand, with "socially engaged art", the accent is often put on an art practice that is collaborative, regularly participatory and involves people as the medium or material of the work. As Helguera argues "what characterizes socially engaged art is its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence. Socially engaged art, as a category of practice, is still a working construct" (Helguera 2011: 2). Socially engaged art, or social practice art, challenges what art traditionally considers both audience and producer. According to Uzwiak, social practice art, like ethnography, takes the everyday into critical light and places it as a site of potential transformation (Uzwiak, 2016). Participation and empowerment have also become conventional notions within urban redevelopment practices. Public art, which has been traditionally identified with the production of monuments, statues and busts in the public space, has progressively begun to intervene in a more socially oriented and political form, developing tools for community engagement and focusing on collaborative processes. For example, US-based artist Suzanne Lacy has defined "new genre public art" a type of artistic engagement that deals with contemporary issues, a "visual art that uses both traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives" (Lacy 1995:19). Contemporary regimes of art point towards the centrality of community engagement strategies for urban regeneration projects and creative place-making (Remesar 2000). At the turn of the new millennium, development agencies, local governments and private institutions have increasingly bet on artists and arts organisations to act upon (and with) communities and places.

However, the cross-fertilisation of anthropological and artistic reflections on the "social turn" in art practice has showed how community can be at once a unifying and fragmentary notion. These critical stances draw from broader anthropological reflections on the instability of community as an analytical tool and an operational concept. As Amit observes, "we often find notions of community offering a convenient conceptual haven, a location from which to safely circumscribe potentially infinite web of connections" (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 17). The risk of naturalising communities in participatory, relational or community-based art projects is to level local collectivities at the expense of more subtle, but not less pertinent, identity dynamics (Crehan 2011; Bishop 2012; Blanes et al. 2016). The questions posed by critical approaches to community art practices revolve around what collectivities they address, who is included or left out in these art projects, the relations of power established among the actors involved, and what identity dynamics and conflicts emerge (or are subdued) in these artistic practices.

It is with these preoccupations in mind that we have invited the authors of this special issue to reflect on their specific research contexts. At a crossroad between anthropological perspective, art criticism and historical analysis, these contributions challenge and enrich discussions around community and art, by presenting a broad array of geographical and temporal examples and in virtue of the different backgrounds and research paths of the authors. While the fieldworks of the articles effectively cover three continents - with contributions from Turkey, China, Ireland and Paraguay - the "communities" to which the authors refer reveal complex dynamics that transcend political cartographies of nation-states.

Ayşe Güngör's contribution depicts the landscape of contemporary art in Turkey starting from the last decade of the 20th century. She links the rise of socially engaged artistic projects to the state new cultural politics that spurred from the EU-accession process, introducing neoliberal policies that delegated artistic work support to the private sector. Funding from philanthropic organizations, the rise of cultural tourism and increased international exchanges with curators and artistic residencies vitalised the country artistic scene. In this shifting landscape, artists' attention turned toward the social and political issues that new forms of urbanisation and internal migration were bringing along. By addressing social engaged artistic forms, Ayşe Güngör specifically analyses artistic projects based on Istanbul peripheries that adopt ethnographic devices to bring visibility to new migrant communities' settlements and ethnic minorities displacement.

Making a point that communal artistic projects are not a contemporary phenomenon but encompass early modern history, Junfu Wong's article shows, through an accurate textual and iconographic analysis, how the artistic projects of stele erection in medieval China were actually forms of community-making, by attending to the collaborative activities that were required to realise and celebrate these artefacts. Positioned at important crossroads and central places for religious and entertainment activities, the stele performed a reconciliatory function among ethnically different groups that had come to live together in circumscribed regional contexts. As Wong underlines, the unifying character of the stele was evident not only during the ceremonial community gatherings around it or through the inscriptions carved on the artwork but, more

importantly, in the realisation of the stele itself, which called for the collaboration of the community in a collective endeavour. Artistic projects, in this instance, served collectivities to generate a communal identity that transcended historical ethnic diversities.

In a sense specular to Wong's argument, Nuala Ní Fhlathúin present the case of community festivals in rural Connemara Gaeltacht, reflecting on how these events contribute to art-making and the dissemination of contemporary visual art. The broader context is that of Irish-speaking western Ireland areas and how different forms of community action aim to culturally, socially and economically sustain local specificities. By comparing two community festivals through archival and fieldwork research and situating her own artistic experience in both, the author untangles the complex identity, political and affective underpinnings that engender the festival appeal to artistic work oriented toward participatory strategies and community engagement. Ní Fhlathúin contributes to widen the reflection of the multiple connections between art and community by bringing a fine-grained analysis of their rich but also contradictory liaison in the specific Irish linguistic context.

Bonifacio's visual essay concludes this special issue offering an anthropological and historical account of a Paraguayan company town that spans over a century. By collecting family albums to retrace the social history of the tannin factory in Puerto Casado, the author observes how these photographs are "partly historical documents and partly symptoms of an affective geography". Providing a visual narrative of the entanglement of the factory in a past everyday life, the photographs end up juxtaposing the social dimensions of the intimate and the public, the domestic and the historical. Bonifacio stretches the aim of her research in a collaborative project with artists and curators, using and transforming the photographic archive and bringing back the collective work to the "community". As the author rightly observes, the community album is at once a collective endeavour - the making of a visual narrative of common belonging that elicits acknowledgement and recognition - and an authored one, where her role is pivotal in making and unmaking the community by stressing the contradictory ethnic, political and class divisions that are apparently silenced in the official narrative of the history of the tannin factory.

To conclude, this special issue represents an effort to sidestep the "seductive combination of authenticity and vagueness" produced by over-simplifications of community, art and their multifaceted entanglements (Crehan 2011: 193). The volume highlights how bringing together different approaches and scholarly perspectives reveal the complex cosmologies under which art continuously operate in a social dimension. In a sense, we have tried to bring foward the mutual constitution of art and community when artistic projects are oriented toward participatory and social oriented practices. The editors suggest that reflective and critical stances can contribute to the production of new interpretative analysis while enforcing sound collaborations in artistic projects with collectivities.

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Biographical notes

Francesca De Luca (ICS-ULisboa) is an anthropologist, working at the intersection of medical anthropology, archives and ethnographic-base art. She integrates the research project "EXCEL. The pursuit of excellence. Biotechnologies, enhancement and body capital in Portugal" (ICS). She is a member of EBANO collective, pursuing methodological experimentations and collaborations in ethnographic-based artistic practice. She was a founding member of Rifrazioni Festival, a site-specific visual and performing arts residency and festival based on ethnographic researches in the south of Rome. Before her hijacking in the performing and visual arts, her interest and work in anthropology has focused on cultural psychiatry and the medicalization of undocumented immigrants both in Italy and Canada.

Helena Elias holds a BFA in sculpture at the Faculty of Fine Arts of Lisbon. In 2000 she completed the Master in Art degree, in Grays School of Arts, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, UK. In 2007, she completed the PhD in Public Art, at the Faculty of Fine Arts of Barcelona. For her PhD research she has received, in 2009, the Ignacio de Lecea prize, promoted by the Barcelona Council and the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Barcelona. As an artist, teacher and researcher, she has been articulating her teaching with her art practice, along with the publication of several papers and workshops, in conferences proceedings, journals and book chapters. She was awarded with an FCT grant for her post-doctoral research in Sculpture at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Lisbon. She received the Best practices prize of ObservIST (University of Lisbon) for her workshops held during the artistic residency at IST Civil Museum. As researcher of VICARTE, she coordinates the Research in the making of Arts and Sciences line. Within this scope, Helena is currently developing the project towards communities of practices methodological strategies for collaborative Research among arts and sciences. She has recently won a position as a full-time assistant professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts of Lisbon.