



Artistic Practices in Lockdown: Resistance and Collectivism during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Portugal¹

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ENG Abstract: In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the precariousness and working conditions of artists and cultural workers globally, including Portugal. Through the research project *Práticas Artísticas Confinadas: Resistência e Coletivismo na Pandemia Covid-19 em Portugal* (Artistic Practices in Lockdown: Resistance and Collectivism during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Portugal), undertaken between December 2021 and June 2022, it was possible to conclude that amid this crisis, Portuguese cultural workers mobilised collectively to advocate for labour rights, expose irregularities within cultural institutions and secure access to cultural and artistic production. Drawing on these findings, this article focuses on how the restrictions on the use of physical public spaces, which are privileged arenas for protest and participatory democracy as defined by the Portuguese Constitution, compelled these workers to devise alternative approaches to sustain their activism. Thus, the paper examines the strategies employed by cultural workers to circumvent the restrictions by adapting and subverting these spatial limitations. The article concludes with an analysis of how the use of art practices and the performativity of these strategies were crucial in ensuring the continuation of social mobilisation and democratic exercise.

Keywords: Art, covid-19, collectives, public space, Portugal

ES Práticas Artísticas Confinadas: Resistência y Colectivismo durante la Pandemia de Covid-19 en Portugal

Resumen: En 2020, la pandemia de COVID-19 exacerbó la precariedad y las condiciones laborales de artistas y trabajadores culturales a nivel global, incluyendo Portugal. A través del proyecto de investigación *Práticas Artísticas en el Confinamiento: Resistencia y Colectivismo durante la pandemia de Covid-19 en Portugal*, realizado entre diciembre de 2021 y junio de 2022, se pudo concluir que, en medio de esta crisis, los trabajadores culturales portugueses se movilizaron colectivamente para defender los derechos laborales, denunciar irregularidades en las instituciones culturales y asegurar el acceso a la producción cultural y artística. Basándose en estos hallazgos, este artículo se enfoca en cómo las restricciones al uso de espacios públicos físicos, arenas privilegiadas para la protesta y la democracia participativa según la Constitución Portuguesa, obligaron a estos trabajadores a desarrollar enfoques alternativos para sostener su activismo. Por lo tanto, el documento examina las estrategias empleadas por los trabajadores culturales para sortear las restricciones, adaptándose y subvirtiendo estas limitaciones espaciales. El artículo concluye con un análisis de cómo el uso de prácticas artísticas y la performatividad de estas estrategias fueron cruciales para garantizar la continuidad de la movilización social y el ejercicio democrático.

Palabras clave: Arte, covid-19, colectivos, espacio público, Portugal.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Circumventing restrictions: adapting and subverting the occupation of public space. 2.1. Reconfiguring the public space as a means to ensure democratic exercise. 2.2. Adapting traditional forms of struggle and using digital resources. 2.3. Subverting restrictions on the use of physical public space. 3. Conclusion. References.

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1. Introduction

On 5 May 2023, the World Health Organization declared an end to the state of global health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite promises that “everything would be fine”², the three years of pandemic that had affected the world since the beginning of 2020 had led to irreparable losses. The pandemic revealed, among other things, the inequalities between rich and poor countries in accessing medical care and vaccines, and reinforced the vulnerability of those experiencing financial and social fragility (A. Adarov et al., 2022). This included artists and workers employed in the cultural field whose existing precarity was exacerbated by the pandemic, although to differing degrees³.

In Portugal, the successive states of calamity and emergency decreed by the government for over a year (between March 2020 and April 2021) led to the immediate closure of cultural facilities. Even after this challenging period, various restrictions on access and the normal functioning of these spaces were implemented, limiting cultural creation and its enjoyment. The fragile working conditions in the arts and culture sector in the country, characterised by job insecurity, low wages, lack of social protection and underfunding by the state (Gama, 2021, p. 17), were further aggravated by the pandemic.

The difficult situation experienced by these workers during this period, combined with the economic crisis and growing social tension, triggered intense social mobilisation and political demands. This led to the emergence of new forms of self-organisation, and greater participation in trade union activities developed. These new collectives, associations, cooperatives, and informal groups sought to resist and overcome situations of extreme poverty and undefined, precarious contractual working conditions. Additionally, it is important to emphasise the efforts made by these groups to find alternative means of ensuring that their creativity and access to artistic and cultural production continued despite the restrictions on movement and gatherings imposed by the pandemic.

It was within this context that the project *Práticas Artísticas Confinadas: Resistência e Coletivismo na Pandemia Covid-19 em Portugal* (Fig. 1) emerged. The aim of this project was to reflect on the effects of the pandemic crisis on the arts and culture sector in Portugal. Utilising the methodological framework of artistic studies and the history of contemporary art, the project focused on key concepts such as collectivism, collaboration, participation, and activism in artistic practices, as well as the labour rights of artists. The research aimed to map and study the formal and informal groups established by professionals in the arts and culture sector during this period, aiming to understand their organised struggles and demands for conditions that would enable them to continue working and subsisting. This mapping identified 19 groups, which were subsequently analysed in terms of their formation, as well as how and to what extent they contributed to the dynamics of political and social resistance in the public space. Despite the diversity of these groups, the most common reasons for their formation were the struggle for labour rights, better working conditions, and the recognition of the importance of collective organisation to achieve these demands.

Using the results achieved in the project as a starting point, this article first reflects on the impact of the pandemic on the use of public space. It begins by analysing how limitations on its use affected the vitality and political potential of both its physical and social dimensions. However, despite these constraints potentially weakening participatory democracy, we concluded that restriction on movement in Portugal did not prevent citizen mobilisation. Instead, alternative forms of action and protest emerged. These groups exemplify how, despite the physical distance, collectivism empowers citizens to develop alternative strategies for democratic participation, protest and advocacy, in both physical and virtual spaces.

Next, the article analyses the strategies employed by the groups identified in the *Prática Artísticas Confinadas* project which aimed to circumvent such restrictions. These strategies included adapting traditional forms of struggle through digital platforms and subverting restrictions on physical public space through symbolic and legal occupation.

Thus, by examining the strategies adopted and the actions taken by the groups under analysis to try to overcome the difficulties faced by the cultural sector during the pandemic, this article aims to contribute to understand an unprecedented period in the country’s democratic life. These workers responded to the pandemic crisis by developing their own forms of resistance, performativity and artistic aesthetics, thereby reinforcing the importance of artistic practices and collectivism as a privileged means of exercising democracy.

² The expression was adopted in a number of countries, especially after the song *Andrà tutto bene* (in English, Everything will be fine), written by Cristóvam in March 2020 and accompanied by a video by the director Pedro Varela, went viral on the internet.

³ We advise reading the 2022 report by the World Intellectual Property Organization on *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on creative industries, cultural institutions, education and research*. The report can be read here: https://www.wipo.int/edocs/mdocs/copyright/en/wipo_cr_covid_19_ge_22/wipo_cr_covid_19_ge_22_study.pdf. Last accessed: 13/12/23; see also the 2022 publication produced collaboratively by organisations such as UNESCO and Mercosur entitled *Assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on cultural and creative industries*. The book can be consulted here: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382281->. Last accessed: 13/12/23



Figure 1. Logo of the research project Artistic Practices in Lockdown. Courtesy: research collective.

2. Circumventing restrictions: adapting and subverting the occupation of public space

2.1. Reconfiguring the public space as a means to ensure democratic exercise

The pandemic period can be understood as “a shared experience of a paralysed economy and the removal of spaces for circulation, meeting and decision-making (...)” (Nagamine and Vitale, 2020, p. 1). The intensity of street emptiness varied according to the stages of virus spread and strategies adopted by each state. However, movement restrictions undoubtedly disrupted normal life, prompting a reevaluation of public spaces in relation both to the political and the public spheres.

The understanding that our experience of the world depends to a considerable extent on spatial experience is not new. This conception, which gained widespread recognition both philosophically and sociologically in the 1960s and 1970s, rejected the notion of space as a mere receptacle. Scholars such as Michel Foucault (2001), Henri Lefebvre (1991), and Michel de Certeau (1988) were among those who argued against this perspective (Cruzeiro, 2014, pp. 153 and 154). In the sense that space, when considered in isolation, is an abstraction (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 12), it is necessary to consider both its objective and subjective dimensions. Henri Lefebvre (idem) contends that “real space” is the space of social practice. However, this notion does not exclude the dimension of “ideal space” - related to mental categories - since both types of space “involve, sustain and presuppose the other.” (p. 14). This perspective asserts that the public aspect of space is the proper form of pluralistic and conflictual social practice, essential not only for the practice of politics (Mouffe, 2005, p. 153) but also for a democratic society.

There exists a strong relationship between democracy and public spaces. In practical terms, democratic principles are often both reflected in and supported by the accessibility, functionality, and inclusivity of public spaces. Viewing public space as a primary arena for exercising democracy, the restrictions on the free use of those spaces during the pandemic posed significant challenges to democratic principles. In Portugal, the first state of emergency was declared on 18 March 2020. Among other measures, it included the partial suspension of rights to freely move within national territory and internationally, to assemble or demonstrate, and to actively or passively resist orders issued by authorities. The challenge to Portugal was amplified due to the country’s political organisation, which is rooted in a combination of both participatory and representative democracy. According to the Portuguese constitutionalist Jorge Miranda (2007), a distinctive feature of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic is its emphasis on “the participation of citizens, associations, and various groups in legislative and administrative procedures, thus promoting participatory democracy.” The imposed restrictions affected fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, the right to protest, and the ability to interact, share ideas, and collaborate on community issues, thereby hindering the promotion of a more participatory democracy.

One of the most important changes brought about by the pandemic was the reconfiguration of public spaces. In fact, the home became the place that most profoundly “harboured public life in its materiality within digital environments” (Nagamine and Vitale, 2020, p. 10). This unprecedented shift resulted in a surge of virtual interactions. In Portugal, digital platforms and online environments such as Google Meet and Zoom, and social networks such as Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp became essential for maintaining social connections and for artists and cultural workers to self-organise. In a way, these platforms served as arenas for democratic engagement.

This shift represented an adaptation to new conditions, enabling the maintenance of political interactions among people. However, access to digital spaces is not uniform, with disparities in technology and internet access potentially excluding certain communities and undermining the inclusivity crucial for democracy. Furthermore, issues such as echo chambers can polarise opinions and contribute to the spread of misinformation and fake news. While digital tools can enhance civic participation by facilitating engagement in

specific political processes such as signing petitions or participating in virtual meetings, they also introduce challenges. Digital public spaces differ from physical ones in terms of democratic exercise. Physical public spaces, despite facing challenges such as increasing privatisation and security measures that may threaten principles of accessibility, inclusivity, and freedom, provide opportunities for experiencing the city and engaging in collective political life. However, digital public spaces differ from physical ones in terms of democratic exercise. Physical public spaces, despite facing challenges such as increasing privatisation and security measures that may threaten principles of accessibility, inclusivity, and freedom, provide opportunities for experiencing the city and engaging in collective political life. This importance was underscored during the pandemic by organisations promoting street demonstrations in Portugal, which adapted to new restrictions on physical public spaces. Above all, it involved subverting these rules, finding ways to reconfigure forms of protest under new conditions, and asserting the irreplaceable role of physical public spaces in upholding democratic values and facilitating civic engagement.

The article will now analyse the strategies employed by groups operating within Portugal's arts and cultural sector to circumvent restrictions on public space access, seeking alternative methods to advocate for their causes, protest, and showcase their artistic work. Firstly, it examines how these groups have adapted traditional forms of struggle by harnessing the potent reach of social networks to disseminate their protests and demands. Secondly, it explores how these groups recognised the significance of maintaining physical public space as the primary arenas for political and democratic exercise.

2.2. Adapting traditional forms of struggle and using digital resources

Following the identification of the first case of Covid-19 in March 2020 in Portugal, and the immediate declaration of a state of emergency, the Portuguese cultural sector unflinchingly co-operated with the government in implementing public health measures. Consequently, it was among the first to postpone and cancel shows and exhibitions, and to close museums, libraries, archives and galleries.

However, to the surprise of many of these professionals, several institutions - some supported by the Portuguese State - used the precarious employment relationships they previously had with their workers and service providers to justify not paying salaries or cancelling shows and other cultural events. This was the generalised opinion of the workers interviewed as part of the *Artistic Practices in Lockdown* project, and one of the most recurrent accusations on social media as well as during demonstrations. Faced with severe poverty due to the abrupt loss of income and the constraints to take to the streets to demonstrate, various arts and culture professionals adapted their methods of struggling and exercising citizenship to make their demands heard. Social networks played a key role in mobilising thousands of professionals, helping them organise collectively and disseminate their protests. For almost two years, networks such as Facebook and Instagram were crucial for denouncing irregularities in (both public and private) cultural institutions and highlighting the precarious conditions many professionals faced. Additionally, these networks provided a platform for expressing demands directed at the government and other cultural institutions. Through open letters and petitions, professionals immediately demanded more respect and ethical behaviour from the authorities, as well as social protection measures for arts and cultural workers, and more effective legislation to create long-term labour contracts.

Throughout this period, the social media pages of the groups under study and their followers were filled with posts. These included surveys on the working conditions of cultural agents, information sessions on newly created legislation regulating cancellation processes related to cultural activity, Zoom or Meet conversations between national and foreign artists, and online exhibitions. These activities played a decisive role in shaping public opinion, which was generally solidary with these professionals.

Despite the transition to the online, artistic practices remained an important vehicle for political resistance. Digitally generated content, including videos and drawings, combined with text and slogans, contributed to a unique performativity and visuality. While not entirely new - the use of social networks as a means for arts and cultural workers to disseminate their protests and demands first took place in Portugal during the 2011 economic crisis -, such content generated a plethora of publications characterised by what we have defined here as an aesthetics of urgency.

An example of this was the significant mobilisation sparked by the movement *#unidos pelo presente e futuro da cultura em Portugal* (#united for the present and future of culture in Portugal). After creating a profile on social networks, the movement published an open letter to the government on 26 April 2020, outlining the main challenges faced by the sector, which had been suspended for almost two months at that point. The name of the movement quickly became a *hashtag*, encouraging everyone to repost it on their profiles. The challenge was for each cultural agent to publish a photo holding a poster with the phrase. These images, featuring different poses, backgrounds, and calligraphy, often digitally manipulated into profile frames or *Instagram stories*, led thousands of cultural agents to personalise the movement with their faces. This flooded the feeds of their followers, generating a digital display of performativity. In essence, this demonstration highlighted two key aspects: the urgency of governmental measures to address the sector's crisis and the spirit of unity among these professionals. Furthermore, the movement resulted in a series of demonstrations on 30 January 2021, which took place in various cities across the country under the hashtag *#na rua pelo futuro da cultura* (#taking to the street for the future of culture). This demonstration was led by various cultural associations and organisations demanding legislation to implement formal employment contracts after a year of the pandemic and severely restricted cultural activity.

This digital performativity was also observed in the multiple posts shared by the *Arte-Educadores de Serralves* (Serralves Art-Educators) on their social networks. After being made redundant by the Fundação de

Serralves (Serralves Foundation) museum in Porto, these workers turned to social media to report what was happening, not only from a personal standpoint, but also as part of a collective struggle against the precarious conditions they had endured for years under the institution. Their social media featured a rhythmic series of publications counting the number of days the educators had been without work and without receiving a response from their working institution. These updates were often accompanied by drawings or posters created by the educators themselves or by other artists showing solidarity with their cause. One such post included a message stating, “23 Educators without any reply for 32 days. On hold for a month. Without working and without being paid”, alongside an illustration by the educator Sónia Borges. Inspired by a work of Helena Almeida’s (1934 - 2018) series *Ouve-me* (Listen to me - 1979), Borges’ drawing depicts two women - one with her head veiled and her mouth covered by a scarf bearing the words ‘Look at me’, reminiscent of Almeida’s work, and the other blindfolded with a ribbon bearing the words ‘Talk to me’ (Fig. 2). This image serves as a poignant commentary on the institution’s failure to address the educator’s demands and willingness to listen to their grievances.



Figure 2. Drawing by the educator Sónia Borges. Courtesy of the author.

A few days later, another post underscored the passage of time, recalling the ‘23 lives on hold for 35 days’, accompanied by a new illustration by educator Inês Soares (Fig. 3). Using simple lines, Soares shows a tight-rope walker visibly struggling to find the balance needed to stay on the rope, which was a powerful reminder of the sacrifices endured by these professionals. At the top of the drawing were the words ‘23 lives on hold’. The repetition, the cadence in counting the days, and the emphasis on lives on hold highlighted the mounting pressure caused by the passage of time, the urgent need for resolution, and the imperative for dialogue. The use of drawing as an accessible medium proved to be a common method of conveying these messages, effectively mobilising public opinion as part of this aesthetics of urgency.

In this context, it is also important to mention the intensive activity on social networks carried out by the *Ação Cooperativista* (Cooperativist Action) collective. Created in April 2020, this group sought to unite the sector by adopting a non-hierarchical and inclusive organisational approach. Among their multiple denunciatory and informative posts, one in particular stood out for its performativity nature. On 15 June 2020, the group drew up a fictitious application for the 2020 edition of the annual funding program “Support for Publishing and Creative Projects” run by the Directorate-General for the Arts⁴. Contrary to what this funding was designed for, the application proposed the creation of an emergency support line for the arts sector. As explained on the group’s website, this fictitious application aimed to “highlight the absence of an emergency support line [provided by the Government] for the arts and culture and also to warn of the disastrous consequences of this omission”⁵. Given the chronic underfunding of the cultural sector, the group deemed the implementation of extraordinary support measures to address the crisis the arts and culture were experiencing. Consequently, *Ação Cooperativista* demanded the urgent creation by the government of a similar support

⁴ The Directorate-General for the Arts (DGArtes) is an organisation within the Ministry of Culture of the Portuguese Republic with the mission to coordinate and implement policies to support the arts in Portugal. The annual funding mentioned here aims to support the creation, performance and presentation of works, artistic residencies and repertoire interpretation (in the field of music) and/or to support projects to nationally edit and publish works in a physical or digital format. Source: [https://culturaportugal.gov.pt/pt/conhecer/local/_dgartes/direcao-geral-das-artes/](https://culturaportugal.gov.pt/pt/conhecer/local/_dgarartes/direcao-geral-das-artes/). Last accessed: 20/12/23

⁵ This website is no longer available. However, the group’s work can be followed on Instagram and Facebook.

line, along with fair regulations and remuneration. In addition to submitting the application, the group also encouraged other cultural agents to replicate the action and provided instructions on how to do so.



Figure 3. Drawing by the educator Inês Soares. Courtesy of the author.

The use of fiction to parody and protest against these institutions was repeated a few days later when, on 1 July, *Ação Cooperativista* announced the establishment of a para-ministry of culture. Faced with insufficient support from the government⁶, the group created a fictional situation in which a ministry of culture opened an emergency funding line for the arts and cultural sector, amounting to 500 million euros. The ironic announcement stated that the para-minister recognised that it was “time to move from fiction to reality, from promises to action” and conceded that the funding was manifestly low in view of the “50 billion euros [earmarked for] Germany”. The almost burlesque situation warned of the risk of jeopardising the stability of cultural activity, thereby reinforcing the State’s responsibility to guarantee the survival of cultural workers and artistic production by opening an emergency support line.

Additionally, the group released a series of videos throughout the year which drew attention to the urgent need for support to the sector. These videos were recorded using mobile phone cameras in domestic settings and contained a series of individual testimonies from various cultural agents. The stiff posture of the workers, the close-ups on their faces and the sombre tones of their voices showed the gravity of the times they were living and their growing exasperation at the lack of answers that would solve their problem in an effective manner.

In short, confronted with the impossibility of using more traditional forms of protest, the need to find alternative strategies and adapt forms of resistance became imperative. The performative nature of both images and words manifested through widespread, regular posts on social media by all the groups created at the time, using figures of speech, hashtags, drawings, home videos and illustrations. These efforts were aimed at amplifying their protests, informing public opinion, and, most importantly, demanding essential support to guarantee the survival of the workers and the sector. It is also worth emphasising that during the lockdown various artistic structures, particularly in the performing arts, tried to adapt by showcasing their work on on-line platforms⁷. This initiative not only sought to address the sector’s economic challenges, but also made a significant contribution to ensuring that the wider society was not completely deprived of access to culture and the arts.

Interactions in the virtual space seek to reproduce those that take place in physical spaces designed for human interaction. However, as Renata Nagamine and Denise Vitale (2020) observed, these virtual spaces

⁶ It is important to emphasise that DGArtes did establish an emergency funding line as early as March 2020. However, the reality was that this line was primarily intended at providing exceptional support to “artistic organisations and artists in the performing arts, visual arts, and cross-disciplinary fields”, thereby excluding thousands of artists and cultural agents who were facing economic hardship. Source: <https://www.dgartes.gov.pt/pt/noticia/3104>. Last accessed: 20/12/23

⁷ An example of this was the series of online exhibitions organised by SOS Arte entitled *No Limits (Sem Limites)*. Each exhibition in this series was personally curated by five curators, showcasing works virtually exhibited by 118 artists. The exhibition can be visited here: <https://sosartepsemilimites.blogspot.com/>. Last accessed: 20/12/23

undergo “processes of remodelling, in which individuals connect with one another through affinities of ideas, agendas or identities, and similar-minded opinions are multiplied. In other words, both bridges and ‘bubbles’ are created” (p. 15).

The increasing use of digital platforms to disseminate public opinion or engage in political debate has triggered a discussion about their end purpose since the 1990s. In 1995, Mitchell held that virtual spaces create “ (...) a new rhythm experience in space which, in turn, is based on an asynchronous state rather than the synchronous social construction of the identified place” (pp. 15-17).

The virtual space, controlled by companies with the power to define algorithms that promote particular visions or ideas, is highly vulnerable to potential political instrumentalisation. Over the years, the internet “has been grossly colonised. It has moved from the free anarchistic vision to the reality of commercial interests, tools and power” (Jorgensen, 2001, p. 14). This trend was exacerbated during the pandemic, with fake news and fictionalised narratives circulating on social media being presented as factual.

Consequently, the superimposition of virtual space onto physical space can jeopardise one of the most important dimensions of public spaces: the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1969). Grounded in collective empowerment, the right to the city hinges on the principles of plurality and intersubjectivity, which are fundamental for political action and can only be fully guaranteed in physical public spaces.

2.3. Subverting restrictions on the use of physical public space

The streets remained empty spaces for struggle and protest until the Workers’ Day, on 1 May 2020. On that particular day, Portugal’s trade union centre, the *Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses – Intersindical Nacional* (CGTP-IN) (General Confederation of Portuguese Workers - National Intertrade Union), organised the country’s first demonstration of the pandemic era. Thousands of workers gathered in the open green space of Alameda D. Afonso Henriques in Lisbon. Their figures, separated by a few metres, marked the inception of a new political performance. While this demonstration stirred controversy within certain social and political circles⁸, it also sparked the emergence of other demonstrations and protests thereafter, adopting a similar spatial organisation. In fact, despite the restrictive measures on the use of physical spaces in Portuguese cities, social protest was not deterred. On the contrary, the limitation of citizens’ right to the city became a major concern along with the increasing poverty, precarious living conditions, and inequality exposed by the present-day reality.

In the cultural sector, the *Vigília Cultura e Artes* (Vigil for Culture and Arts) group was the first to follow suit and take to the streets with a demonstration on 21 May, bringing together professionals from the performing arts. This decision subverted the recommendation to avoid public gatherings under the slogan *#fiqueemcasa* (*#stayathome*). The group mitigated the risk of contagion by making appeals to observe safety rules and maintaining distance between demonstrators. The re-adoption of the same organisation of people in the public space established an aesthetic for the performativity of political protest that was replicated throughout the pandemic by other groups and movements. This aesthetic was characterised by occupying a large area with fewer people, spaced apart from each other, standing still in the same place instead of marching through the symbolic streets of their cities. The media’s portrayal of the event intensified the visual impact of the geometrical placing of the bodies. The images broadcasted did not show the usual gatherings of people, but rather individualised bodies standardised by the use of masks. In the case of the *Vigília* group, these characteristics were accompanied using predominantly black posters which highlighted the slogan of the demonstration itself: *#E se tivéssemos ficado sem cultura?* (*#What if we had ended up without culture?*) (Fig. 4).

Shortly afterwards, on 1 June, workers from the *Fundação de Serralves* and the *Casa da Música* (The House of Music), both located in Porto, also gathered to demonstrate (Fig. 5). The workers’ performance was similar to the previous one, featuring predominantly black clothing and posters with black letters on a white background, containing messages with puns. Examples included *“Precário e bem, há pouco quem”* (“Precariousness and alright, there are few”, *“À volta do Bacoco”* (“Surrounding the fool”) or *“Imagine Serralves com outra Graça”* (“Imagine Serralves with another Grace”), a clear reference to the then Minister of Culture, Graça Fonseca⁹. Around the same time, the *Casa da Música* and the Serralves workers’ collective, in collaboration with Portuguese musicians and visual artists¹⁰, produced a video reiterating the demands of the demonstration. Both visually and performance wise, the video is more complex aesthetically. Phrases and slogans were projected together onto the *Casa da Música* building with individualised images of the faces of the employees who were wearing masks. In the background, poetic protest music could be heard. The video was shot at night, not only allowing the projections to be visible, but also to avoid the scrutiny of the authorities. In addition, it is important to emphasise the effect that the obscure and invisible have in the aesthetic of the video, which refer back to the challenging time these people were facing. This is evidenced by the widespread adoption of black clothing during the demonstrations that took place across the country. Moreover,

⁸ In this regard, for example, the President of the Republic and the leader of one of the country’s largest electoral parties expressed outraged at the CGTP-IN’s decision to proceed with their celebrations in the public space. More information (in Portuguese) is available here: <https://eco.sapo.pt/2020/05/01/festa-do-1o-de-maio-e-uma-pouca-vergonha-diz-rio/>; and here <https://www.dn.pt/poder/marcelo-o-surto-nao-desapareceu-por-milagre-12149630.html>. Last accessed: 20/12/23

⁹ In the Portuguese language, “Graça” can refer to both a person’s name and something funny or amusing.

¹⁰ The video involved special collaborations with André Gil Mata (video), Manuel Cruz (lyrics and music in collaboration with the workers), Miguel Januário (projections) and Sara Yasmin (voice, lyrics and music in collaboration with the workers), and can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/qci6llNyz9U?si=dGpc1vwUc5-HsTdh>. Last accessed: 27/12/23

the video used a travelling movement not only around the *Casa da Música*, but also the surrounding buildings, contrasting with the fixed objects being filmed to depict an empty, lifeless city.



Figure 4. *Vigília Cultura e Artes* demonstration in front of the Portuguese Parliament. Photo courtesy of João Porfírio.



Figure 5. Demonstration organised by the Workers at the *Casa da Música* and the Arts Educators at *Serralves*. Photo courtesy of Jeremy Pernet.

As had been the case on social media over those months, the use of irony and sarcasm was also a recurring feature of the subversive actions of cultural workers occupying the streets. Frequently, strategies employed evoked the events or the discursive mannerisms of politicians combined with theatricality, and the use posters drawing upon the traditional visual, performative and discursive aesthetics of street demonstrations. An example was the “Parados, nunca calados” (Stopped, never silent) demonstrations organised on 4 June by the *Manifesto em Defesa da Cultura* (Manifesto in Defence of Culture) and the *Sindicato dos Trabalhadores de Espectáculos, do Audiovisual e dos Músicos - CENA-STE* (Union for Shows, Audiovisual and Musical Workers). These demonstrations brought together thousands of arts and cultural workers in the cities of Lisbon, Porto and Viana do Castelo. During these demonstrations, the workers staged several theatrical performances, referring to the Ministry of Culture as the General Secretariat for Propaganda, and humorously requesting two euros to create a cash pool to support culture in Portugal. Due to restrictions on gatherings, only the jugglers, tightrope walkers and clowns moved among the demonstrators, who shouted various

slogans while wearing masks and holding handmade placards. This theatricality was thus used to create a festive atmosphere reminiscent of many other actions and movements from the pre-Covid period. These demonstrations were particularly significant because, unlike before, the mobilisation and gathering of large numbers of citizens in the streets to protest was not allowed and could not serve as a criterion for measuring the strength or success of the movements.

A similar example was the “Um Drink pela Cultura” (A Drink for Culture) demonstration in front of the Palácio Nacional da Ajuda (Ajuda National Palace. The house of the Ministry of Culture, located in Lisbon) held on 1 September by the *Convergência pela Cultura* (Rally for Culture) group (Fig. 6). This action was prompted by statements made by the Minister of Culture who, while evading journalists’ questions about the lack of support for workers, proposed that journalists accompany her for a late afternoon drink. This sequel provoked outrage, leading cultural workers to stage a subsequent protest where they held emptying glasses symbolising the government’s lack of concrete responses to the sector’s numerous demands.



Figure 6. Poster publicising the “Um Drink pela Cultura” (A Drink for Culture) demonstration. Courtesy of the *Convergência pela Cultura* group.

Later, in 2021, in another protest organised by the *Vigília Cultura e Artes*, the group used performance and an installation to stage a wake for culture, arts and event professionals. Irony and sarcasm were once again present in this mock funeral ceremony in front of the Portuguese Parliament. The performance consisted of six cultural workers dressed in black carrying a white coffin on which they then laid a wreath. The coffin was left abandoned there for the rest of the day. This performance was replicated in several other Portuguese cities¹¹ symbolically representing all those who had been forced to abandon their profession due to a lack of financial resources.

After a period during which pandemic restrictions had severely limited free movement and the occupation of physical public space, its re-occupation through a collective effort to adapt to the enforced rules proved to be an important civic and democratic exercise. The protests that took place in the public space during this period are evidence of a political debate that persisted even under such unusual conditions.

The articulation of the concepts of the public and the political has been the subject of reflection by various authors, including Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas. Arendt (1958/1998), for example, introduced the concept of *spaces of appearance*, i.e. places of action, meetings and togetherness where the relationship between citizens and power should always be exercised and updated. In its ideal version, a free and equitable community would be established, based on action and discourse. The author also argued that power is provisional and performative, and it depends on those same actions and discourses (p. 200). Similarly, Habermas (1997) considers citizens’ action as a determining aspect, viewing the public sphere as fundamentally a communicational structure of action (v. II, p. 92). This presupposes an essential link between the subject matter, how individuals position themselves in relation to it, and the ensuing human interactions. Reflecting on how public spheres have been integrated in the virtual space - where physical presence is non-existent -, Habermas considers that this leads to a greater level of abstraction of these elements (v. II, p. 93). Thus, materialising the relationship between discursivity, bodies and action is important for guaranteeing the democratic potential of public space. In this context, Judith Butler (2015) proposes the concept of *bodies in alliance*, suggesting that “The “true” space (...) lies “between the people”, which means that as much as any action takes place in a located somewhere, it also establishes a space that belongs properly to alliance itself.” (p. 71). Public spaces therefore have both physical and social dimensions. Limitations imposed on any of these dimensions weaken their subjective and political power. Capitalist social logic further undermines the political and social potential of public spaces by promoting individualism, reducing common spaces (Harvey, 2013), or diminishing conflictual and antagonistic political discourse (Mouffe, 2005).

¹¹ According to the national press, this performance took place in the cities of Odemira, Évora, Faro, Funchal, Angra do Heroísmo, Aveiro, Porto and Ponta Delgada.

However, antagonism (Deutsche, 1996) or agonistic confrontation (Mouffe, 2005) are the very engine of public space's existence. Rosalind Deutsche (1996) emphasises that "Conflict is not something that befalls an originally, or potentially, harmonious urban space. Urban space is the product of conflict." (p. 178). Drawing on the argument of Deutsche, for whom public space is an "invention" of democracy (p. 273), it is possible to say that the "paralysation of city life" (Nagamine and Vitale, 2020, p. 7) did not result in with the disappearance or suspension of democracy. On the contrary, as in other moments of crisis, this was a period of intense social mobilisation prompting discussion, criticism, disagreement and demands for government measures. As shown in the aforementioned examples, cultural workers were aware of the importance of taking to the streets to maintain participatory democracy. Therefore, they developed alternative forms to traditional protest to subvert the restrictions imposed. Moreover, the use of artistic practices proved essential in this process, as cultural workers found the necessary strategies to reconfigure forms of protest and ensure that the streets remained the privileged public space for their political action and resistance.

3. Conclusion

The ability of cultural and art workers in Portugal to mobilise proved essential in maintaining democratic exercise in the country throughout the pandemic, as stipulated by the Portuguese Constitution. For the first time in 50 years of democracy, Portugal underwent the suspension of some fundamental rights, freedoms and guarantees, such as freedom of movement throughout the country and the right to assemble freely in public spaces. These groups of workers adopted a strategy of circumventing these restrictions, seeking alternative methods to voice their demands, protest and showcase their artistic work. In doing so, these groups looked for ways to adapt and subvert what had been legally imposed, while refraining from engaging in any illegal actions. Firstly, digital platforms and social networks became primary tools for organising, discussing and protesting, enabling effective communication and advocacy for their rights. Secondly, many groups continued to maintain a physical presence on the streets, participating in political actions. This symbolic defiance subverted public sentiment, which generally viewed it as risky to take to the streets to demonstrate during the pandemic and adhered closely to official recommendations. Both online and in physical spaces, artistic practices played a prominent role, utilising visual and performative forms distinct from traditional street protests, thus forging a unique aesthetic associated with the challenges of the pandemic era.

During this period, social networks and physical public spaces operated complementarity, yet the street emerged as the quintessential arena for pluralistic and contentious social practices. Here, assembly, confrontation, and discussion – the cornerstones of democracy – found tangible expression. The streets provided a stark contrast to the more abstract and impersonal nature of protests on social media. Occupying physical public spaces infused protests with vitality, endowing them with faces and uniting bodies in action. This visibility drew media attention and facilitated negotiations with stakeholders, including government officials. It also enabled participation in inquiries into cultural institutions accused of misconduct. Through collective organisation and collaboration with other groups, movements, and trade unions, these actions sustained pressure and social friction, fostering a wave of solidarity across civil society that, in several cases, ensured the survival of arts and cultural professionals.

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