

HOW CAN ART CHANGE THE WORLD

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About the XII International Conference of Art for Childhood and Social & Human Development & I SenseSquared Conference— Becoming Through the Senses: Towards Artistic Ways of Being in the World which took place on 26 November 2022 at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

The cognitive paradigm of education is in crisis, agonizing hopelessly. It is time to return to what distinguishes us as humans. We are not just a brain. We have a body. We have hands. We have mothers. And mothers sing. Music and art must urgently return to the education system. This is mainly what was heard on 26 November 2022, at the XII International Meeting Art for Childhood and Social and Human Development, which took place at the Gulbenkian Foundation, for the first time associated with the Erasmus+ project SenseSquared — Towards an artistic attitude in education and society.

It's Saturday morning in Lisbon and, in an auditorium of the Gulbenkian Foundation overlooking the garden, the XII International Meeting Art for Childhood and Social and Human Development and I SenseSquared Conference is about to start. Looking back, twelve years is a short life, the time it takes a human being to acquire an (almost) autonomous self. This 'almost' applies to all ages, and that is the reason why an autonomous event like this one is still on the verge of a first.

In 2010, the Laboratory of Music and Communication in Childhood of CESEM, in the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences of the University of Lisbon, was created, giving place to the International Colloquium Music, Communication and Human Development. Following that significant start, two important projects called Opus Tutti and GermlnArte, of the Companhia de Música Teatral (CMT), were born with the support of Gulbenkian Foundation. 2022 marks the beginning of another partnership, this time with the Erasmus+ project SenseSquared — Towards an artistic attitude in education and society.

At the end, we always come back to the primordial question that drove the previous actions and which still remains more than pertinent: how can a sensorial approach and an artistic attitude contribute to an education towards a more connected and sustainable world? If a simple answer is impossible, this question opens a debate that goes through several countries and societies. Thanks to this new partnership, the XII Meeting could be an encounter between projects coming from very different places, each one in search of understanding how a more 'artistic' education can symbolize the return of education to what is most human. Therefore, the event was built in a joint

curatorial mode between several countries, with the CMT representing Portugal.

Saturday autumnal and sunny morning with the garden right there: Gry Worre Hallberg perhaps hadn't counted on the scenario being so suitable to her proposal of "sensitive learning & Poetic Self". It consisted on a meditation exercise that made the audience - present in the room and more than a hundred via Zoom - close their eyes and let themselves be carried away by Gry's voice. If they opened them, they would see evoking photographs: a pier, a woman in a forest of beech trees, hands on a keyboard guiding other hands, lit candles and aligned beds in an empty dormitory, shadows and a sleeping child on a table full of books and papers. And they would see also, standing in front of them, the founder of the Sisters Academy project and The Sensuous Society: Beyond Economic Rationality, which explores how the qualities of the sensible relate to a more sustainable future. A PhD graduate of the University of Copenhagen, Gry was, in 2021-22, appointed IETM Global Connector.

Now, it's really time to open our eyes.

The human voice

Kirsten Halle is an associate professor at the University of Stavanger in Norway. She was trained as a singer and began working in the Department of Early Childhood Education at that institution. It is no accident: singing and childhood are closely related. "I'm going to talk about the human voice, a phenomenon that has always interested me, and I'm going to start with your human voices", Halle told the audience, proposing a vocal exercise that served as a preamble to a deeper and broader reflection. Because we are all born to sing, to express ourselves and to connect through singing. There is no known culture that has dispensed with lullabies — "the only language babies understand". Before thinking discursively, we think musically.

It seems a solid and, indeed, quite obvious truth. But the current education system has tended to ignore it. "I am concerned about the absence of the musical and singing side in present-day educational practices," she confesses, because it means that children no longer have a voice. In Norway, she recounts, "the government is increasing the number of maths and arithmetic lessons to 1,159". This 'non-pathway' puts the challenges of education at a higher level. "Children are more stressed than before, they drop out of school more than before. We need to rethink an education that increases musical practice to include what makes us human and allows us to be in connection with the world."

Homo sapiens survived thanks to "the ability to synchronise two melodies, the creative capacity for expression through the arts". And this aesthetic

dimension that has allowed us to subsist and evolve as a species is precisely what is missing in all sectors of education. If cognitive skills are important, are they the "most important" thing? Kirsten Halle's answer is that since children play spontaneously through musical expression, this musicality cannot be diminished and should be encouraged. "We need teachers with musical skills, but above all who know what they are for and why they are relevant," she explains. In essence, why do we sing? In a first approach, we sing to promote well-being, to be heard and express ourselves, to create a sense of belonging, to train social and emotional skills ("music is an empathic activity, a way of synchronisation with others"), to enhance all levels of learning. But there is more. We sing because we have been endowed with a very complex system of auditory skills, to the point that a baby differentiates and prefers its mother's voice to any other. We sing because singing is a powerful "mental laboratory" that promotes neuroplasticity. Kirsten shows the image of a breastfeeding mother with her eyes fixed on a mobile phone. "We have become experts at communicating through technology. We communicate more than ever before. But what is the quality of that communication? My idea is that we have also become supercompetent at disconnecting."

Who can deny it?

Towards an ethnography of bodies

We are programmed to define learning as a purely cognitive and demonstrative process. It turns out that it is not. Who says so is a doctor who practised the profession and who, one day, decided to understand medical practice from other perspectives. The Australian Anna Harris then graduated in anthropology, specialising in ethnography, and currently works with a team of anthropologists and historians at Maastricht University, developing the project Making Clinical Sense, funded by the European Research Council. "Anthropology is a knowledge built by direct contact with communities, participation and observation. And communities are not simply an object of study," says the researcher.

She wanted to understand what goes on during learning: how the way it happens conditions what is learnt. Learning, says Anna, is a physical activity that takes place in a certain context and using a certain type of instruments. "It was necessary to attend to the sensory details of the different environments we were studying; to do a sensory and conscious ethnography. Medicine has a very specific materiality, you learn from your own body."

As part of the Making Clinical Sense project, it was possible to verify, first of all, that doctors are increasingly surrounded by technology. Then, the narratives of the places where medicine is taught — in this case, photographs

of several different spaces, in Africa and Europe — helped us to understand what material elements each pedagogical approach is made up of.

It also became clear that improvisation and imagination are a daily part of teaching, even in a field of great exactitude where this is barely assumed. An empty latex glove and another one filled with water can be used to exemplify what an amniotic sac is.

The sac we are born from.

The art of tuning the world

And then the screen shows: "Tuning birds and flowers #2022." Composer Paulo Maria Rodrigues, founding member of the Companhia de Música Teatral and professor at Aveiro University, is already at the microphone to explain how to tune birds and flowers. The idea, he says, is to review the most important achievements of the CMT this year, always guided by the basic principles that have oriented its activity for almost a quarter of a century. Considering "artistic projects as multidisciplinary laboratories", those are also "contexts for observing and studying human communication", as well as tools that aimed to contribute to human development.

All the CMT's work is constituted as an artistic-educational constellation, in which from a single idea other ideas are born associated with other projects — which can either take the form of a conference, a show, a performance, a training session or an installation. Basically, it is about "fine-tuning people's relationships with themselves, with others and with the environment", says Paulo. So, it is not surprising that, in Famalicão, "Metamorphosis" appeared as an installation in a park from a dead tree transformed into a musical instrument, which passers-by could try out. Or that "Inner Gardens" has become the name given to an immersive training course, a week of intense work that ends with the creation of an original piece.

According to the same model, the piece "Noah" seeks to address the problems of the environment and the planet through artistic expression. And here it is man who creates the flood, rather than God. "Murmurarium", a metaphor for birds and the murmuring they generate, consists of an installation linked to an original performance, carried out in Aveiro and the Azores. Birds are also the main topic of "Mil Pássaros", an exhibition and a film by Luís Margalhau that took place at Estufa Fria, in October 2021, in Lisbon. This event took advantage of the Orizuros — origami birds made of paper — that resulted from an extensive workshop with schools. "We tried to think how a world could be like where birds were wishes and we could live together", clarifies Paulo Maria Rodrigues. The "Orizuro Garden" initiative, for children and elderly people, is another ring of the same constellation.

Composer Paulo Maria Rodrigues also talked about the Deep Listening/Deep Sea(ing) project, done in collaboration with marine biologists. "It is considered 'deep' what is more than 300 metres, and this encompasses most of the ocean, which can be 10,000 metres deep. This universe and these sounds are unknown to most of humanity. We run the risk of destroying it without really knowing it." In this project, the data provided by the biologists were used by children and teenagers to create possible sound universes, "marrying" science with art and giving rise to workshops in which children record their own compositions. These material is used to soundtrack films, with the aim of "creating a sound map". An Imaginary Sound Cartography — or what we imagine sound to be at an extreme depth.

Speaking of water, the show "Aguário" is dedicated to it, as well as the "water workshops", a proposal of one-week residence with school classes. And speaking of earth, its complementary opposite, in 2022 appeared "The Song of the Earth", strongly inspired by Gustav Mahler, in which a new version of the beginning of the world is told: the story and the music of the earth before the arrival of humans, who have definitively changed it. "It's been a fertile year", concludes Paulo.

Then he addressed the box he placed outside, at the entrance of the Auditorium, inviting each participant to insert a piece of paper with questions, suggestions or sentences. What is it for?

To make an opera about what happened here.

A house in transfiguration

Casa de Marres is one of six Dutch public cultural institutions for experimentation in visual arts. Located in Maastricht, it changes its features every three months to adapt to the proposals of the different artists invited. Each one takes over the space, transforming it, intervening on it like as it was a blank canvas. For the last five years, Ilse van Lieshout has been the head of the educational department of this centre, while also being part of the research programme of Maastricht University dedicated to higher learning based on the senses.

"We have to move towards body-level knowledge, because knowing is not a process that goes only through the head," she says, underlining that "the artistic attitude is a basic attitude that has to be present in the educational system". Now, this artistic way of thinking and acting, which is equivalent to being present in the world with the body, seems to be outside education. The system is "heading for disaster".

It is a fact that the first image a child draws is a huge head with legs. Later, she will be able to draw the entire body, giving the head its real dimension. "If they don't do it by the age of seven," Ilse emphasises, "something is going on at an emotional level." And this happening is increasingly common. In Marres, several projects have tried to address this issue: resizing cognitive knowledge so that the emotional side takes place. For example, the 'Invisible Collection' was about asking someone to describe a work of art with words, while the interlocutors were asked to imagine it and represent it only using a small cardboard box with a bean inside. Ilse required the audience to do the same, and the results could not have been more diverse.

In 2019, the Eye-I project, which took place over six Saturdays of intense collaboration between 25 young people from different countries, started from a question: what our identity is in total freedom, that is, what lies behind our eyes? And what this freedom means for us to become what we want to be?

And how do we know who we are and what we want?

Travellers of the senses

Hans Van Regenmortel was the last lecturer of this meeting. As soon as he arrived at the microphone, he immediately made it clear that he was going to undertake a "small journey between five landscapes". Artistic coordinator of the Musica Impulse Center, in Belgium, this violin and creative music teacher began by asking what it means to think: "Thinking is a mixture of memories, emotions, experiences and misunderstandings", he said. Basically, it is a nomadic exercise deeply rooted in the human spirit that urgently needs to be revived, "for the good of education". If we close our eyes and imagine a world formed only by signs, what would it be like? What smells, what sounds would it have? One thing is certain: it would be a totally predictable world, devoid of expectations or compulsions or changes. A world in which the senses would not be needed at all. "Nor would we be able to be there, because our mere presence would disturb it."

Having senses makes all the difference in terms of perceiving and shaping reality. Thanks to them, we are capable of giving and receiving. One of the great paradoxes of human existence is that we are different precisely because we are similar, variations of the same theme - different in the sharing of the same nature. The 20th century, Hans explains, "focused on a 'zoom in'", a vision of details, losing the ability to see the landscape as a whole. And this is the main reason for the crisis in education. It becomes necessary to reverse this movement, making a 'zoom out' that recovers that broader look and can question whether what we saw before still makes sense. Roberto Llinas said: "The brain evolved because creatures needed to move." And 'emotion'

etymologically comes from 'ex movere', that is, "a steady state of the mind that is disturbed", or that which pushes the body into action.

At the beginning, the understanding of the world does not involve rational thought. Therefore, this cannot be the basis of education. "Having a brain serves only to activate movement", explains Hans Van Regenmortel, "which means that thinking is making an abstraction of movement". Intelligence — from the Latin 'inter legere' — means 'to choose between', to make the right choices. Now, have we been letting the children make their own choices? If art is a space of freedom, what is education without art? Is it even possible?

The case of babies can be enlightening, because for a long time it was thought that they have no conscience. In fact, their smallness goes back to *homo habilis*, the hominid that lived in the lower Pleistocene at least a million years ago. In this species, babies were born with their heads larger and larger than their mother's pelvis, and this led to them coming into the world increasingly premature. But being so small doesn't take away their humanity, it makes it more basic, more elemental, more devoid of concepts. Music is a way for adults to refer to that basic communication that takes place at the beginning of human life and defines it, and nourishes it. Musicality is not a faculty, but a behaviour.

Music is primal communication.

From speech to paper, from paper to opera

The end of the XII Meeting (and I SenseSquared Conference) had the visit of Dr. Fortuna, who came straight from his creative and robotic atelier, flanked by his two assistants, without even removing his much worn white coat. He appeared with a 'cyberboard', a musical instrument of his exclusive authorship, made with an ironing board and the iron itself. Once the new invention was presented, the famous, unique, inimitable diva La Pavone came on stage and, accompanied by the cyberboard, lent her soprano voice to the questions and phrases asked by the audience.

Of course, La Pavone did not always like what she read, found it boring and crumpled up the paper or was moved to tears that prevented her from singing. She formulated in impeccable English the questions that were addressed to the foreign participants.

As she left the scene, Helena Rodrigues, from CMT, host of the event, announced that the next one would take place one year from now, on November 25, 2023, and recalled these verses by Rui Belo:

Birds are born on the tips of trees
The trees I see yield birds instead of fruit
Birds are the liveliest fruit of trees
Birds begin where trees end
Birds make the trees sing
On reaching the height of birds the trees swell and stir
passing from the vegetable to the animal kingdom
Like birds their leaves alight on the ground
when autumn quietly falls over the fields
I feel like saying that birds emanate from the trees
but I'll leave that manner of speaking to the novelist
it's complicated and doesn't work in poetry
it still hasn't been isolated from philosophy
I love trees especially those that yield birds
Who hangs them there on the branches?
Whose hand is it whose myriad hand?
I pass by and my heart's not the same.
(Translation: Richard Zenith, 1997)

See you later.