

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
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José Reis

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Ana Cordeiro Santos, António Sousa Ribeiro, Carlos Fortuna, João Rodrigues,
José Castro Caldas, José Reis, Pedro Hespanha, Vítor Neves

Linguistic Revision

João Paulo Moreira

Editorial Assistant

Rita Kacia Oliveira

Design and Pagination

André Queda

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ARTS

Giuseppina Raggi

Understanding creativity and artistic output as “gratuitous”, an activity engaged in for its own sake, is the leitmotiv of artists’ lives. When they introduce themselves (“I’m a musician”, “I’m a ballet dancer”, “I’m a director”), the most spontaneous question that follows from their interlocutor is: “Yes, but what do you do?” I refer, of course, to the high number of artists who conduct their activities without ever becoming stars.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has evidenced even more the fragility of those working in the artistic sector and the difficulty the political class has understanding the importance of artists as workers and agents playing a crucial role in society. During the first weeks of the pandemic, “art” and “culture” were forgotten words.

Faced with this situation, creative self-production on social platforms as a personal initiative has highlighted the vitality of the arts, but at the same time it has conveyed the idea of it being inconsequential, that is, a reality removed from the problems of “workers”. As the lockdown dragged on, the sector’s economic and social fragility ended in collapse, demonstrating the complexity of the instability that artists have to deal with, even in non-pandemic times.

More than a month after the crisis began, meetings between trade unions and the government were still inconclusive, in a situation of extreme labour emergency for artists. The availability of digital platforms to enable artistic production and the hiring of artists was one of the answers, without, however, going to the heart of the problem.

After their initial use of social networks as stages for continuing their own creative activities, artists – mainly those involved in the field of performing arts – chose silence and the white screen, radically changing their message: the arts are not “free” leisure, nor can artists be excluded from the dignity accorded to “other workers”. Thus, the manifesto “Unidos pelo Presente e Futuro da Cultura em Portugal” (United for the Present and Future of Culture in Portugal) was born, as well as the Culture and Art Vigil which took place on May 21, 2020.

The solidarity among artists that emerged from this pandemic time also demonstrated the strength and value of joint initiatives and the cohesion among arts professionals, but most of all it highlighted the lack of government attention and of a structural solution.

Given the sense of freedom that drives artistic creation, the pandemic shows that, in addition to the need to improve social and labour support structures for artists, the post-pandemic times could be an occasion to radically review the way society looks at the arts.

Thus, policies and action plans need to be implemented, aimed at shifting our understanding of the arts from the field of leisure to that of “structural creativity”, because – and this is not to deny their role as entertainment – the arts represent much more than complementary events of social life. On the contrary, they are (or should be) one of the main pillars of contemporary societies.

It is therefore necessary to sharply focus on the political vision and the national educational system, recognising that the arts play a central role in weighing, framing and overcoming the social, historical and political challenges laid bare by the pandemic, as shown by the global Black Lives Matter movement.

If the arts and culture are the first fields to disappear in emergency situations, the post-pandemic represents an improbable but unmissable opportunity to implement a new political vision for these sectors, because to care for, preserve and defend creativity (whatever the situation and whatever the cost) means to defend the plurality and democracy of Portuguese, European and world society.