

Introduction

APECV is a non-governmental organization from Portugal, which has been working for more than 30 years in educational projects through the arts in a formal, non-formal and informal context.

In 2019, it became a partner of the international project AMASS, funded by the European Union research and innovation programme Horizon 2020 (agreement n° 870621), coordinated by the University of Lapland (Finland) and partnering with Karlova University (Czech Republic), University of Malta, Hogskolan i Boras University (Sweden), Corvinus Egyetem University (Hungary), PACO Design (Italy) and Leeds University (England). This project seeks to investigate the role of the arts in society's challenges, especially in places located on the margins. It aims to promote and investigate transformative actions from the arts with minority or disadvantaged groups from marginalized places in Europe.

In this article, and within the scope of the aforementioned project (AMASS), we will report on its pilot project, between June and December 2020 in Portugal (the year when the pandemic spread around the world). An experiment developed with a population from the margins of society (with the partnership of the ASSOL – an organization in which people with multiple disabilities participate). We worked with a population that is especially fragile in the context experienced, using Artist techniques, Participatory Design, Relational Aesthetics, Transformative Learning and Gentle Teaching.

The experiment started with the following problems:

How do you develop a collaborative project, with a community on the margins of society, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, in Portugal?

Why should you develop a collaborative project...?

What causes (political, social, cultural, etc.) in this context make such interventions necessary?

And what assumptions are you making about the possibilities of such interventions?

To try to answer these questions, we followed a phased pilot construction methodology, which we set out as a narrative in this article:

1. Understanding the context;
2. Community identification;
3. Preparation of work with the community;
4. Development of work with the community;
5. Reflections on the study.

We will start with a short description of the Portuguese context during the pandemic, the weaknesses of society and the reference to the most marginalized groups in the context experienced, the problems developed in mental health and the compulsory social isolation.

Next, we will present the population, a community of adult people with multiple disabilities, users of the non-governmental organization ASSOL dedicated to experimental methods of treatment based on Gentle Teaching.

We will also discuss the methodology of the study presented: the idea and preparations for collective work, the gift “Isolate with Love” and the affective exchange contract, the importance of symbolic objects, the importance of love, the collaborative education and Gentle Teaching based on affective relationships.

We will also present the work methodology and the participatory ideals, in which all participants collaborate in the plan and development of the “Learning Spaces” project. Here, we present the developed path, with the activities carried out and the evolution of the work until the devolution to the community (with the exhibition and sale of the Kit “Isolate with Love”).

In the last section, “Impact and New Paths”, we present some reflections on the work developed: expected impact, weaknesses of the study and objectives achieved.

1. Context: Covid-19 pandemic in Portugal and in the world

In the first quarter of 2020, Europe began to feel, with the appearance of the first cases, the Covid-19 pandemic, and Portugal detected the first case in March 2020¹.

¹ At the beginning of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) (www.who.int/eportuguese/publications/pt/), reports that the confirmed infected of Covid-19 already they had exceeded 200,000 cases worldwide. On May 6, 2021, the same organization reveals that 154 815 600 people have already been infected and 3,236,104 died by Covid-19, worldwide www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

In March 2020, little was known about the virus, which forced communities into total social isolation, and for several weeks, unjustified circulation and the opening of public spaces (such as shopping centres, museums, galleries, associations, administrative spaces, government buildings, schools, universities). This pandemic, which we still face in 2021, with successive lockdowns, has radically altered social structures, especially personal relationships and economic and social development. This made social, economic or individual gaps even more visible in Portugal, as follows:

- On a social level, the pandemic exposed more marginalized populations, further away from the majority of the population (Costa in Carmo et al., 2020). Despite the use of digital platforms to bring people together, share culture, education and training or medical and / or psychological support, the limited technological, social, educational and economic capacities of these minority populations increased the barriers, making evident the importance of working with these populations and the need to reformulate the practices used so far.
- At the economic level, given the temporary or total closure of many companies, the number of unemployed people has increased (Carmo et al., 2020), with an impact on various economic strata of society, but with greater predominance in the most fragile populations.
- At the individual level, there is a need to maintain and take care of mental health, given that social isolation and distance are problems that increase psychological and physical problems. At this level, it should be noted that the whole context of the pandemic (ignorance of the disease, fear, uncertainties, social pressures ...) increases distrust in others, lowers self-esteem and the importance of life itself, distances culture, art and education. This can lead to the development or potentiation of psychoses, hallucinations, various sufferings and depression. This reveals the enormous impact of the pandemic on the present and future of mental health in Portugal and in the world.

According to the World Health Organization (2004), mental health is:

“a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community ”. (WHO, 2001, as cited in WHO, 2004)

Changes also felt by other researchers, who initiate a reflection and forecast of needs for the post-Covid-19 future, such as Lawrence Gostin refers:

“The world is experiencing a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, causing untold human suffering and death, unraveling of social relationships, and robbing individuals of livelihoods and countries of prosperity. The coronavirus pandemic has strained health systems, revealed inequalities, and upended international institutions. Here are 7 critical lessons:

1. Build Resilient Health Systems;
2. Leadership and Public Trust Are the Single Greatest Indicator of Success;
3. Defend the Integrity of Science and Public Health Agencies;
4. Invest in Biomedical Research and Development;
5. Focus on Equity: The Prevailing Narrative of This Age;
6. Adopt Evidence-Based Laws: Safeguard the Rule of Law;
7. Fund and Support Robust Global Institutions: We Are in This Together.” (Gostin, 2020)



2. Population: Working with people on the margins (NGO: ASSOL)

ASSOL (Lafões Social Solidarity Association), a non-governmental organization in the center of Portugal, was founded in 1987. ASSOL was created as an instrument to facilitate the community’s response to the needs of adult people with multiple disabilities without specialized assistance.

The Association’s mission is to contribute to the social inclusion of people with disabilities or mental illnesses that generate disability, residing in the region of Lafões (interior-centre of Portugal).

Support for each person is decided jointly with them and should be enough so that they can be independent in the community where they live, which will help the person to become more autonomous and less dependent on institutional support. The specialists who work at the institution provide support and help the person to go through his/her plan, without deciding for him. This support is established according to the dreams and needs of each person and always negotiated with him / her and / or with the people who can represent him / her and negotiated annually. This negotiation results in the definition of the objectives to be achieved, the necessary support and the responsibilities that the person assumes to achieve them.

These contracts are discussed and evaluated together and also signed by all parties who assume responsibilities therein, with a detailed description of the activities negotiated.

The methodology that guides this process is Person-Centered Planning, according to which the important thing is to help the person to create a vision of the desired future and to support the path towards its realization. Also in this organization the following method is used:

- Gentle Teaching², which is based on human rights, the right to equality, non-violence and social justice; in the affective accompaniment of each person so that they feel safe, loved, needed in the community and able to love.

All of these methodologies reinforce the power and capacity of each person to enter the community, with their differences and difficulties, increasing their quality of life, taking into account eight criteria, described in the “Gentle Teaching” Movement principles and adapted by the organization ASSOL (assol.pt):

- Body Integrity - having health, being well dressed, fed and cared for;
- Feeling safe - Enjoying being with others, not being afraid of those you live with and living relaxed in interaction with others;

² Gentle Teaching is about unconditional love. It recognizes that many people are burdened with memories of distrust and fear and that their hearts are broken. It focuses on teaching them a sense of companionship. Through this process, violent behaviors begin to disappear and new ones emerge.” McGee, John J. In <https://gentleteaching.com>, access may 2021

- Feeling valued - Seeing yourself as good, being recognized as a good person, feeling proud, and being able to express your talents;
- Having a structured life - Feeling like you have a life plan, having daily routines and having your own rituals and beliefs;
- A sense of belonging - Having a circle of close friends, valuing and being valued by others and feeling companionship;
- Social participation - Being able to have contact with the community, to be among other people and to take part in the life of the community;
- Significant daily activities - Enjoy your daily activities and do activities that fit your life plan;
- Inner contentment - Feel inner harmony and feel free from traumatic experiences.

This non-governmental organization has been a partner of APECV for several years, which facilitated the work carried out during this experiment, where affection, respect and trust were essential for the continuation and legitimacy of the work (necessary factors for the development with a population of this type, always with time and dedication).

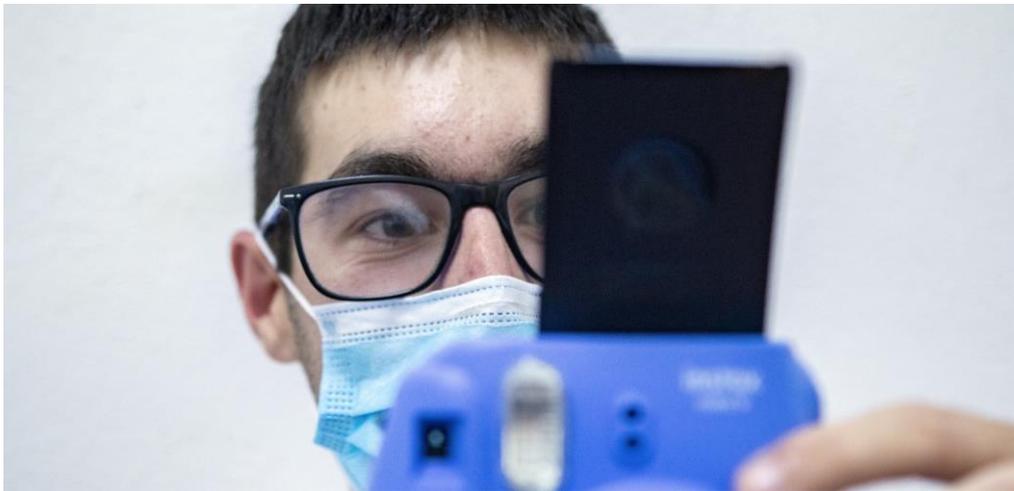


3. Methodology: relationships, metaphor, collective participation, time, activism ...

“The most beautiful and true thing is the hearts that pass through other hearts and leave in those hearts the optical instrument that allows you to see and contemplate more hearts” (Barata, 2012)

Any methodology to be used at the community level must take into account the different factors that make up the work, mainly: the context (social, political and economic), the population (with attention to each individual), the objectives, the time available for implementation and return (giving back and sharing the results/process with the surrounding community). In this case, after analyzing all the factors, the APECV artists/activists decided to prepare the work and presentation based on the motto “Isolar com Amor”.

“Isolate with Love” is a manifesto of action for the present times, in which mandatory isolation can be seen as a proof of Love towards others, even those we do not know. We try here, by using a metaphor, to bring the most beautiful side of the pandemic to everyone’s work and thinking table.



At this point, we are already working with the concepts inherent in contemporary art, in which relational aesthetics, as a proposal to inhabit and build a common world (Bourriaud, 2009), is visible in all thoughts of the work. Becoming, in the first instance, a gift of presentation, donation, work proposal and invitation, according to the concept of Derrida:

“Derrida was interested in the gift as a philosophical question, in the very concept of ‘gift’. That interest took him to the foundations of what constituted a free, pure gift and its aporia or impasse: the gift disappears at the very moment it is acknowledged as such, since any account, any recognition, any hint of the necessity to return a gift, turns it into a debt.” (Derrida in Sansi, 2015, p. 108)

... “The “pure” gift is not an impossibility and an aporia, but a radical gesture of subversion. (Sansi, 2015, p. 110).

We seek to transmit messages and change habits through gestures that approach activism, bringing it to the work room, where artistic actions are used to draw attention. (Mourão, 2014)

Associating all these contemporary practices to the contributions of artistic making:

- Arts engagement contributions to mitigate the effects of adverse environments;
- Enables self-expression and empowers;
- Helps managing chronic stress;
- Helps to surpass social isolation;
- Contributes to self-understanding and reflection about life;
- Improves empathy and openness to the diversity and human experience.

Contributions that benefit the wellbeing, as the scheme refers (The Mental Health Foundation present five ways to wellbeing³):



After explaining the concept “Isolate with Love” and delivering the “Gift”, the collaborative work started with time for conversations and for the knowledge of all participants, using PhotoVoice. This became the starting point for the actions that were developed (proposals and accepted in groups) and which we describe in the following point.

³ font: <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/five-ways-to-wellbeing>





4. Process: Route of creations until arriving at Kit “Isolate with Love”⁴

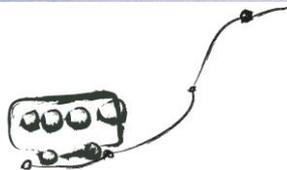
The Pilot Project was developed between June 2020 - December 2020 and was implemented gradually, according to the wishes of the participants in 5 steps.

Step 1: We share ideas at ASSOL, in Oliveira de Frades Pedagogies of emancipation through the arts: Learning from the ‘Other’

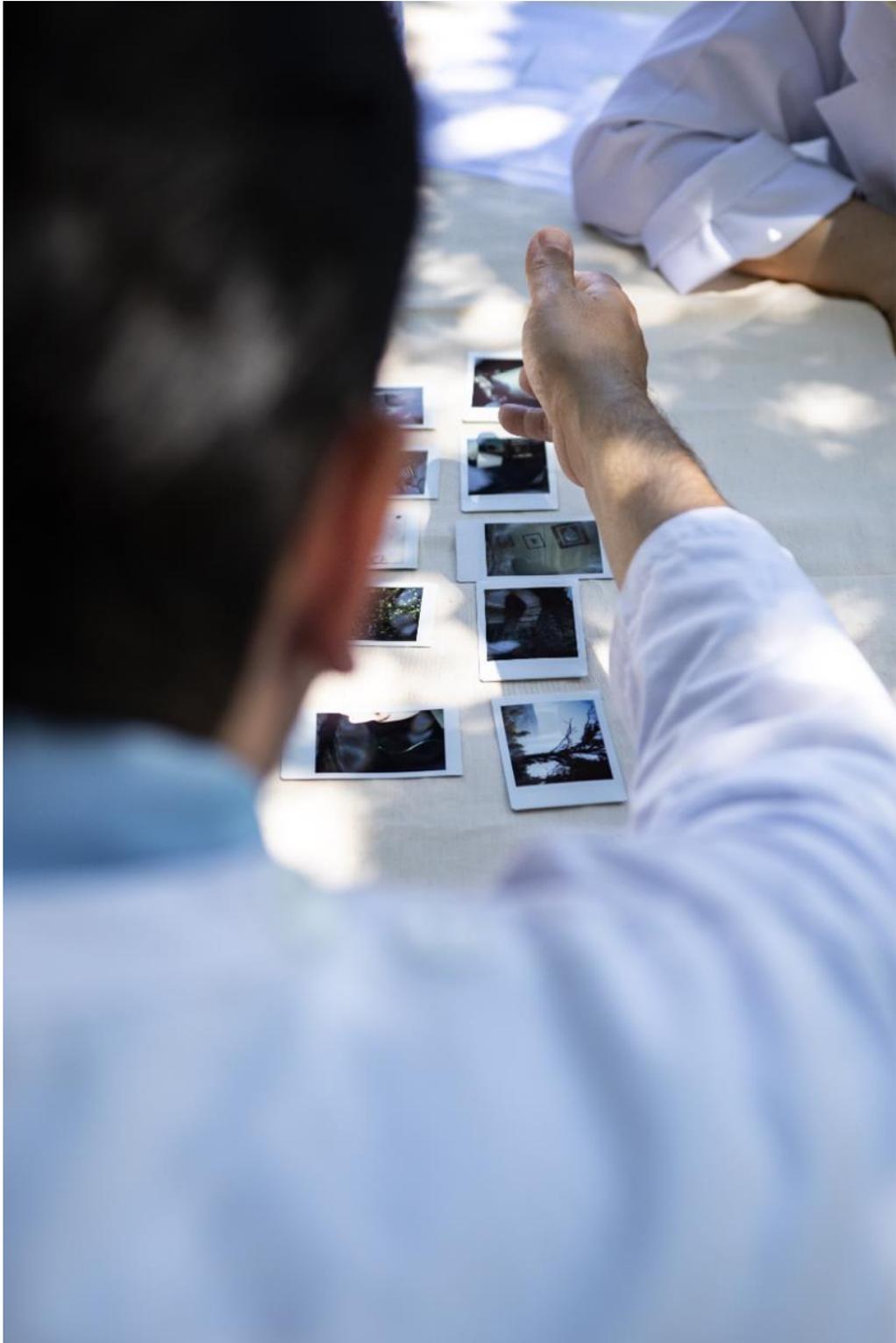
In June 2020, we went to a first meeting to explain the idea.

ASSOL agreed to do one more experiment with us. We proposed to start by discovering our places of learning - a way for us to build, in a group, a sharing of the important places in the individual history, to facilitate group dynamics, sharing and future perspectives - and we left a polaroid camera for each of us or each group to take photographs of these places. At the end of the month we came back, for a conversation about the places of learning from the photos. We learned that in the rawness of light and shadow are unstable places of relationship; learned in the family, on television, on the internet school; at work, on the road, in the village; in the river; with the people; with Raquel, with Pancho. We talked about what we could do next, what we would like to learn and how we could learn from the arts.

⁴ 06 Process described in <https://www.apecv.pt/pt-pt/amass>



Our way of learning is a collaborative process, capable of creating new relationships and new ways of understanding the world. In this way, we learn deeply about pedagogy from the participants of the projects we coordinate. Learning spaces are learning encounters, and the learning process requires an affective relationship with space and people. Our methods, inspired by Paulo Freire's ideas about popular education, reside in relationships structured in humility; trust and love. We learned from the pedagogy of interdependence how to apply companionship and respect for others in collaborative artistic projects (McGee, 2019).



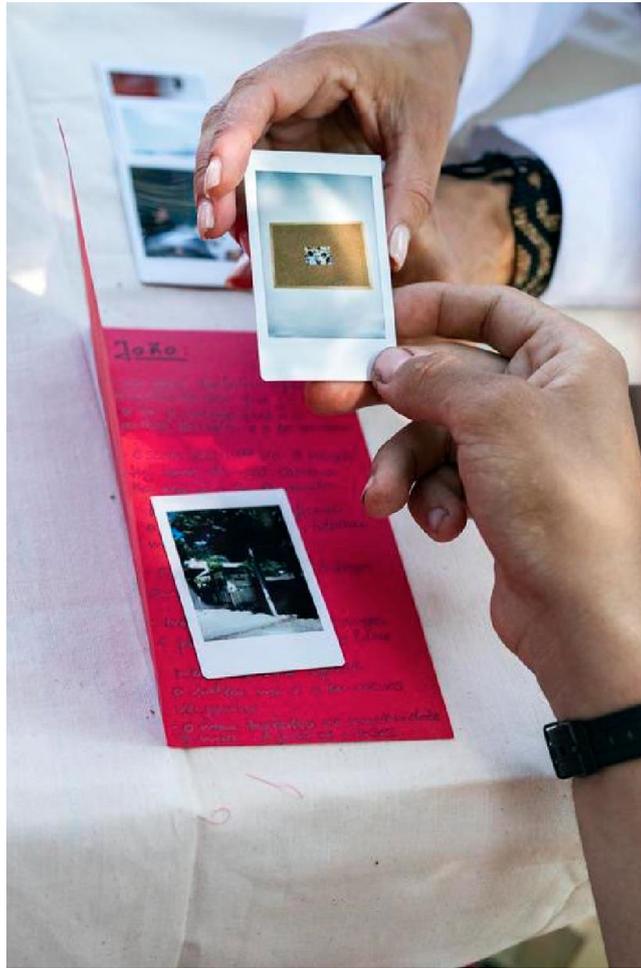


This is a quote from one of the participants of the AMASS project, made during the second session (photovoice):

“What cannot be defined turns out to be a mystery. Cruelty is in the image, in the light and in the shadow, that indefinite feeling. I call this art, the way we use it to explain, to demonstrate our feelings.”
JC, one of the study participants

Step 2: At ASSOL we talked about the photos and planned future actions.

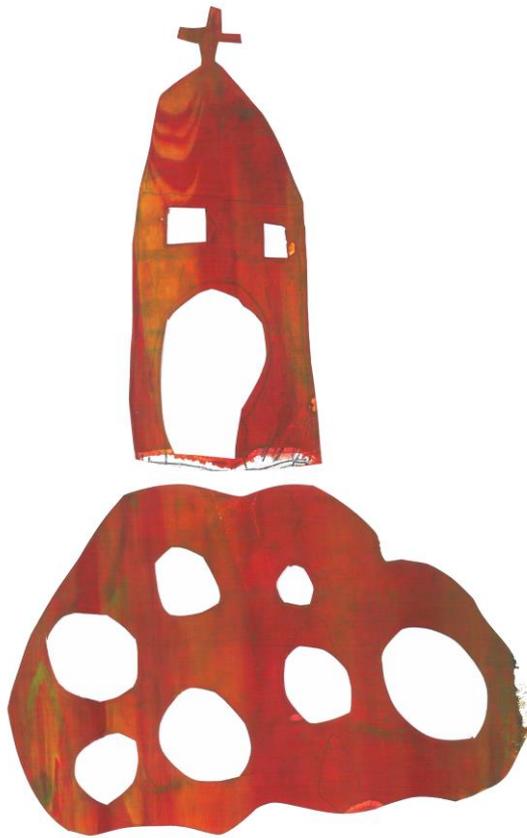




We discover the legends of the lands of Lafões

Step 3: We told stories from here and beyond by the river
We designed at ASSOL.





Step 4: We print the legends of our land (Serigraphy)

The legends are brought by ASSOL users, we talk about them, we draw, we create purchases with old and current places and we create new stories and imaginaries with the drawn images.

With the images we produce a bag full of important things.

For three months we built a Product-Manifesto “Isolate with Love” that aims to react to the fragility of our times. A Product-Manifesto filled with symbolism, with the stories of Oliveira de Frades told by ASSOL people that we can symbolically transport with us:





- the drawings, starting from the legends of the places, to add to the images of our shared memories.
- the lace, in the form of a mandala - made by the participants - invoking timeless dreams, to help us keep what is most dear to us.





All the pieces were made with attention, affection, patience, rigour and time that an object made individually and by hand takes. We want to take care of others, dress affections and spread hope (APECV, 2020).

The realization tasks were divided by all participants. some made the drawings, others the binding of the notebooks with the legends, others the lace... each one produced what was easiest for him.

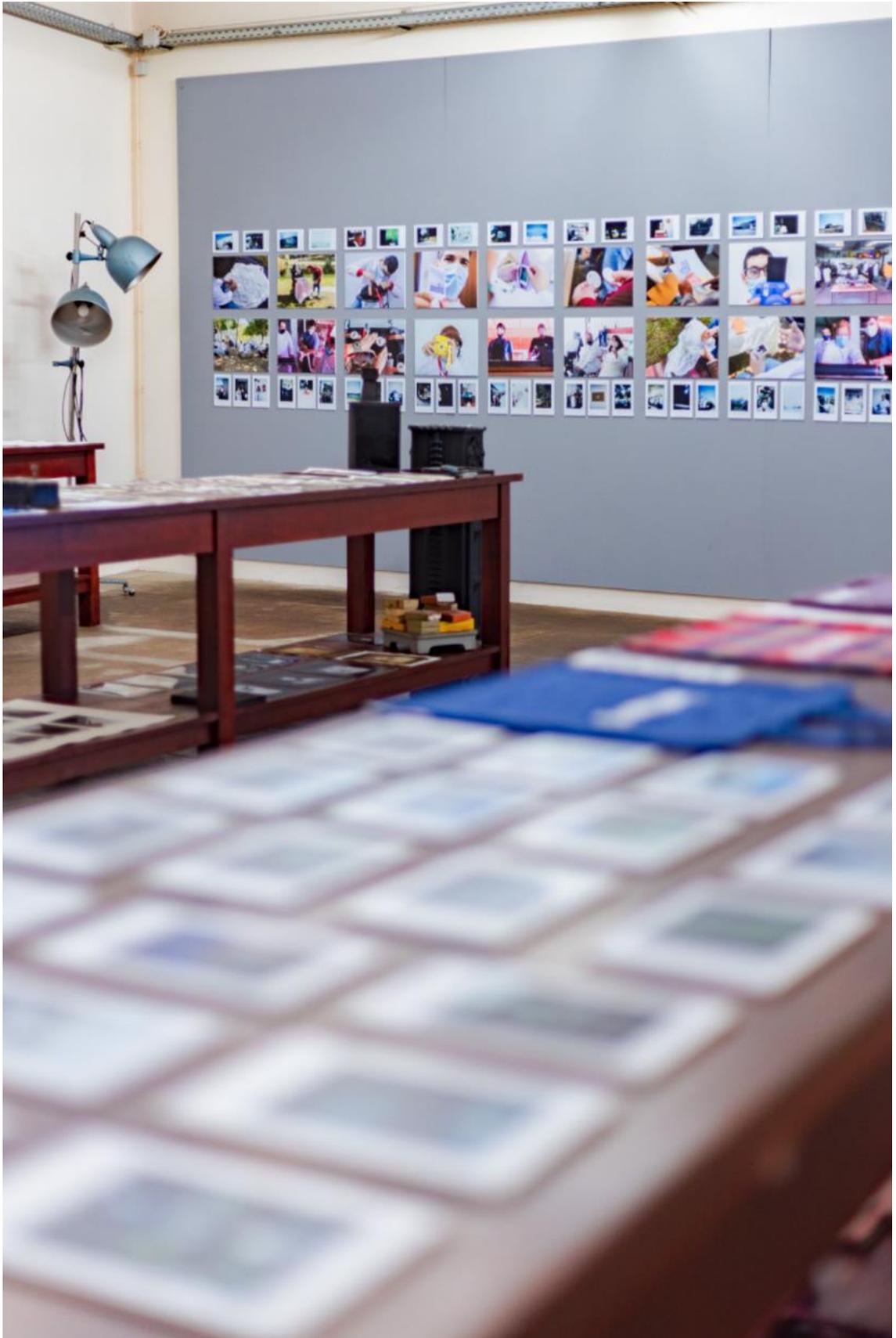


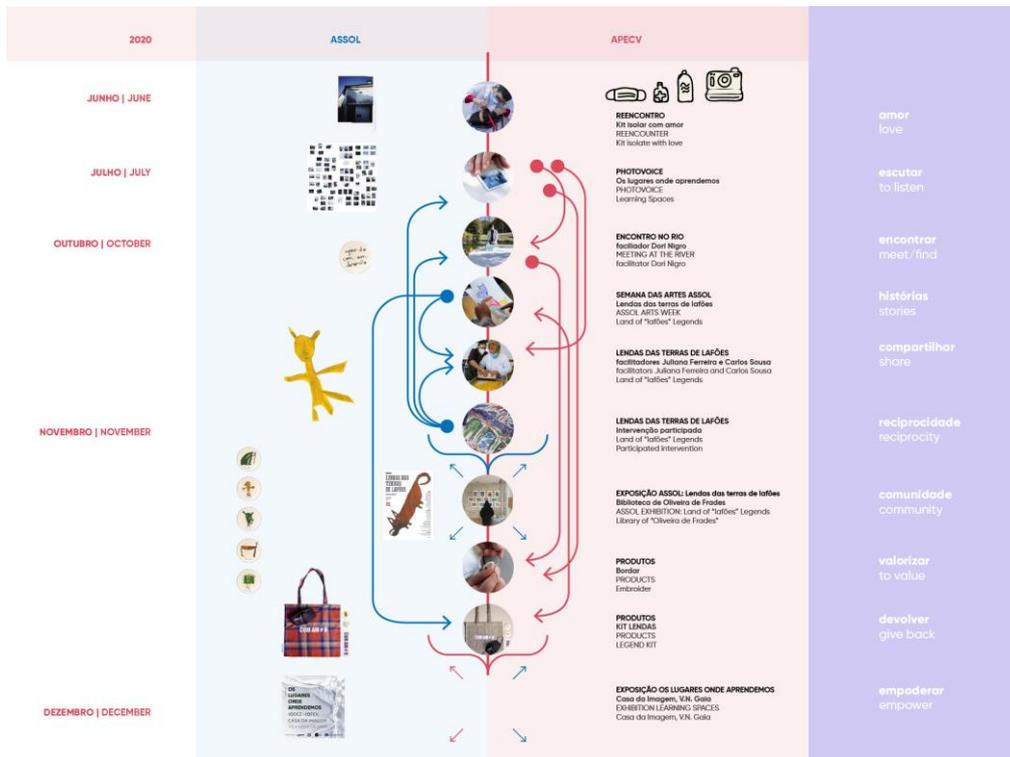
Step 5: We shared our trip at Casa da Imagem in Vila Nova de Gaia with the participants (through video and photography)

This exhibition is based on a collaborative and continuous work, through artistic processes, between members of APECV - Association of Teachers of Expression and Visual Communication and members of ASSOL - Association of Social Solidarity of Lafões - which supports adults with disabilities. (APECV, 2020)

We set out on other discoveries...

This year we will resume work, centered on what we can do and learn to sell and show to others.





a luz transmite
 beleza mas
 também, al-
 gum ruído

the light transmits beauty but also some noise

5. Impact and New Paths

At the end of this pilot project, we have found that the artistic based methodologies used in the experiment “Isolate with Love” can be useful to increase degrees of internal equilibrium, taking into account the evolving concept of mental Health (World Health Organization, 2004):

“A dynamic state of internal equilibrium, which enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with universal values of society. Basic cognitive and social skills; ability to recognize, express and modulate one’s own emotions, as well as empathize with others; flexibility and ability to cope with adverse life events and function in social roles; and harmonious relationship between body and mind represent important components of mental health, which. Contribute, to varying degrees, to state of internal equilibrium.”

We understand that the relationship created and the path developed, allowed us to understand its importance for the community, namely:

- Enabling participation;
- Empowering community gathering;
- Expressions of one’s potential and fosters autonomy;
- Providing social and learning space for dialogue;
- Breaking the social isolation;
- Develop know how closer to the labour market;

In terms of Impact, the experiment enabled not only the visibility of the AMASS project but also the visibility of the capacities of the people involved in the study. The surrounding community had the opportunity with the exhibition and kit selling to get to know the marginalized community participating in the study and to value their work;

One positive aspect of the study was linked to the importance of involving participants in each stage of the experience’s design and planning, not using directive tools. The used methods increased a sense of belonging and sharing. As a conclusion we can say:

- It is important that all participants have a voice in the construction and evaluation of the project;

- The importance of not doing charity, but enhancing the value of the work developed;
- It is everyone's responsibility to publicize the work in a way that dignifies and values the people involved;
- The importance of taking care and asking to take care;
- Research studies must contribute to strengthening a sense of belonging and caring of all participants.

There were also many weaknesses in this study, such as:

- The unexpected social isolations (lockdowns), mandatory of the pandemic, forcing a constant adjustment of the work agenda;
- The necessary social withdrawal, which did not allow touch and greater intimacy between participants;
- At the final public exhibition, due to the pandemic, the exhibition audience numbers were fewer than expected, and it was difficult for participants to visit in the planned timetable, (they only were able to visit the exhibition in April 2022, 4 months after the experiment).

In conclusion, we emphasize that the Covid-19 pandemic situation made the problems of society more visible and moved marginalized communities even further away from the majority populations, therefore we should address:

- Strengthening relations between local entities for joint work;
- Discussing publicly (cultural / artistic agents, associations, minority populations, educators ...) the problems we experience so that all citizens can be heard on an equal basis;
- Building practices that generate intimacy and social relationships;
- Not standardizing aesthetics;
- Developing artistic actions of visibility and social claim.

This study has been approved by APECV's ethics committee (<https://www.apecv.pt/en/node/819>)

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OS LUGARES ONDE APRENDEMOS

