Fostering the common: Transformative socio-cultural innovation through co-creativity among citizens

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ABSTRACT: The research core is related to a set of participatory art and design projects developed with different disenfranchised communities in Portugal and abroad. The objective of the practice in question is to engage citizens in co-creative situations focusing on their skills and ambitions, heritage, tradition, local habits, and plurality, which is implemented through different coalitions with other creative agents, public institutions, the charitable sector, among others as appropriate.

Some key concepts are presented in order to go deeper in the understanding of this hybrid practice systematization: (1) the importance of human and other than human systems interconnectedness for the rehabilitation of our planet as a whole; (2) the notion of a panarchy connecting local to global entities, from the molecular to the planetary, as a relevant logic to understand the transformations that occur at the individual level in the social body, along with the various socio-ecological systems; (3) and the idea of a mechanism to boost the level of creativity in a social group that works through a reinforcing feedback loop.

The essay concludes that participatory art and small-scale design projects involving citizens in transformative socio-cultural innovation can effectively affect larger systems through a more or less gradual transformation.

Keywords: Participation, Social innovation, Systems thinking

1 ACTIONS AND EMOTIONS FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN AND OTHER THAN HUMAN SYSTEMS

It is practically undeniable that human beings' interactions, among themselves and other living beings and the environment, are at the origin of the deterioration process that compromises the sustainable evolution of Planet Earth. The exponential action and influence that the human being exerts on other systems are marked by a patriarchal logic that has characterized Western culture. This is a set of "actions and emotions" (Escobar 2018, 13), clearly anthropocentric, led by competitive spirit, hierarchical organization, a sense of power and domination of different forms of capital, based on the idea of a social, cultural, economic and political system that controls and imposes itself on all other systems.

According to Escobar (2018), this evolutionary model that characterizes most contemporary societies is related to the increase of agro-pastoral societies, preventing a more sustainable development from prevailing. A patriarchal culture instituted, with reason and economics as main values, to the detriment of emotion, one of the pillars of human existence.

However, despite this negative transformation, "actions and emotions" coexist that contradict this dominant logic – such as healthy parenting or emotional relationships in a more private context, as well as manifestations of participatory democracy in a more social sphere (Escobar 2018, 13). The interconnectedness between various human and non-human systems, and the coexistence of different cultures and worldviews, are crucial aspects for rehabilitating civilization and the planet as a whole.

A very significant understanding of humanity's relationship with other natures is the "human-soil" connection, which Puig de la Bellacasa (2019) explores to enhance "new ecological cultures of care for the non-human world." This is a paradigmatic example of the link between systems since the soil is a medium that connects different forms of life that depend on it for their subsistence. The concept of

soil is understood in this context as an entity for which it is fundamental to have affection, for it is an important substance to our existence as living, animate organisms.

Soil is a biodiverse system characterized by the constant creation of communities of complex organisms, such as bacteria, fungi, protozoa, or nematodes, of which we still know only a tiny part. The profusion of living things in the subterranean world is greater than above ground level, which clearly demonstrates the natural wealth that we generally despise, but which we should care for through an ecological involvement and a notion of "interspecies community justice" (Bellacasa 2019, 7).

Regarding the "human-soil" concept and the idea of soil as a unifying and basic element of humanity, Puig de la Bellacasa (2019) argues that this is also a way of caring for and rehabilitating human beings, namely through a "more than human ethico-political vision of our entangled interdependence." The "actions and emotions" in caring for other systems on which we depend for subsistence are ways for humans to manage their sustainability as a species as well as to de-center the whole logic of Anthropocene evolution.

This paper explores the relationship between different systems on which the maintenance of human life quality depends. It is important to understand how the various complexities work to understand better how each one operates and develops in a balanced and consistent way. In turn, this holistic and sensitive vision to all forms of involvement with a given human or other-than-human activity informs a set of participatory art and design actions that have been developed with different communities in Portugal and the US, which will be addressed throughout the text.

2 LOCAL AND GLOBAL COMMUNITIES IN A PANARCHY OF SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS

In the broadest sense, nature involving physical phenomena, living beings, and the production resulting from human activity has a standard feature that determines the sustainability of the synergy among these elements. This joint action, called panarchy, is based on the notion of scale-linking, which connects the molecular and the planetary and the local and the global through adaptive cycles that occur simultaneously (Wahl 2016).Panarchy is a concept that dates back to the 16th century, having been introduced by the philosopher Frane Petric, also known by the name Franciscus Patricius, who was born in Dalmatia (now Croatia) and died in Rome. Petric's treatise, entitled "Nova de universis philosophia" (1591 - 1st version and 1593 - 2nd version), presents a worldview where

the universe, nature, and knowledge are understood as a whole (Bellis 2009).

Later, in 1860, the scientist and intellectual Paul Emile de Puydt adapted the concept of panarchy, giving it a more specific meaning, particularly as an argument to defend his research in the social, political, and economic field. Many others have been interested in the concept of panarchy, including John Zube. In the late twentieth century (1986), he defines panarchy as a possibility of governance that envisions the coexistence of different, autonomous, non-territorial communities, both locally and globally (Bellis 2009).

Gian Piero de Bellis (2009) argues that panarchy is a method for solving social problems, a way of life that praises individual initiative, and a practice of social interaction. It is a way of being that is simultaneously personalist, voluntarist, and universalist. Personalist, because it aims to replace the logic of mass politics that has always fostered confrontation between opposing ideologies and social groups - such as social classes, political parties, and nation-states - and always sought to subjugate and manipulate the individual will. The personalist perspective of panarchy, on the contrary, values the respect for individual opinion and the person autonomy when the generated effect affects only him or her.

The voluntarist perspective is verified by the opposition to all forms of monopolization and the fierce defense of the individual will with respect to belonging or not to a certain community or social group. This does not mean that panarchy does not value the existence of groups and communities, but that these have, as its norm, personal determination. With the obvious exception of family, whose formation has a natural origin, no other set of people should be created with their forced integration (Bellis 2009).

The universalistic panarchy is related to its adaptive logic, which applies to all human beings and social situations. Guderson and Holling (2001) state that panarchy represents the holistic and structural character present in nature and the systematization and interaction between various spatial scales.

From the systems theory perspective, the panarchy approach is defined by "interlinked adaptive cycles occurring at multiple temporal and spatial scales simultaneously." These dynamics demonstrate the reciprocal action between change and persistence in socio-ecological systems and linkages at different scales.

3 PARTICIPATORY ART AND DESIGN AS SMALL-SCALE DYNAMICS FOR INNOVATION

The concept of panarchy and the notion of simultaneity of interconnected adaptive cycles contribute to

a clearer perception of the scale connection logic that characterizes natural processes, particularly regarding the limitations of foresight and mastery, which humans experience as participants in various systems in which they are included. It is important to emphasize that the larger the system, the more difficult it is to control since the complexity increases exponentially, and countless unexpected factors can occur (Wahl 2016).

Another relevant aspect is that cycles with a smaller scale have a more accentuated dynamic and are more prone to innovation when compared to larger-scale cycles, which tend to accomplish the action that results from a good performance, namely regarding the maintenance of a context that favors survival. Thus, we may conclude that panarchy, in the broadest sense, is both conservative and innovative (Resilience Alliance n.d.).

Regarding the participatory art and design practice with citizens in vulnerable social, cultural, economic, and political situations, it is a small-scale dynamic that seeks to reverse the conservatism of the larger-scale system, which is characterized by slow and stabilizing development, namely of the state over the various social and cultural organizations, which in turn constitute smaller systems. Participatory art and design interventions seek to influence the socio-cultural structure and thereby promote innovation towards the sustainability of society.

Despite the spread of neoliberal logic in various spheres, namely in economics and politics, but also human thinking and behavior, transformative social innovation processes occur in the opposite direction. These modes of action stem from creative initiatives from citizens, which are characterized by being both individual and social, driving the creation or rehabilitation of links between people and between them and the places they live in, promoting the development of new communities. In this sense, through participatory art and design, social innovation is a small-scale system, causing a ripple effect expected to occur in other larger-scale systems, as is the case of social and cultural public policies that characterize democratic societies. Manzini (2019) defines social innovation as a process and, simultaneously, a consequence, focused on the "socio-technical system" transformation, seeking solutions to real problems, and fostering the common good.

Wahl (2016) states that smaller, and therefore faster, systems can affect larger systems, either through a chain reaction or through a "(r)evolutionary transformative" development. When developed in the local sphere, the latter possibility, and then expanded to regional and global levels, demonstrates the interplay between fast, small-scale actions, such as the projects we develop, and slow actions that seek to maintain stability down to the last redoubt. Thus, panarchy sustains that it is at the local level

that social innovation, particularly through increased creativity and artistic experimentation, is most feasible to occur. This may be the basis for a regenerative culture, which can promote sustainable development through a bottom-up approach, supported by collaboration among citizens who voluntarily participate in innovative initiatives, knowing in advance that they are also participating in the transformation of society at a broader scale level.

Manzini (2019) describes these communities as intentional, through which it is possible for people to communicate and maintain a close relationship regardless of the space and time that separates them. Moreover, there is a profusion of intentional communities to which it is possible to belong simultaneously, flexibly, and with different degrees of involvement. As a consequence of this transformation of a community's way of being, citizens who join these social structures do not do so to acquire or add something to their identity, but as a platform to develop, through participatory processes, a perspective and a way of being. In this way, intentional communities are also spaces of opportunity that systematize various possibilities for innovation and experiment with solutions to identified problems. These contemporary communities are defined by the quality and consistency of the established interactions among their members and by the existing capacity to implement actions and test solutions for their benefit and the context in which they are inserted.

4 IMPROVING THE RESILIENCE OF DISENFRANCHISED COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE ENHANCEMENT OF THEIR SOCIO-CULTURAL CAPITAL

Human beings are a fundamental part of the natural world, depending on the sustainability of various ecosystems for their survival. Socio-cultural systems are a significant part of society's balance, as are political and economic systems, among other instances of the panarchy surrounding us. In this context, it is important to create micro and macro strategies that minimize the negative impact of humans on the various systems. Humanity needs to develop the ability to plan for the future, through sustainable development, in the various hierarchies where nature manifests itself. For the connection between ordered systems to occur without entropy, it is relevant that their functioning is resilient and that this is a structuring quality. When enhanced, resilience allows a given system to be tolerant to disturbances and thus to be able to resist without deteriorating.

The concept of resilience is used to understand the interaction between socio-ecological systems better. It is essential to understand and manage the various transformation processes from this

perspective, especially when they occur unexpectedly. This interdisciplinary subject gravitates around the principle of sustainable development, according to which ecological and social systems constitute a cohesive whole characterized by various forms of interaction and feedback. Evolutionary logic is an intrinsic feature of socio-ecological systems, with possible change or disturbance representing an opportunity to improve, reorganize, or renew (Biggs et al., 2015).

In certain socio-cultural contexts, vulnerable citizens remain in situations marked by an unsustainable trajectory, which in turn affects other areas of society, at the local and regional level, and so on. The social and economic intervention of states is important to solve some pressing problems. However, it is not enough because vulnerabilities remain, but usually latent fragilities are accentuated in the short and medium term. The resilience approach argues that incremental transformation, as is the case with most policy interventions in this area, is not a sufficiently effective solution to systemic problems, as incremental adaptation occurs that does not reduce the negative effect as expected. For a more resilient attitude towards this kind of adversity, it is important to deepen the holistic understanding of complex adaptive systems so that substantive transformations occur at the individual level, over the social body, and that these have repercussions in diverse socio-ecological systems.

Donella Meadows (2009) argues that a system is not just a collection of processes, emphasizing their interconnection and organization to achieve a predetermined purpose. The system's structure is what defines its behavior and determines the consequent manifestation through various events over time.

There are other possibilities to enhance community capital, such as the reduction of natural capital consumption (e.g., preserving natural resources, implementing ecological consumption and production habits), the improvement of material capital (improving community services - education, health, public transportation, etc.), the solidification of economic capital (more innovative, efficient, and equitable commerce and industry), and the increase of human capital (social cohesion through health, education, family, work, etc.). We highlight the proliferation of social capital - promoting the existence of government institutions and public and private participatory entities that involve citizens, as well as the strengthening of cultural capital - valuing the various artistic practices, heritage, tradition, local habits, and characteristics, and plurality (Roseland 2005).

In disadvantaged places where participatory art and design interventions have promoted the inclusion of the most vulnerable population clusters, the capital in question is socio-cultural in nature. This is a dynamic resource that citizens use for their own benefit after contact with existing social and cultural structures. In a broader sense, this more abstract form of capital is characterized by elements of the social system that interfere with interactions between human beings, influencing the capacity to produce and use resources (Baker 1990, Schiff 1992).

5 FEEDBACK LOOPS FOR THE EMANCIPATION OF VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Regarding the rhythm and dynamics of a system, Meadows (2009) states that capital changes determine these factors. In the case of the disadvantaged areas where participatory art and design projects were developed, we consider that their social and economic development can benefit through greater cultural development. A community or social group that develops various skills and stimulates creativity benefits directly from the knowledge acquired. The cultural capital acquired influences other forms of capital in the short or medium term.

The oscillations of a system's capital or the ability to keep it constant, regardless of inflows and outflows, are associated with its own mechanism that works through a feedback loop, which allows the capital of a given system to remain level. This process starts by monitoring existing capital and consequent action to correct capital inflows and outflows (Meadows 2009).

The participatory art and design practice that we have been experimenting with is based on collaboration between artists, designers, institutions, and citizens to develop participatory projects that are somehow innovative in socio-cultural terms. In this sense, one of the central elements is the exploration of an empathic approach with the coalition partners, based on the ability to establish dialogue, listen and exchange ideas for a better understanding of differences and existing diversity, recognizing them as strengths that enhance the overall community quality of life. In parallel, another systematic method is creating a dialogical and co-creative involvement aimed at bringing together the participants, their respective cultures, and different generations and income levels to promote community relations and the development of synergies for common goals.

It is a system that aims to develop social and cultural capital, in the first place, followed by an expected improvement of other forms of capital, such as economic and human capital. In Meadows' (2009) view, this is a process of amplification and reinforcement, which is also exponential and reproductive. Social engagement projects with the groups in question promote the growth of creativity within the individual and the community, contributing to the regulation of their cultural capital.

Since 2007, we have been developing several participatory art and design projects through different means of representation, relying on the collaboration of fishing, rural and urban communities in Portugal (Figure 1). In 2019, we developed a project with Hispanic and Central African immigrant communities in the city of Cedar Rapids (USA) (Figure 2), keeping with the same kind of collaborative work previously developed with African immigrants living in disenfranchised neighborhoods in the outskirts of Lisbon (Figure 3).

Figure 1. *Creative Practices Around the Production of Cork*, 2014-2015, Évora, Portugal.

Figure 2. *Shifting Ground*, 2019, Cedar Rapids, USA.

A common characteristic to all the developed projects is the fact that they start with workshops about a certain artistic practice, as well as a cultural theme related to the participants' knowledge, or something they are interested in exploring, evolving later to the creation of meaningful reproductions, namely photographs and videos of the social involvement initiatives. This image of communities marked by vulnerable social, cultural, economic, and political situations constitutes a photographic testimony through which the viewer metaphorically participates in the project. Observing these societal reproductions requires a critical perspective of the socio-cultural context in question, shaping a political attitude towards public life (Azoulay 2015).

Within systems theory, this logic of society's sustainable development called reinforcing feedback loop seeks to increase the flow of capital into the system beyond the existing one, enabling exponential growth (Meadows 2009). This is the intended effect of the series of participatory art and design actions we have developed in collaboration with artists, designers, professionals from social institutions, and citizens going through a vulnerable period due to the unfavorable conditions they are subject to in society. This is a mechanism that stimulates the resilience of a given social group regarding creativity capital. Taking into account that the creativity existing in the individual or the community may be little active, the participation in initiatives for the benefit of the context itself, and the respective reproduction through a type of societal image works as a reinforcing feedback loop, whose objective is to rehabilitate the system as a whole, namely the set of cultural, social, environmental and economic phenomena that are subject to disturbances.

Figure 3. *More South*, 2017-2018, Sintra, Portugal.

A relevant aspect of a system, such as those we seek to implement, is its potential to reproduce and self-organize, namely by demonstrating the system's capacity to assimilate information and transform and complexify its processes with an evolutionary perspective. In the scope of the participatory projects in question, these factors are present in the eventual emancipation that the citizens involved may demonstrate in their journey and the promotion of creativity of the socio-cultural fabric in a broader sense.

6 CONCLUSION

This paper seeks to contextualize the participatory art and design practice that we have been developing by implementing co-creative projects for the social innovation of communities with different characteristics but with the common factor of having certain social, cultural, and economic vulnerabilities. It is a systematic social problem that governmental bodies try to solve, together with social solidarity institutions, but without

the desired effect. A considerable part of the issues these institutions propose to solve find more or less effective solutions, but no real transformation towards a more sustainable and holistic evolution certainly occurs.

At the root of the issue is the patriarchal logic that characterizes Western culture and prevents the development of a social, cultural, economic, and political system that respects difference without seeking to control and impose itself on other systems. In this perspective, we bring to the reflection some concepts that contribute to a broader view of the problem, such as the notion of the interconnection of various human and non-human systems and the idea of panarchy, as a method to overcome social adversities and a way of life that praises both individual initiative and social interaction. The practice of participatory art and design resulting from these issues is based on developing "actions and emotions" that aim to counteract this dominant logic, contributing to the rooting of a more democratic and participatory society.

It is an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary project approach in the field of art and design, whose smaller scale is relevant to reverse the conservative attitude of the larger-scale system. This type of smaller system is more agile and effective in affecting the larger system through a more or less gradual transformation. The practice is a transformative social innovation process with repercussions in social and cultural public policies that characterize democratic societies. We think it is fundamental to implement modes of action that result from creative initiatives in collaboration with citizens, which boost the creation or rehabilitation of ties between people and their places.

These socio-artistic activities aim to achieve concrete results in the community environment and promote a more resilient attitude so that substantial transformations occur at the individual level in the social body. These have repercussions in various socio-ecological systems. In particular, the main objective is to stimulate the creativity of vulnerable citizens and disenfranchised communities so that all directly benefit from the knowledge acquired and enhance their cultural capital.

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