DIGITÁLIAS: A WOMEN ART COLLECTIVE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST GENDER VIOLENCE THROUGH CO-CREATIVE NET ART

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we present and discuss the ongoing co-creative net art and transmedia labs with *Digitálias*, a female collective in the fight against gender violence. Since 2018, we have been organising art labs with the *Associação Ser Mulher* (ASM), based in Évora, aimed at female victims of intimate partner violence living in a Shelter House, as well as ASM technicians. The labs are part of an exploratory research whose main aim is to analyse how the community artistic practice of net art can play a social role as a tool for empowerment, self-esteem, and identity, using an arts-based action research methodology through the creation, production, and dissemination of practical artistic projects (project-based research), and using women from shelters who are victims of domestic violence as a case study.

Keywords: Net art; Participatory art; Domestic violence; Intersectionality; Empowerment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence against women is a reality in Portugal, with a truly shocking number of femicides in recent years. According to the Murdered Women's Observatory of the UMAR - União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta (Alternative and Response Women's Union), in 2022 there were a total of 22 femicides in intimate and family relationships in Portugal (UMAR, 2022). These abusive acts mostly take place in the private sphere, and are mainly carried out by partners and ex-partners and are based on gender inequality and stereotypes.

The Internet emerged in the mid-1990s, and since the last decade it has been a means of mass communication, presenting enormous potential that has since been exploited by artists, we believe that the Internet is an ideal space for the creation and dissemination of projects with women from shelters, the case study of this research.

We also highlight the importance of the Internet for women in today society, as advocated by the United Nations/Women:

> Whether through websites, social networks, instant messaging or email, it has opened up avenues for online activism, community building, career and learning opportunities, greater awareness and involvement around women's rights issues, and has enabled women to set up businesses, political campaigns and much more. (UN Women, 2019)

Since 2018, we have been organising co-creative transmedia and net art workshops with ASM, aimed at women victims of intimate partner violence living in a Shelter House, as well as ASM technicians. As far as the history of shelters is concerned, they were set up in the 1970s in the UK, USA, Germany, Austria, Norway, and Finland (Women's Shelter, 2023), to provide an urgent response to the high-risk situations in which women who were victims of domestic violence found themselves, guaranteeing their safety, empowering them in terms of their psychological well-being and helping them to rebuild a life project. In Portugal, only the First National Plan against Domestic Violence in 1999 (DR, Lei n. º 107/99) led to the creation of a public network of shelters, which had been idealised since the mid-1990s.

As part of this research, between 2021 and 2022, over the course of several months, digital art training was provided to women from the shelter and ASM technicians, accredited by the University of Évora, as part of co-creative laboratories. As its director, Ana Beatriz Cardoso, puts it, these labs resulted in:

> (...) many rounds of conversation, sharing, laughter, photographs, videos, various experiments, drawings, texts, and the production of the works that are now on display. International Women's Day, 25 April, 25 November, important dates to remember the inequalities and multiple discrimination that still exist, the sexism in force and

the violence exerted on women and girls, in their marks and scars, were inspiring motifs. From this creative journey and communion, *Digitálias* emerged as a collective of women, digital artists, survivors, activists for women's human rights and committed to peace! We are *Digitálias* women in a creative movement who (re)build, empower and seek to be the measure of their lives and future! Thank you to all the artists who walk with us! Thank you to everyone who walks this path with us and with whom we see possibilities and opportunities. (Cardoso, 2022)

The idea of creating an artistic collective of women arose from the need to not be able to identify the authors of the works for security reasons and, in addition, from the collective characteristics of the work itself, carried out in co-creation. Thus, this project is heir to the artists of the 1970s, who wanted to maximise their experiences for the benefit of the flourishing of a collective consciousness in the feminist groups to which they belonged and, although their work started from the personal and individual realm, they wanted to represent the group, the collective. Since then, collectives such as *The Feminist Art Workers* (1976, USA), *The Waitresses* (1978, USA), *Guerrilla Girls* (USA, 1986), and nowadays *Mujeres Creando* (1990, Bolivia), *Mujeres Publicas* (Argentina, 2003) and *Las Tesis* (Chile, 2019) stand out, among many others.

The artistic research presented here is the result of fieldwork carried out during the co-creative net art laboratories with victims of violence by their husbands, partners, or boyfriends. In methodological terms, this fieldwork was conceived from a qualitative perspective, through artistic practices aimed at a community.

2. THE EXCLUSION OF THE NEOLIBERAL WESTERN ART WORLD OF THE COLLECTIVE, THE POPULAR AND THE ARTISANAL

Today there is still an epistemic aesthetic rejection in the art world of any artistic production that is not led by people who were not trained in the Eurocentric and sexist academies of fine arts, in other words, any artistic production that does not bear the stamp of Western curatorship and academia is devalued. For this reason, the values and methodologies developed in the collective laboratories of this research oppose this epistemological fraud, which often allows the Western art world, through an aesthetic based on neoliberal values, to exclude collective artistic initiatives or those of a popular and artisanal nature from the field of art. Regarding the present time, Paul Preciado argues that:

We are living in a counter-revolutionary moment. We are immersed in a heteropatriarchal, colonial and neo-nationalist reform that aims to undo the achievements of the long processes of labour, sexual and anti-colonial emancipation of recent centuries. As Félix Guattari announced in 1978, breathing has become as difficult as conspiring. If behind the glitter of the silver of Potosí was hidden the

exterminating labour of the colonial mine in the 16th century, behind the glitter of the canvases today are hidden the most extreme forms of neo-colonial, technological and subjective domination. The dark age of the pixel could even be the last, if we don't manage to invent new forms of balance between the worlds of carbon and silicon, and new modes of dialogue between the subjective, machinic, organic, immaterial and mineral entities of the planet.
(Preciado, 2018, p. 5)

Since the 1970s, many feminist theorists as Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock, have deeply criticised the traditional philosophy of art, arguing that the very concept of art used by philosophers was based on paradigms that excluded women. In the 18th century, the various forms of art were unified in what was known as the "fine arts", based on ideas of beauty, aesthetics, and imitation, which excluded practical crafts, based on a "tekhnē" and previously categorised as belonging to the same category as poetry and painting. Insofar as a large part of the creative work carried out by women was conceived in a domestic context, since they were denied throughout history the means and economic and social contexts necessary to carry out their creative work, in particular, as well as public visibility and learning the canons in force in the academic context, this 18th century categorisation of art rejected women's creative work as art, thus omitting many women from the history of art (Furtado, 2014).

It should also be noted that the current paradigm of "art for art's sake", which categorises art in terms of intrinsic properties disconnected from the other dimensions of life and its social context, has led many feminist artists and thinkers to advocate that: i, the social context in which art was produced was essential to understanding and evaluating it; ii, it was important to take into account perspectives of gender, class, race, among others; iii, the viewer is not a generic and ideal viewer, and therefore differently situated people experience art differently, and finally; iv, that artistic objects are in effect about some subject, expressing a meaning and point of view about something, on the part of those who created them. Continuing along these lines, it was pointed out that the Western aesthetic of art itself was conceived by specific individuals belonging to a certain race, social class and gender, i.e., mostly by white, heterosexual, upper-class men. As a result, collectives, handicrafts, and popular culture do not rise to the realm of "art", a sphere that is highly hierarchical and colonised by the neoliberal gaze, which turns art into merchandise and cultural capital (Furtado, 2014, p. 340).

It should also be noted that, during our research, we considered it important for this excluded knowledge to enter the academies themselves, not just through theory, but also through practice, and for this reason *Digitálias* carried out co-creative collaborations within the academy, in particular with class students of the MA course in Artistic Practices in Visual Arts of the School of Arts of the University of Évora.

3.EMERGENCE OF ART COLLECTIVES BASED ON NETWORKS AND CO-OPERATION

The associative form in contemporary societies is often the result of the neoliberal system's aggressions and disempowerment of people. Collectives often arise from the need to bring together the action of a group with a certain objective, but also from the pleasure of doing it together. The creative actions of collectives shake up the system, even if they do so in a fragile, timid, and punctual way, working against the individualistic logics of globalised neoliberalism. They encourage socialising with the Other, who is different from us, and stimulate the desire to participate, listen, speak and be a Subject. Collective artistic activities are experienced and shared in a communal way, based on a flexible, non-hierarchical horizontal structure that rejects the traditional roles of knowledge-holding teacher versus teaching-receiving student.

The new emerging artistic collectives, based on networks and co-operation circuits, are not governed by a mercantile logic, and are constituted as projects that draw on various multidisciplinary perspectives and often seek to reflect on contemporary aesthetic-political problems. The *Digitálias* collective does not have a fixed line-up in terms of participants, but rather a central nucleus, made up of the author and the ASM Technicians, around which different participants gather, according to each one's ability to attend the workshops on a given date.

The name *Digitálias*, inspired by the word "digital", comes from the idea of using multimedia computer technology to empower girls and women in the community, in this specific case women who are victims of intimate partner violence. Training and skills in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) seek to reverse the downward trend in their participation in digital society, and their consequent impoverishment and subalternisation.

We also believe that the artistic practices developed within the scope of the co-creative laboratories of the *Digitálias* collective can be considered activist, in that they defend a cause, specifically the fight against violence against women and gender equality, seeking social transformation anchored in the emancipation of women, and in ethical and aesthetic points of view and attitudes allied to intersectional feminist movements challenging neoliberal policies that take away women's rights. With regard to the *Digitálias* artistic collective, it should also be pointed out that it is currently not easy for this type of collective to be accepted by the art world if it wants to align itself with the premises of artistic value defined by art history and the art market, such as the notions of authorship, quality, originality and style, which are still very present in the European artistic context. For this reason, we are aware of the difficulties of acceptance and validation by the art world of what we call participatory art, regarding issues associated with the aesthetic experience and authorship of this type of art.

In addition to this difficulty in getting collectively authored artworks and participatory art accepted by the art world, the *Digitálias* collective is

made up mostly of women whose invisibility and subalternisation in the art world is historical. It should also be noted that most of the participants come from disadvantaged social classes, some of whom are immigrants and have "non-white skin colour", which makes them an easy target for racist behaviour in Portuguese society, and most have never had contact with fine art practices. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the traditional canons of art that exclude participatory art are legitimised above all in art academies but are also available to a wider public in exhibitions, galleries, museums, publications of art histories and artists' monographs, and are sold at prices accessible to the public in general.

Regarding the acceptance of participatory art practices, methodologies and aesthetic criteria by the Western art world, Tom Finkelpearl states that:

> Agreeing on the possibilities of participation as art is one thing. Agreeing on aesthetic criteria, however, remains particularly difficult in the light of the diversity of practices and the fact that the aesthetic, ethical, and social values can be diametrically opposed. While one artist or critic might seek healing through participation, another might valorize rupture. Some see political potential in artistic social action; others see the likelihood of the cooptation of artists and communities. But perhaps the most fundamental questions arising from participatory art revolve around authorship and use. In the visual arts, authorship has important implications, perhaps most obviously in the economic sphere. A painting has only a fraction of the value it would otherwise possess if it fails to be authenticated as a Cézanne or a Rembrandt. There are art historical implications as well. Critics are used to writing about a body of work by an artist. Audiences are interested in who a work is "by." So, making art through participation and ascribing authorship to a group—especially a group of nonprofessional artists—has created difficult issues of authorship and interpretation. (Finkelpearl, 2014)

Just as in the previous text Finkelpearl draws our attention to a current change in canons regarding art in general, which is leading to greater acceptance of participatory art, Patrícia Gouveia argues in the article below that these winds of change are being reflected in the most important European contemporary art exhibitions:

> In 2022, two of Europe's biggest contemporary art events, the aforementioned Kassel Documenta and the Venice Biennale, opened up their strategies to the visions of curators from other latitudes and/or genders, in an economy of solidarity, attention and empathy. Documenta in Kassel was curated for the first time by a collective of artists from Asia. This year, after 127 years of history, the Venice Biennale, curated by Italian Cecilia Alemani, presented an exhibition in which women dominated the event, highlighting neglected cases while investigating themes such as gender plasticity

and ambivalence. The *Digitálias* project is therefore part of an area of contemporary artistic creation and production aligned with what is anticipated as the goals for a more sustainable future in terms of inclusion, which includes those who have been systematically relegated to the margins. (Gouveia, 2023, p. 3)

4. *DIGITÁLIAS* LABS METHODOLOGY: PARTICIPATORY AND CO-CREATIVE

As far as the *Digitálias* logo is concerned, we came up with the idea during one of the workshops in which the women and their children filmed themselves dancing, as part of our strategy of valuing and empowering them. These performative scenes of bodily expression sought to give women survivors and their children what they are so often denied in society – the chance to express themselves freely and spontaneously. The cameras were made available to everyone present, placed on a tripod in a small indoor garden, where there was no shortage of food and music.

Figure 1. Digitálias logo, 2022 © Digitálias collective

During all the labs, it is also worth mentioning that we always tried to provide the participants with a cheerful, pleasant, and festive atmosphere, because we know that the unequal structure of relations between men and women also affects the way they access the realms of pleasure and leisure. In fact, women, who for centuries have been left with the responsibility of looking after the home and the children, still have the task of looking after the home, the children, the men, themselves, and their work outside the home, in an endless circle. In this respect, as Inês Brasão argues:

We know that official history has made women subjects without history. It has made women subjects with no desire to speak, to express themselves, to enjoy themselves, to join parties or causes. It has made them professionals of desire, material of desire, but not

subjects of desire. It has made women subjects without the right to desire to do nothing. Notice how the discourse on idleness is above all a male pleasure. (Brasão, 2019, p. 12)

During the sessions, the cameras, placed on tripods, were manipulated considering the light, the framing, and the notion of inside and outside the field. This resulted in a series of short videos, which were then transferred to the computer and worked on together in photo and video applications. High-contrast techniques were applied to all the images, so that the participants were transformed into silhouettes so that they could not be identified. Next, we chose the colours of the figures and the background, deciding on violet and orange, each of which could be applied, according to the aesthetic needs of the occasion, sometimes to the background and sometimes to the figure.

The font we chose to write the collective's name, called LoRes, has an aesthetic linked to bitmaps that incorporates pixels into its structure and therefore works well at both large and very small sizes. Without delicate details, this font is associated with the ubiquitous computer technology in everything around us. As information is increasingly stored, accessed and displayed in digital format, on-screen reading has become the ultimate method of visualising most of our information. Today, pixels, the minimum unit of a digital image, are the unmistakable feature of the computer, like the brushstroke in an oil painting.

In the present, the idea of identity and community are reconfigured without interruption through communication technologies that redefine time, space, and transform the private and public forums into places with no fixed location. Collaboration, collectives, contamination, and interdisciplinary cross-exchange are ubiquitous in the network society.

Our project methodology is heir to artists such as Leslie Labowitz (USA, 1946), who created community performances centred on violence against women in the context of public art and used art to serve as a means of collective expression for large groups of people, motivating them to bring about social change. Her working methodology consisted of:

(...) collaboration with a political organisation; use of the specialist artist as director/organiser; focus on current issues; use of the language of the target audience; and affordability of materials (...) use of media strategies. (Lacy, 1995, p. 250)

As part of this research's participatory community practice, we used an action-research methodology aimed at social change, which adapts continuously and flexibly to the needs of the co-creating participants, with regular and periodic critical reading and evaluation of the project's partial results. It is, in fact, an ongoing artistic project of a procedural nature, in which the path to be travelled is regularly conceived and recreated using a working method specific to community art. This method is characterised by being participatory, cooperative, collaborative, inclusive, integrative, and listening actively and empathetically to people.

The aesthetic expression of these community artistic practices is connective and a vehicle for humanist and egalitarian values regarding gender. Knowledge is built horizontally, based on common goals rather than hierarchies, contributing to co-operation between all, valuing both individual and collective forms of expression, giving them visibility and a public voice.

Objectives and processes are established between all the agents involved in a non-hierarchical and dialogical way, in other words, between equals. A commitment to the interests of the community, with the aim of empowering them and creating tools and models to be used in the fight against gender inequality. And, in addition, to value, empower and give visibility to the problems of women who suffer domestic violence, contributing to their self-sufficiency and promoting their inclusion and full participation in society.

Throughout the laboratories, transmedia projects were developed, produced by all the participants in a collaborative environment and sharing knowledge and skills, which were intended to be a vehicle for values, attitudes and principles, new thought processes and reasoning that were opposed to violence, promoting healthy and non-violent relationships. It is also important to mention that this project was not intended to be modelled on relational art, which had its great systematisation in Nicholas Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics* (1998). Douglas Gordon, Gonzalez-Foerster, Liam Gillick, Pierre Huyghe, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Philip Parreno are some of the artists who, since the 1990s, have developed an artistic practice based on relational art. This refusal on our part is linked to the argument put forward by Claire Bishop, according to whom:

> Bourriaud describes as "relational" work that has as its theoretical horizon "the realm of human interactions and their social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space". But despite Bourriaud's emphasis on human relationships and their social context, the artists he supports are nevertheless less interested in human relationships than in the idea of the "relational" understood as the relationships between space, temporality, fiction, and design. As such, Bourriaud is often criticised for the "aestheticisation of relationships". In contrast, the projects that are the focus here are less centred on a relational aesthetic than on the creative rewards of collaborative activity. This contemporary work forms a marked shift from the "relational" art of the [19]90s and is part of a historical trajectory of socially-orientated practice – from Dada tours to Situationist parades, Happenings and Actions produced in collaboration, often with a range of pseudo-institutions such as offices, restaurants, and hotels, as part of tours and debates. (Bishop, 2006, p. 178, author's emphasis)

Although participatory art practices received little attention in art history in the modernist period, the remarkable revival of such strategies from

the present century onwards has resulted in growing historical interest. As Bishop argues about the identification of this type of art: "This expanded field of engaged practices goes by various names: art engaged with the social field, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogical art, literary art, participatory, interventionist, research-based, or collaborative art" (Bishop, 2006, p. 178).

5. GENERAL AIMS OF THE *DIGITÁLIAS* CO-CREATIVE NET ART LABS

The artistic practice of net art, within the framework of the co-creative laboratories, sought to give women greater digital literacy and free them emotionally from negative gender stereotypes. Throughout the workshops, themes were analysed and debated such as: the ideal model of woman according to the primacy of patriarchal ideology; conceptions of couples, often associated with the idea that children and women are the property of their father and husband; conceptions of love and the ideal of romantic love and lifelong marriage; sexualisation of work in the home; the traditional role of women as carers in the home; models, values and asymmetrical gender roles that family members, friends and colleagues pressure women to integrate, with continuity and persistence.

In the labs, we tried to organise co-creative practices that were liberating, giving rise to artistic expressions that relieved the participants on an emotional level. We also investigated how artistic practice could help them to reflect and think critically about things, to find new ways of interpreting gender-based violence, both at the level of their personal history, the one that fell on them, and at a systemic social level, of a collective nature.

We hypothesised that artistic practice could be a social tool that contributes to the emotional empowerment of these women, helping them to deconstruct social emotions and gender models and stereotypes as factors in maintaining violent intimate relationships, which condition their actions and contribute to the production, reproduction and perpetuation of gender violence and violent marital relationships. The production of artistic content for and on the Internet by women is seen as a way of empowering them and democratising a space of power where, as a rule, content is broadcast that does not give a voice to marginalised people.

Throughout the workshops, emphasis was placed on the role of women as agents of change and authors of their own lives, capable of forms of self-determination, empowerment, fulfilment, and emancipation, as well as their representation of themselves, despite the discriminatory and cruel circumstances, and the mechanisms of inferiorisation, subordination and suppression to which they have been subjected. The aim was to contribute to the development of the participants as Subjects, as open, explicit, and active subjectivities. Concerning the visibility and role of women in history, Anita Sarkeesian (2018) argues that:

We find it rather tiresome that instead of being celebrated as heroines, leaders and innovators, women are all too regularly portrayed and treated as secondary characters in history. They may represent love interests, damsels in distress, best friends, mothers, lovers, or martyrs, but they rarely exist as anything other than footnotes to the stories of the men whose lives and achievements we are told really matter (...). When they were told that women should aspire to be submissive and good, they decided instead to be challenging and great.

These labs were aimed at digital training and literacy, as well as empowerment, by promoting awareness of gender inequalities and stereotypes. The methodology was that of participatory art, including a theoretical component to learn about works by artists who work on gender issues, a practical component to learn how to use digital technologies, as well as a creative component based on the experiences and realities of each woman. The results took the form of transmedia projects expressive of the feelings and experiences of the women's group, serving to feed the contents of the digital art archive and the physical exhibitions. They also constituted significant content to be analysed with a view to producing artistic knowledge and disseminating it in academic circles.

During the labs, laptops and their USB-C adapters were used, on which image and sound editing software was installed, to learn the basics of photomontage, video editing, audio editing and the creation of web pages and content. Throughout the sessions, we used a video projector and screen to project multimedia content, external discs to store the work produced, headphones and printers to test images and print content.

The general aims of the co-creative net art labs were as follows:

i. To promote the inclusion of women in shelters through their digital literacy, giving them accredited training and basic skills in the area of digital technologies, which could contribute to their social integration into the labour market;
ii. Raise women's awareness, through the symbolic language of art, of the mechanisms by which gender-based violence operates, acting at the level of shared mentalities and social representations, in order to eliminate the naturalisation of violence within families by men, as the main precursors and perpetuators;
iii. Design new places and possibilities of being for the feminine and masculine that we inhabit today with women, through artistic practice, using images and representations that contribute to changing models of thought, without repeating the clichés, norms and traditional social hierarchies that diminish women;
iv. Create research models and methodologies that can be used by various academic institutions, as well as social solidarity organisations, among others, in the fight against gender inequality, and active policies to respect difference and promote equality, fostering a culture geared towards equality, equity and diversity, and;

v. Raise awareness in society, through the net art projects disseminated on the *Cabaz Digital* website and in travelling exhibitions, of stereotyped and harmful conceptions of gender as a fundamental basis for structural inequalities between women and men, as well as a source of gender-based violence.

6. LAB 001 / HERSTORIES

The *Cabaz Digital / Digital Basket* website[1] has the form of an interactive digital archive, and was created to host the work of the *Digitálias* collective, as well as the work carried out as part of a wider multimedia art project centred on gender equality. The main aim of the HERSTORIES laboratory, which is part of a series of laboratories developed and can be accessed on the *Cabaz Digital* website, was to build an epistemic memory, through art, of the minorities made up of women who were victims of violence in an intimate context[2]. To this end, we sought to give a voice to women as Subjects of experiences and life stories that were brought to the labs and that needed to be valued. In fact, we believe that everyone should be allowed to speak, and to produce knowledge that is recognised as such. Concerning the phenomenon of domestic violence, for Phil Barker:

> Women are using their own stories of domestic violence to show the world what's actually going on behind the slammed doors. They are telling their stories to help other women understand they're not alone and that it's not their fault, and to present them with an alternative reality. It's disturbingly easy to find powerful stories of women's experiences of domestic violence, simply because there are so many. Stories engage us at every level: our emotions, values and imaginations. Narrative connects us with our deepest motivations, and is still the most effective tool for creating change. A funny tweet, an entrancing book, an engaging corporate presentation and a blockbuster movie are all, simply, great stories. Stories show us that we're part of one community. (Barker, 2019, p. 56)

Based on the premise that listening to others is a key element of research aimed at social justice and change, as opposed to a neoliberal society in which informing and moulding others is a central premise, during this laboratory we asked the participants to free-write texts related to their life experiences. These texts were digitally integrated into the silhouettes of their own profiles. The women's responses took the form of counter-narratives to the dominant discourses:

> I've been to WAR. Sobbing with every heartbeat, nonexistent at any time. WAR with weapons, always hand in hand with terrorism at home, equally LETHAL. Not knowing when the TORMENT of FEAR will end, if we wake up and are attacked with guns, bombs or simply with painful words and physical force. Desecration of body and mind.

Expectations of a better day that sometimes never comes. The right to have a home is denied, destroyed by screams, despair, suffering and violence. Terrorism in all its possible and existing forms. Children are denied the right to be simple children, moving into a new world, cheating death, and mistreatment. Deep sadness at the loss of identity, living beings without names. MEN have the right to total power over women. Women who only have the sole right to oxygen until it is taken away from them. But everything comes to an end one day! Through courage, survivors are formed, and I'm proud to be one of them! rebuilding a life is the way forward. With strength and determination, all of you will be ME! BEING A WOMAN / 8 MARCH 2022. (Woman Shelter Artist, 2022)

It is important to note that during the workshops, trying to give the participants a voice and listen to them did not mean that we harboured the expectation that they would all be obliged to speak, as we advocate that everyone also has the right to silence. The participants' responses were very diverse: some brief and fragmented, others complex and extensive.

Figure 2. Image of Lab. HERSTORIES, 2022 © *Digitálias* collective

We stress that this project explores alternative ways of working with marginalised people to produce knowledge about their lives that draws the public's attention to their lived experience of inequality or stigma, seeking to contribute to positive social transformations. The aim of the co-creative workshops was to help give women victims of domestic violence a place in history and, on the other hand, to give history back to women.

The word history derives from the Greek word "historia", which means enquiry, the act of seeking knowledge, as well as the knowledge that results from this questioning. "Herstory" is the English word created by feminism to signify the documentation, reflection, and production of knowledge about women's narratives and life experiences, in response to the perceived urgency of recording their speech, their discourse that had previously been silenced in different areas of knowledge. The ironic play on words in this English term stems from the realisation that the role played by women as social agents in history has been erased. The term

is also intended to denounce the censorship of patriarchal language itself, emphasising the use of the masculine as generic – "His-story", just as the term man is synonymous with humanity (Macedo, & Amaral *apud* Furtado, 2014).

During the second wave of the feminist movement, women were dissatisfied with the male narratives that controlled and presided over the course of the narrative of historical events. The historical amnesia surrounding women's stories necessitated the coining of the term "Herstory", which was used with both seriousness and irony. The American thinker and activist Robin Morgan is one of the first to use this term in her work, *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (1970). It was second-wave feminism, stemming from the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, that questioned and challenged the ways in which knowledge was produced, mainly from a male perspective, with the aim of drawing attention to the ways in which women's experiences were excluded and existing gender inequalities were maintained.

Figure 3. Image of Lab. HERSTORIES, 2022 © *Digitálias* collective

Today, women's demands seem, in general terms, to no longer make any sense given their achievements, such as the right to vote, free contraception, equal opportunities in the world of work and education. However, according to Filipa Lowndes Vicente when it comes to women's contemporary artistic practice:

(...) this is not necessarily a linear history - from a past where women were not part of an artistic culture, to a present, our present, where this would no longer be an issue. So neither is the past made up only of absences and limits to women's artistic practice, nor is the present of the Western world, supposedly the most egalitarian, free of countless obstacles to women's full participation in the artistic and cultural world and their recognition. One of the main differences is that until the beginning of the 20th century, these obstacles were objective, nameable, written, and legalised, but since then they have

become invisible due to more subjective, unconscious, unwritten, and often unspoken factors. (Vicente, 2011, p. 24)

We would therefore point out that at the centre of the feminist movement of the 1970s was women's awareness of the need to reclaim control over themselves, as they were dominated by cultural and structural gender inequality, particularly about their sexuality and their reproductive role, which did not allow them to self-determine and create themselves freely and broadly as Subjects. Women began to speak, reflect and act together in a wide variety of social spaces, from the streets to academia, valuing their lived experiences and inscribing the stories of their lives into the social fabric. This process came about in a dialogical way, a reflective dialogue with themselves and with other women. The women's discussions about their experiences allowed them to develop a sense of collective social self-consciousness that generated new ways of seeing that were also used to reinterpret their past experiences (Furtado, 2014).

Regimes of inequality are based not only on the social forces of gender, but often intersect through the concept of intersectionality, with inequalities of class, race, and ethnicity, among others, forming a complex web of oppressions, issues dear to feminism from the mid-1980s onwards, particularly black feminism, which corresponds to what is now considered the third feminist wave. The analyses of their thinkers were fundamental to the development of intersectionality theories, which criticised the dominant feminist analyses of the second wave for mainly reflecting the concerns of white, middle-class women. In this context, it is important to highlight the thinkers Angela Davis, bell hooks, Chandra Mohanty, Cheryl Clarke, Chimamanda Adichie, Gayatri Spivak, Gloria Anzaldua, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Lélia Gonzalez, Ochy Curiel, Patricia Collins, Sueli Carneiro and Yuderkis Minoso, among many others.
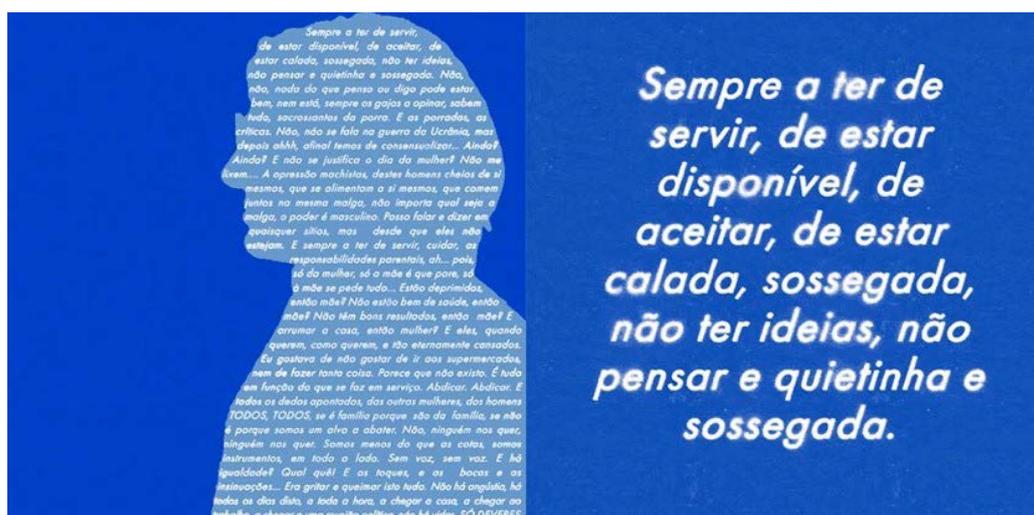

Figure 4. Image of Lab. HERSTORIES, 2022 © *Digitálias* collective

Projects focussed on communities and intersectionality are a reminder of the unequal construction of gender online, and whose community net art projects are inspiring for the artistic practice to be developed with the women in the shelters. According to the Association for Women in Science

(AWIS) founded in 1971, intersectionality, a term coined by black feminist Kimberlé W. Crenshaw in 1989, is a contextual framework that aims to analyse how various systems of oppression and privilege intertwine and influence people's experiences and opportunities (AWIS, n.d.). The systems that shape human experiences cannot be analysed separately, even though they are often studied in this way, and must be understood in an integrated and holistic way. In this context, a black, lesbian woman with a disability does not have the same agency in relation to her workplace, for example in engineering, as someone who is white, heterosexual and without a disability.

The term intersectionality advocates that different systems of power, when interconnected, have a profound impact on minorities who are marginalised in society, such as women, transgender people, black people and others. According to these black feminists, it was necessary to consider the multiple disadvantages that shape the experiences of non-white women beyond those of gender, such as class and ethnicity, among others. Furthermore, black feminism rejected the idea that all women experience the same type of domination, arguing that, in this respect, each woman had a unique personal biography and that identities are multiple and changeable. Postmodernity brought ambiguity, relativity, fragmentation, specificity, and discontinuity to the binary and stable paradigms of modernity. During the workshops, an intersectional perspective was valued, and it is important to note that many of the women were immigrants and from disadvantaged economic classes, which is why a process of dialogue and relational interaction between the participants was valued. Intersectionality in this context deepens understanding and the ability to improve the lived experiences of marginalised groups in the field of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Mathematics).

7. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

With regard to the final considerations of this research, we were able to conclude from the work carried out in the co-creative laboratories and their added value that the community artistic practice of net art can indeed have a social function as a tool for empowerment, self-esteem and identity of women from Shelters who are victims of domestic violence, contributing to their autonomy, inclusion and active participation as Subjects in society. As most of the participants had no previous experience of fine art practice, this project served to combat the idea, adopted in many instances in Western societies today, from curators to art critics to academies, that artistic production cannot be presided over by people and groups whose training is other than that of fine art academies.

It is essential to adopt and develop collaborative artistic methodologies and practices of transmedia research, such as those we used in this project, which challenge hegemonic scientific methodologies and strengthen marginalised minorities' sense of belonging to the community. In this sense, this research has reinforced the idea that art

can play an important role in social cohesion and positive social change, connecting marginalised communities with those in power, towards a more egalitarian, and therefore more sustainable, society.

Similarly, we were able to conclude that cooperative, collaborative, dialogical, inclusive, integrative artistic practices and active, empathetic listening gave visibility to the participants' problems and should be considered a key element of any research oriented towards social justice and change. Over the course of the sessions, the participants' emotions were transformed towards a rejection of models that sustain them as prisoners of the role of woman, wife, or partner, and which legitimise the symbolic power of male domination and violence exercised against them as something natural.

When the women in the shelters built a net art archive with their stories, they dealt with the trauma of forgetting and erasing their experiences in the social space and interrupted structural gender violence. In the context of this systemic violence, the aggressors' behaviour is often blamed and devalued, justifying it by reasons such as men's sexual desire or excessive jealousy. This web archive is therefore a collection of knowledge from the field of art, coming from experiences and practices of the body, emotions, affections, senses, and intellect, which we believe cannot be reached through conventional research methods.

Sharing the participants' life stories through art served to empower them emotionally, offering them the opportunity to broaden their self-critical understanding. This project enabled the participants to fight feelings of shame and guilt and to rethink together the places of oppression and submission often attributed to women who are victims of intimate partner violence. The participants often positioned themselves as strong, active, and powerful, and interested in finding a safe place in society for their families and themselves, contrary to the image often conveyed by media discourses that represent them as fragile, vulnerable and oppressed. There is an urgent need to deconstruct the psychosocial emotional frameworks associated with intergenerational, binary and asymmetrical gender roles and stereotypes, which value the masculine over the feminine.

We were also able to see that the women who took part were able, interested, and resourceful when it came to using STEAM – Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths – tools, having increased their digital literacy. It is important to provide training in this area for women and girls, since more than half of them are unable to access the Internet due to its high price and lack of skills to use it. They are mainly represented in the lower ranks of technological production chains, and their presence is small in the leadership and creation of IT industries.

The interdisciplinary collaborations between the participating women, researchers, and students from academia, always placing the participants at the centre of knowledge creation, contributed to the construction of knowledge and know-how in a horizontal, non-hierarchical way and the recognition of themselves as active, competent, and capable subjects.

It is essential to work on issues of gender-based violence among students, since schools are social spaces where people learn what it means to be a man and a woman, and what gender-specific roles and stereotypes are. In this sense, we would like to highlight the *Digitálias* artistic projects that we have developed in collaboration with the school and university, to break not only with the manifestations of violence, but also with its causes.

The production of digital and analogue transmedia objects, mutable and shareable, centred on the experiences and voices of women victims of domestic violence, and their dissemination in physical exhibitions and online platforms, has made it possible to provoke, disturb and raise awareness among the community in general about the mechanisms of violence against women.

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