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Spaces, Mobilizations, Interventions

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Biographies for Artistic and Social Intervention

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Abstract: This paper discusses the theme biographies for artistic and social intervention through an analysis of artistic work conducted with a group of young people from the arts education project *Bando à Parte: Youth Cultures, Arts and Social Inclusion* (O Teatrão, Coimbra). How do young people create a voice which may be potentially used to transform their own communities, having as a starting point their biographical path(s)? How can each of us find on biographical courses specific contributions that may interfere with change, and how may these be translated into concrete policies and actions in society? The exploration of these processes through a work of artistic creation, inspired in biographical collected materials, represents a possible contribution to reflect on the issues of memory, identity and community change.

Keywords: biographies, social change, arts education, urban communities, citizenship

Theoretical contextualization

The biographical construction of individual courses represents an approach that may structure a base for individual education, as the biographic process is directly connected with the processes of education (Dominice, 2006), and defines a basis of intervention in society and of our relations with other people in different collective contexts. Biographies work on the existential and subjective perspective of individual identities, giving greater importance to the social, cultural and political aspects of each individual. Therefore, it is an approach that is able to articulate both individual and collective elements of all and every one of us (Josso, 2009), congregating both a subjective and an analytical component.

The *Artistic Society Projects* (ASP), whose approach is used under the arts education project *Bando à Parte*, are here understood as what results from the process of using biographical approaches (lifestories and biographical narratives, combined with different individual perspectives on the social world) in the artistic process of the arts education

¹ Cláudia is a post-doctorate researcher at CES within the project “Artéria 7: o centro em movimento”, an action-research project in collaboration with O Teatrão (Oficina Municipal do Teatro, Coimbra) in order to create artistic projects of intervention in several cities of the centre region of Portugal. She completed her PhD in Sociology, specialization in Sociology of Culture, Knowledge and Communication, at the Faculty of Economics, University of Coimbra, in October 2010. The empirical work of her PhD, “The Creative Citizen: Citizenship Building in the Boston Area,” included three case studies on the Boston urban communities of Jamaica Plain, South End and Somerville (Boston, MA, USA), was done during her stay as a visiting researcher at the Center for Reflective Community Practice (now Community Innovators Lab, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology). This work focused on trying to understand the different ways in which culture and cultural practices may promote the social, economic and cultural revivification of urban spaces, originating new formats to rethink citizenship. Claudia is currently responsible for the coordination of *Bando à Parte: Youth Cultures, Arts and Social Inclusion*, a project of arts education taking place at Teatrão (Oficina Municipal do Teatro) in Coimbra, since September 2009.

process. These projects represent an effort of building knowledge on social processes and issues, based on the heuristic potential of biographic approaches and its subjective processes, creating, as Elsa Lechner and other authors propose, an interpretation of social history from the subjectivities of individual stories (Lechner, 2009).

Biographies reflect relations of trust between individuals and propose strategies of outreach to and interrelation with differentiated social groups and social worlds. The relation of interaction has a strong pedagogical and transformative power, not only from an individual perspective, as it gives their own subjective perspective on a specific situation (Bertaux, 1997), but also from a collective point of view. The materials collected through biographical and life stories' approaches may generate individual processes of social and cultural emancipation. These processes tend to generate a political process that may give origin to new formats of civic participation and citizenship, as they tend to destroy socially constructed stereotypes and build an individual political perspective on the social world, as well as a specific code of conduct.

We need to take into account the origins of the models of biographical construction, on one hand, and, on the other hand, understand its connections with the education and learning processes (Delory-Momberger, 2011), so as to clarify the relation between art education and social integration (Marshall, 2006). Biography is always a social and cultural construction on the social world and is simultaneously product of the articulation between the objective and subjective richness of the biographical material, as individual stories are always a reflection on the crossing between individual and collective stories and realities (Lechner, 2009). The relation of human beings with their life is culturally constructed and their life courses express models, social structures and cultural approaches. Subjects interpret their lived experiences and produce an interpretation of their lives and of their relation with it, creating an idea of themselves and therefore an interpretation of the world around them. The biographical activity is consequently an essential process on the social definition of the individual in his relation with the society where he is integrated (Delory-Momberger, 2004). It is under this context of reinterpretation of the social world that subjects are created as active interveners on their own lives, influencing their course and, consequently, having a political and reflexive perspective on the development of a specific social, cultural or political situation. It is on this connection with reflexivity that it becomes interesting to analyze the contribution of an arts education project that uses some tools of the biographical perspective to create individual *Artistic Society Projects* (ASP). The process implicates both the creation of knowledge over the specific social, cultural and political situation of the individual, and the reflection, through the means of the artistic practice, on that same situation. The artistic practice incorporates processes that integrate the possibility to re-write life and rebuild identity, proposing structural models to build individual constructions on reality. The process incorporates and individual reporting that assumes the form of an artistic presentation, which is the result of a long process of artistic oriented research, explained further down in this paper, in the section 'Methodology'.

The project: Objectives and activities

The main goal of *Bando à Parte* is the construction of individual identities based on the promotion of individual capacities, on the development of self-trust behaviors and on the promotion of inter-personal and inter-group relationships. On one hand, one of the main objectives is the creation of a culture of civic leadership, the development of reflective behaviors and the capacity of action, with a view to conceptualize and implement *Artistic*

Society Projects (ASP). These projects use artistic activities as promoters of positive social change, contributing to change the negative stereotypes that are normally reproduced by a political system that tends to perpetuate the youth disconnection from mainstream opportunities, lifestyles and outlooks (MacDonald and Marsh, 2001). On the other hand, and as an active civil society cannot be envisioned independently from its cultural ties, our approach is also based on the revivification of individual's cultural origins, through the promotion of opportunities to establish inter-cultural relations and to promote cultural reconciliation with urban spaces. The instrument used to develop these objectives is the artistic activity on its multiple disciplines, namely theatre, music and dance. On this context, the project strategy of intervention is the development of youth individual creativity, as an essential instrument for the development of a group of social and individual skills that contribute for the creation of a citizen, able to reflect on social contexts and to have an engaged civic participation.

It becomes more and more important that citizens in general and the youth in particular develop a process of reflection about the society where they live, positively acting over the communities where they are live. The artistic activity in general is an essential instrument to stimulate critical reflection, developing at the same time creativity and establishing connections with other approaches to the social world. The issues that affect youth in their daily lives directly connect us to the main issues that affect society in general. What may then be in this context the role of the artistic practice? What is the role of the citizens in general, and the youth in particular on the construction of what might be nowadays understood as citizenship? How may the artistic practice contribute to the generation of knowledge and innovative social approaches for the construction of a citizen, builder of a local, national and international identity? These are the main questions that set up the terrain of analysis within this project.

Processes and objectives

This project aims to impact the creation of citizens with a critical attitude, autonomous, with capacity to act individually and as a group and with a deep connection with the urban social space that surround them, as well as with their differentiated belongings and cultural identities.

To achieve that, this project wishes to persecute the following objectives:

- Creation of a structure that supports the creation of *Artistic Society Projects* (ASP), channeled by the artistic and cultural activity. The main goal is to support the development of projects of social intervention that use artistic and cultural tools and which are directly influenced by the social issues that affect youth daily lives;
- Development of youth leadership capacities, stimulating youth potential for the conception and implementation of ASP, based on the cultural and artistic practice;
- Promotion of a relation with the urban space, including natural urban environments, daily life spaces and spaces of built patrimony, by stimulating the research for the ASP in natural or build urban environments of the city of Coimbra;
- Stimulation of intercultural relations by using the artistic activity as a tool of connection between different social and cultural groups, including the work of inclusion through the arts of individuals who are socially excluded;
- Arts Education: promotion of individual artistic skills through the development of a structured program of activities that include the learning of basic tools of the artistic

practice, in different fields. A more formal learning curriculum is complemented with a non-formal learning process where the youth group will establish direct contact, during the two years of the project, with different activities of O *Teatrão*, from rehearsals, production activities, performance setting up, production of artistic events from other groups, evaluation processes and others.

- Interchange Artistic Activities between *Teatrão* and other artistic organizations from other countries that work with youth groups, developing programs of activities where the youth groups have opportunities to discuss, share experiences, develop joint artistic activities and evaluate the different projects from the different countries. The main goal is to identify good practices in the field of youth, arts and social inclusion, establishing a network where both youth related arts organizations and youth may jointly share and propose innovative formats to build youth citizenship in the contemporary world.

Area of intervention

This project includes intervention on communities and individuals with low levels of social inclusion and/or who are experiencing processes of identity affirmation: youth in general and youth in situations of social exclusion or at risk of experiencing social exclusion.

The area of intervention is the city of Coimbra, namely the social housing complex neighborhoods and other social and cultural peripheral areas of the city: *Fonte da Talha* neighborhood, *Fonte do Castanheiro* neighborhood, *Conchada* neighborhood, *Misericórdia/Loreto* neighborhood, *Rosa* neighborhood, *Ingote* neighborhood, *Celas* neighborhood, *Parque de Nómadas* (Centro de Estágio Habitacional), *Pedrulha*, *Santa Apolónia*, *Adémia*, *Eiras*, *Baixa* and *Alta*.

Target population

This project wishes to work with communities of individuals with low levels of social inclusion and individuals who are crossing individual processes of identity affirmation, but who are not necessarily in situations of social exclusion: youth in general and youth that are under social exclusion situations (immigrants, mono-parental and disrupted families, youth experiencing educational and personal development problems, etc.), with ages between 14 and 20 years old. The project activities envision the development of initiatives centered on this target groups with the main goal to, through the establishment of local and international partnerships with organization that work directly with youth, develop innovative approaches for building a youth leadership culture, using the artistic activity as a channel of reflection, innovation and social action.

Diagnostic of social needs

Coimbra's local Social Network identifies specific needs in what concerns the youth population at risk or experiencing situations of social exclusion, as well as in what respects the social, economic and cultural contexts of the district and specifically the most problematic Social Housing Complexes, namely in *Rosa* and *Ingote* neighborhoods. It is in these social contexts that this project assumes growing relevance and may represent an important contribution on the prevention of school absenteeism and school drop-out, on the prevention

of unemployment among youth, on the prevention of addictive behaviors, early experience in labor market and the consequent disinvestment on personal education.

In what concerns schools absenteeism and school drop-out in Coimbra, some causes identified are related with the low importance that is given, by the families, to education, the disinvestment from the educational community over the more problematic students and to the existence of educational strategies that are not adapted to students with low levels of motivation and high levels of being at risk of social exclusion. In general, educational curriculums do not include innovative contents and methods, related to the importance of artistic education and of other creative activities, but instead include general approaches, which cannot be adapted to personal social and cultural contexts of youth. These lacks on the educational curriculums may originate problems on youth development, as well as risk behaviors. It is then clear the lack of innovative institutional responses in Coimbra for youth, at the occupational and formal level. Coimbra's Social Network, through the diagnostic of social needs, assumes that one of main priorities on the field of Education is the need of programs of capacity development, oriented towards the community in general and towards the youth in particular.

Another social need identified is related with the growing percentage of youth unemployment in Coimbra, a consequence from school drop-out, associated to lack of professional qualification and lack of investment on youth by the local enterprises. The main consequences are the risk of delinquency, social exclusion, poverty and life precariousness, related also with migration and emigrations flows. This project wishes to work on the prevention of behaviors that may lead to social exclusion, by minimizing that same risk of social exclusion. In order to accomplish that goal, the project presents a curriculum that attends youth needs in matters related to the promotion of individual capacities, development of self-confidence and promotion of inter-personal and inter-group relationships. These capacities favor the development of attitudes and personal learning capacities, structured to the acquisition of transversal competencies and to the social dimension, oriented towards human development in society.

In the *Rosa* and *Ingote* neighborhoods, two of the neighborhoods where this project is implemented, the problems identified are the excessive concentration of families, drug addiction and traffic, school dropout, school absenteeism and unemployment. The causes of unemployment are the low levels of school and professional qualification, and the creation of social stereotypes related to these neighborhoods. These facts generate a lack of self-confidence and motivation for work. The project *Bando à Parte* wishes to develop strategies of intervention over the youth population, based on arts education and on the artistic practice. The arts develop intrinsic motivation (to work in society) and the individual creativity (as well as his subjectivity), promoting the individuals' relation with society, their capacity as social agents, responsible for their social action.

In parallel, this diagnostic advises the creation of alternative curriculums, in the area of the arts, which include a motivational component, but also dedicated to the multicultural and multi-social reality of these urban contexts, which include youth from different cultural origins (gypsies, youth from Portuguese speaking countries and youth from eastern European countries). These specific contexts, characterized by populations experiencing exclusion or at risk of experiencing exclusion, require curriculums adapted to their specific realities and educative models based on the development of the capacities of interrelation in contexts of social and cultural differentiation, which characterize contemporary societies.

Strategic approach

Bando à Parte envisions to be implemented based on cyclic process for the creation of *Leadership Cycles* where specific youth individuals, after going through a one cycle of two years of *Bando à Parte*, become peer leaders of the participants that integrate the next cycle. Therefore a culture of youth leadership is created through the development of specialized methodologies to approach the artistic practice (Heath and Smith, 1999; Carvalho, 2011). The basic idea is the continuous work with a youth group, focusing on its artistic capacitance, stimulating its social intervention, in order to question social issues, as well as its emotional and inter-social development as promoters of *Artistic Society Projects* (ASP), based on the relation between biographical contributions and reflection on contemporary social issues. Figures 1 and 2 show how the different processes of creating a leadership structure are articulated.

Strategies of intervention and activity plan: Social and cultural incubation

Social and cultural incubation is based on a model of social development where civil society, civic leadership and critical reflection are presented as essential mechanisms to generate social change. The project envisions the support of *Artistic Society Projects* which use artistic and cultural means, associated with biographical pathways, to intervene over concrete social realities. This type of incubation integrates four approaches, with mutual influence, so that the objectives of relation with the urban space, of promotion of spaces of intercultural dialogue and of artistic capacitance are concretized.

Creation of Artistic Society Projects: conception and implementation of intervention projects. Diagnostic of social contexts and individual living contexts and building of original projects, which use the artistic activity, in articulation with biographical materials, to reframe social issues and find innovative solutions. These projects are based on biographical pathways to reflect on contemporary social issues;

Relation with Public Space: definition of strategies of relation with urban space. One of the main project goals is the organization of an event or group of artistic events in public urban spaces like parks, gardens, streets, historic centers, squares. The main goal is to reframe the nature of the relation of the individual with public space and to give visibility to the continuous work of the group and its involvement in each stage of production, dissemination, presentation and event documentation.

Promotion of Intercultural Connections: definition of strategies to promote intercultural relations between different social groups, essential to secure group identity affirmation. Here is included the possibility of implementation of interchange programs and international seminars, between youth groups from other countries, partners of Teatrão in this type of work;

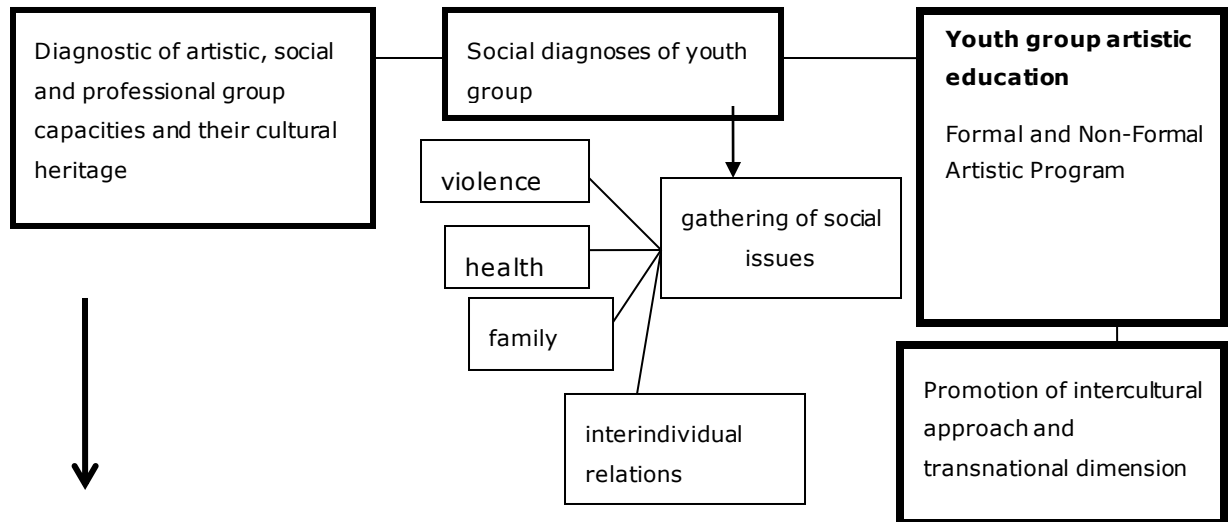
Artistic Education: definition, organization and implementation of an artistic program. The idea is to structure an arts education curriculum in theater, dance and music, which includes both regular classes and attendance to different artistic performances in the cities' different cultural spaces.

Relation with Education System and Families: the project also includes a structured program to follow the relation between the youth and the education system, as well as their integration within their own families, so as to gather more information about their biographical path.

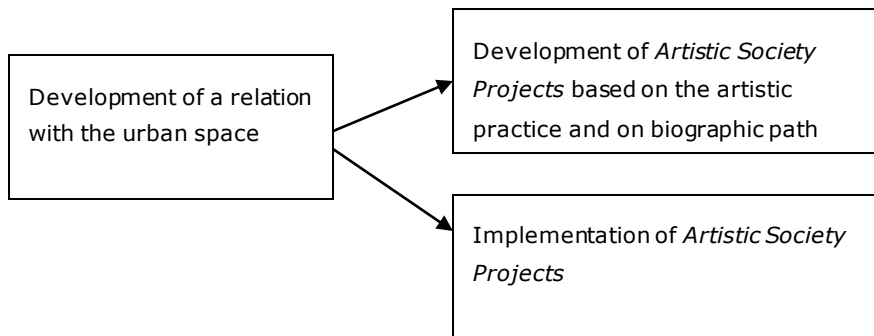
Figure 1. Leadership cycle – structure

Level 0: Project Dissemination and gathering of youth group

Level 1: Social Diagnostic, Diagnostic of Capacities and Educational Program



Level 2: Implementation of Artistic Society Projects



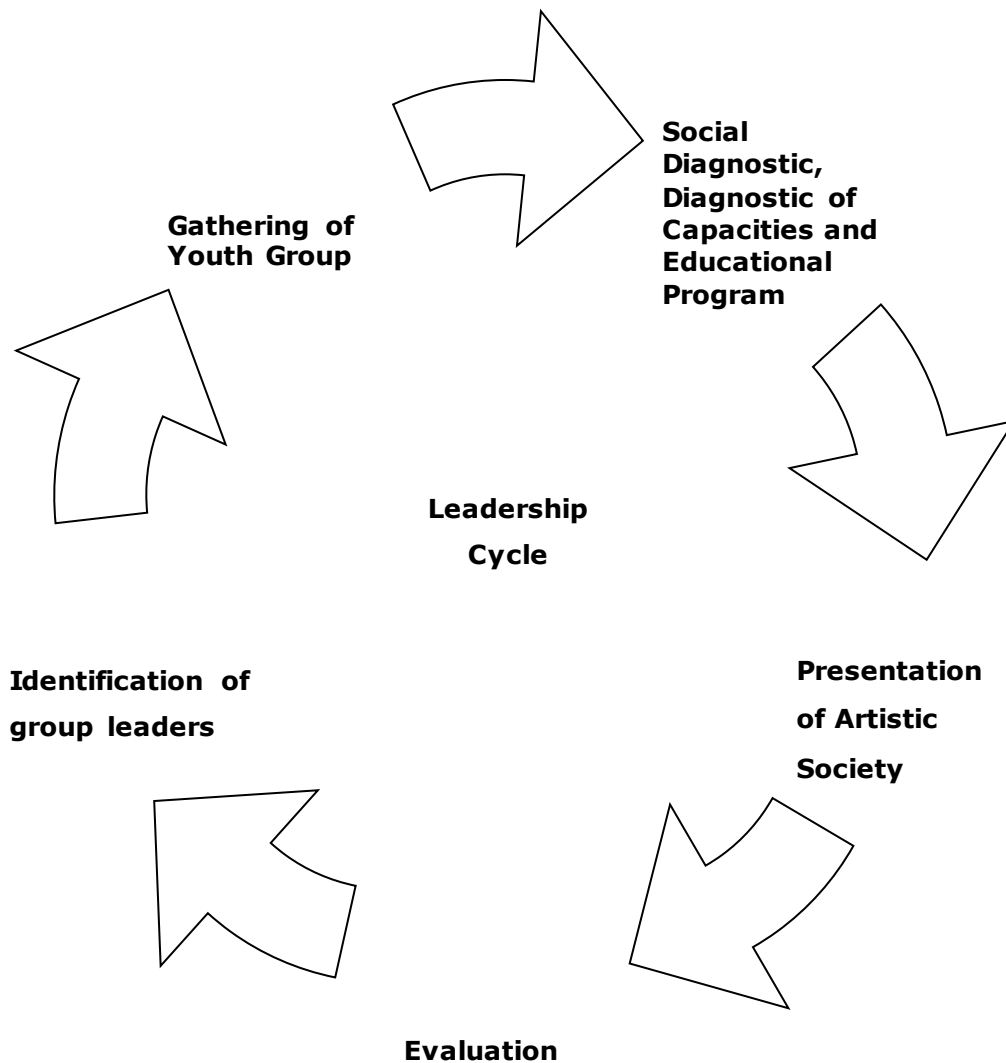
Level 3: Evaluation

Joint evaluation between educators and youth group of the all process and work on joint report.

Level 4: Identification of Leader Group

Collaboration of youth leader group on the orientation, jointly with the responsible educators, of a new leadership cycle. Structured program of arts education for youth to integrate the new cycle.

Figure 2. Leadership cycle



Methods

This project is understood as an experimental project, not only in terms of the methodologies used, but also in terms of the development of platforms of interdisciplinary and transnational dialogue, representing a continuous laboratory for experimenting new approaches to the relation between the artistic practice and the education activity. This relation is developed on the basis of a grounded research approach on biographical courses, in direct articulation with individual's perspectives on contemporary social issues and individual challenges.

Furthermore, it envisions the contribution to enriching the development of specific research methodologies in the field of the artistic practice and of its possible connections with the arts education processes (Baldacchino, 2009). Following the claim that arts must build their legitimacy by developing their own specific paradigm (Knowles and Cole, 2008), arts must gain their salience by their political importance and, therefore, by their continuous connection with the arts education practice.

In fact, the artistic practice may offer an opportunity to enhance the personal, social and professional development of youth, as the youth become influenced to become active participants throughout the all process of ASP preparation, implementation and evaluation. They experience a model of active participation in the activities. As a consequence, youth prepare the terrain to build a youth leadership culture, based on the experience of the arts. This type of non-formal learning represents, in articulation with a more structure learning happening during the arts education program, an essential component for the work of structuring an active and participative society, one of the main components of a more socially integrated community. Social exclusion, specially the one experienced by youth with few opportunities, may be attenuated through the existence of a structured and active civil society.

The projects are developed in different phases. In the first place, the *Artistic Society Projects* (ASP), in the areas of theatre, music and dance, require individual supervisors who coordinate the all process of project development. In January 2011, during the first cycle of *Bando à Parte*, a meeting took place between teachers and project coordinators, where 12 images and 12 texts were chosen as inductors for the construction of ASP. Each participant chose 1 text and 1 image. During the first two weeks of January, several brainstorming activities were done around the texts and images, with the main goal of creating a basic concept, which could be used as a starting point for the creation of the ASP. From this basic concept, efforts were done for generating questions which were important for each participant. To support the construction of the ASP, each participant starts working on a logbook where individual thoughts, questions and reflective contributions start to emerge, so as to help build the individual ASP. At the end of each group sessions, each participant made a contribution to his/her own logbook. The starting questions for building the ASP wanted to express individual uneasiness's, reflections, worries about their neighborhoods, families, school and friends. Between January and February 2011, individual interviews were carried out with the goal to build individually the starting questions that oriented all the process for the creation of ASP.² This phase represented the first approach on how biographies, in direct articulation with reflection on contemporary individual social challenges and general perception on the social world, can be articulated in order to create materials that may work as inductors of the process of artistic creation.

After the sharing of the starting questions between the participants took place, it was defined a structure to work, based on the arts education program. Starting on March 2011, each participant started to focus on their individual ASP. In parallel, the general curriculum on theatre, music and dance continued to exist, as well as interrelation with *Teatrão's* parallel activities. It was also during this phase that each project participant chose an artistic area (theatre, dance or music) where to develop their own individual project. With the participants that chose the area of theatre, it was initiated a working methodology in 2 sub-groups of three people and one sub-group of four people. A creative construction process was started based on the individual starting point defined for each project.

² The starting questions agreed were the following ones: In a mass driven society, alienated, standardized, what may be the role for the individual? In which way can we overcome a society that influences us, leveling us and creating stereotyped references? How can we live our life in a way that we take advantage of all the opportunities? How can I relate my cultural identity with my actual life? In each ways can I be the owner of my destiny? In which way can we try to subvert the common order of things in order to walk toward a utopia? Why do we determine our choices based on what others think? What is a possible equilibrium between tradition and innovation?

In the dance project, the individual motivations were connected with the diversity of individual possibilities (which included opinions, reflections and biographical materials) and after the definition of a precise direction, a work of choreographic research started. Through more technical classes, it was analyzed the choreographic potential of the participant and then, through directed improvisations, the choreographic material was developed. In the case of theatre, it was started a work of construction of each individual project through research on movement, sound ambiences, images and also dramaturgy. The main goal was to build a context for each character, in direct articulation with biographical materials and social perceptions, always trying to articulate the individual as a person and the character as an element of fiction. By the end of each week, discussions were made about the modes of creation and project conception, also at individual and group level.

During the month of April, the individual project in the field of dance included research at home, so that consistency was added to the work, including research on references on movement, sound ambiences, images, texts and creation of short choreographies that could be worked and integrated afterwards. The diary of the project was then completed and gained practical and theoretical substance. In the theatre area, the group started both an individual and a group work. Continuity was given to the work with the individual monologues and with the character building, built from the physicality of the characters and from the proposals for costumes. As the goal was the elaboration of the ASP through a final presentation, a proposal of dramaturgic structure started to be developed. During the month of May, continuity was given to the artistic work with the sub-groups of 3 to 4 people, through exercises of objects' exploration; research work on the consequences of the characters' physical construction; construction of scenes based on the division by units of dramatic action and work on the construction of scenes from excerpts of texts. June was a month used to make an exploration of the group scenes and during the month of July focus was given to the concrete construction of the individual ASP, at the level of the character building, the relation between the different scenes and the building of a structure for the final exercise.

During the month of August, in the context of the theatre work, it was initiated a work of choreographic structure for the definition of the final exercise. It was also started the work of preparation of the group presentation for the International Arts Laboratory, taking place between the 5 and 11 September 2011. The month of September was dedicated to the preparation of the final exercise and to the work of character building for the individual projects (ASP), trying to establish connections between characters' biographical paths in order to structure a collective presentation. A space for sharing of experiences was also created between the different individual projects from the different artistic areas. In addition, during this month also took place the International Arts Laboratory, in partnership with MUZtheater (the Netherlands) and Associazione Marchigiana Attività Teatrali (Italy), which created a space for sharing of experiences, methodologies and approaches between the *Bando à Parte* youth and the Italian and Dutch groups on the building of the ASP.

In the specific case of the music project, the work developed came through four phases: reflection, experimentation, structure definition and consolidation. During the first phase, several resources were used to facilitate the reflection/introspection process, in order to build a solid starting point on the critical analysis of the biographical material. From the different resources that complemented this phase, it is important to mention the use of the internet (and other audiovisual means, e.g. video) and bibliographic references to enrich the individual research process. Under this context, it was created a set of situations lived by a character, who makes a musical journey through out his past, reflecting over specific moments of his life which have transformed him on what he is today. The second phase (May-July) was

focused on the experimentation of sound and musical resources that could add consistency to the project. The starting point was the individual body, the voice and the musical instruments as a sound source. A diversity of musical styles were also explored (concrete music, flamenco, pop, jazz, traditional Portuguese music) and also diverse techniques of music composition in real time (like looping). All the different musical elements, used in the ‘individual musical history’, were defined. The third phase (July-September) was dedicated to the organization (and betterment) of the individual project, including the integration of contributions from other artistic areas. The last phase (September-October) implicated the project consolidation and its integration in the final exercise.

The month of October was a month of intensive work in all the projects of music, theater and dance, in order to integrate them as part of the final exercise *40°11'N 8°24'W*, which happened from the 13-15 October, at the Sala Grande of the Oficina Municipal do Teatro and which congregated the *Artistic Society Projects* of all the participants of the first cycle of the arts education project Bando à Parte 2010-2011.

Final considerations

In sum, the specific methods used were based on non-formal learning (learning that takes place out of the formal curriculum of schools) and informal (learning with everyday practice). The process of project development includes the direct involvement of youth, suggesting new methods and contributing for a practice of structured dialogue between arts educator and youth themselves, which characterized the project process.

The creation of the *Artistic Society Projects* (ASP), which combined the theatre, dance and music areas, required the collection of and the research on a set of biographical materials and experiences, both individually and socially constructed. This specific methodology brings concrete contributions on how the biographical experiences may be articulated with the proposal to build an artistic exercise that creates a universe of fiction. It is however through this artistic proposal that a reflective and political position is built, initiating a movement that goes from an often limited individual perception of the social world toward a more open and critical reflection about the possibilities of creating change in communities.

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