

Research article

Street Art: Dialogues between artistic practices and the community

Arte Callejero: Diálogos entre las prácticas artísticas y la comunidad

Joana Gaudêncio Matos: Polytechnic University of Setúbal, School of Education, Campus do Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal. Portugal.

joana.isabel.matos@ese.ips.pt

Date of receipt: 13/05/2024

Acceptance date: 19/08/2024

Publication date: 26/08/2024

How to cite the article

Gaudêncio Matos, J. (2025). Street Art: Dialogues between artistic practices and the community [Arte Callejero: Diálogos entre las prácticas artísticas y la comunidad]. *European Public & Social Innovation Review*, 10, 01-17. <https://doi.org/10.31637/epsir-2025-578>

Abstract:

Introduction: The text focuses on a series of projects developed by Portuguese artist Alexandre Farto, aka Vhils, which involved local communities in collaborative artistic practices. **Methodology:** The artistic practices analysed are part of the methodology known as community-based art. The data was analysed by observing these projects and interviewing the artist. **Results:** Taking two of Vhils's projects that involved community participation as a starting point, we analysed them based on the documents collected, namely videos, photographs and interviews. **Discussion:** The visual and discursive dimensions of these projects and the information gathered from the artist who mediated this whole process allowed us to access a set of meanings that crossed artistic, social and political domains. **Conclusions:** The articulation of these domains in the context of artistic processes that require community participation allows their impact to be significantly amplified, since it promotes greater engagement, empowerment and social cohesion in that community.

Keywords: Street Art; Vhils; Faces; City; Community; Artistic Practices; Community-Based Art; Memories.

Resumen:

Introducción: El texto se centra en una serie de proyectos desarrollados por el artista portugués Alexandre Farto aka Vhils, que implicaron a comunidades locales en prácticas artísticas colaborativas. **Metodología:** Las prácticas artísticas analizadas forman parte de la metodología conocida como arte comunitario. Los datos se analizaron mediante la observación de estos proyectos y entrevistas al artista. **Resultados:** Tomando como punto de partida dos de los proyectos de Vhils que implicaban la participación de la comunidad, los analizamos a partir de los documentos recopilados, a saber, vídeos, fotografías y entrevistas. **Discusión:** Las dimensiones visuales y discursivas de estos proyectos y la información recabada de la artista que medió en todo este proceso nos permitieron acceder a un conjunto de significados que atravesaban dominios artísticos, sociales y políticos. **Conclusiones:** La articulación de estos dominios en el contexto de procesos artísticos que requieren la participación de la comunidad permite que su impacto se amplifique significativamente, ya que promueve un mayor compromiso, empoderamiento y cohesión social en esa comunidad.

Palabras clave: Arte Callejero; Vhils; Rostro; Ciudad; Comunidad; Prácticas artísticas; Community-Based Art; Memorias.

1. Introduction

This article proposes an analysis of two artistic projects developed by the Portuguese artist Alexandre Farto, aka Vhils (b. 1987), as part of his series of works entitled "Scratching the Surface", in which a series of technical means are mobilised providing a reflection on urban space and establishing a progressive relationship between art and the community.

Vhils' interventions illustrate the transformative potential of street art in urban spaces. By sculpting and painting portraits that reveal the layers of history on the walls of various cities around the world, the artist invites viewers to contemplate the social and cultural dynamics that are built up in this environment. The city is seen by the artist as something ephemeral and transitory that has long since ceased to be stable, and where everything seems to happen simultaneously. Faced with this reality, we analyse how Vhils reflects on this urban environment that influences the community in the formation of its individual and collective identity.

Outside the institutionalised space, that is, in the traditional instances of artistic legitimacy, urban art is subject to its own system of appreciation and can be considered a strategy for getting closer to reality and the public. This form of artistic intervention is characterised by the relationship between the work and the place, which inevitably leads to a fusion between art and the social context that integrates the public space and transforms the work.

To this end, we will analyse the "Fragments" project developed in Rio de Janeiro - Brazil in 2013, and the "Bairro 6 de Maio" project developed four years later in Amadora - Portugal. Both projects address social and political concerns through dynamics that involve local communities in creative practices (collaboration, co-creation and fruition).

By analysing these artistic proposals, which involved the artist and the local communities, the aim is, on the one hand, to understand the participation and positioning of the communities in relation to the creative processes and the artist, and, on the other, to determine the link between the two, since they produce reciprocal relations of individuation. According to Pereira and Sá (2016)

The discussion, negotiation, sharing of experiences, social and cultural memories, of places and time, become the driving force behind the entire creative process and take on a greater role than the final object itself, since they provide new perspectives on reality, constructed from an intersubjective relationship. (p. 26)

This crossover between art and the community through collaborative artistic practices, known as Community-Based Art, is a dialogue between the artist and a specific community.

Considering the various dimensions that make up the artistic project, namely in terms of the creative process, the conditions of dissemination and reception by the public, as well as the multiple readings carried out *a posteriori*, it is important to establish an analysis methodology based on an interview with the artist, thus allowing a global understanding of the selected works. To this end, the projects will be analysed according to three criteria:

- a) Context (date, location, scope of the project and the ways in which its participants took part);
- b) Artistic and creative process (themes addressed and different artistic languages at plastic, photographic and/or audiovisual level);
- c) Dissemination of the projects (processes and forms of dissemination).

The aim is to demonstrate that both the "Fragmentos" project and the "Bairro 6 de Maio" project allow us to see the transformative power of urban art when combined with community engagement and social sensitivity. Through close collaboration with local residents and his sensitivity to the social and cultural context of the place, Vhils has created artistic interventions that transcend the boundaries of aesthetics to become agents of connection, reflection and transformation within those communities. For them, these projects have brought about significant social changes that have involved reclaiming their spaces, histories and memories.

2. Methodology

Artistic projects developed with a specific community involve the artist investigating the place, specifically who inhabits it, how it is inhabited/lived in, followed by building a relationship and rapprochement with its inhabitants. This connection between the artist and the inhabitants, which develops through a mutual sharing of knowledge and memories, is at the root of creative projects in the urban space, which sometimes involve community participation/collaboration. With regard to the works developed by Vhils, they take on multiple technical modalities, allow for reflection on a range of issues in the social and political sphere and, finally, constitute spaces for sharing where the themes worked on are of interest to a collective. Referring to the importance of this issue, we mention Athins (1997, p. 197) who states that art developed for the public space is produced for the community and, for this reason, must be recognised and accepted by it.

Work processes that involve community participation require the artist to carry out a complex work process that takes into account different points of view and the relationships established between those involved. According to Saraiva (2013)

Artists working with communities have to manage and absorb different layers in the working process: the individual's perspective on the community, the community's perspective on itself, the relationship created between the artist and the community, and the various layers of knowledge inherent in the community, such as its history, memory and relations with what is external to it. The emphasis of these practices is

on the process, which is precisely the stage of the project of knowledge and dialogue that should subsequently determine the artistic intervention to be made (p. 131).

The aforementioned processes are part of a methodology known as *community art*, *community-engaged art* or *community-based art*, described by Pereira and Sá (2016) as

a set of artistic practices developed with the aim of involving a specific community (based on criteria of a territorial, demographic, age, cultural nature, etc.) in a wider dialogue with a view to bringing about a positive change in the way it relates internally or to wider contexts (regional, national, global). (p. 26).

Included in this methodology are a number of projects by the artist Vhils that aim to emphasise the problems and threats faced by communities, identified by mapping the different components that circumscribe the real contexts of the intervention with the help of local institutions that provide the artist's first contact with the environment and the population.

The first project selected, "Fragmentos", took place in Rio de Janeiro between October 2012 and May 2013. During this period, multiple works were carried out in three locations:

- a) Morro da Providência;
- b) Ladeira dos Tabajaras;
- c) And a final exhibition at the Clark Art Centre Gallery.

This series of interventions in buildings ready to be demolished made it possible to make known the life stories - individual and collective - collected by the artist and his team from the local communities. It is a reflection on the memory of everyday experiences, set against the backdrop of a space that is on the verge of disappearing, in the form of imaginary scraps, transferred to the walls of the urban space. This work also expresses a metaphor for the social precariousness and fragmentation caused by the demolishing action of material progress, based on a globalised capitalist system. The second project, entitled "Bairro 6 de Maio", was carried out in a neighbourhood in Amadora in 2017, in partnership with Portuguese urban studies researcher António Brito Guterres. The project included six paintings on some of the walls that had not yet been demolished in the neighbourhood, depicting some of the residents who were later evicted from those same houses.

In this type of aesthetic experience developed with specific communities, the meaning of the work is manifested through the final product, the process of social interaction and the repercussions these may have for the future of the community. As Congdon, Blandy & Bolin (2001) point out, these practices have the capacity to stimulate people's intervention in problems "as catalysts for dialogue about individual and group identity, local and national concerns and, ultimately, a quest for democracy." (p. 3). These artistic processes make significant change possible once the community begins to have an active voice and interacts with the artist by assigning a context and content to the intervention.

Community participation in artistic projects is characterised by their level of involvement. On this subject, we highlight the author Helguera (2011, p. 14) who establishes four types of participation:

- 1) Nominal - the individual contemplates the work in a reflective manner;
- 2) Directed - the individual completes a simple task of contributing to the creation of the work;

- 3) Creative - the individual provides content for a component of the work within a structure established by the artist; and
- 4) Collaborative - the individual shares responsibility for developing the structure and content of the work in collaboration with the artist. Some of these typologies of participation are present in the two projects that will be analysed and whose methodologies have allowed for reflection based on personal, social and cultural dimensions.

Considering the various dimensions that make up the artistic project, namely in terms of the creative process, the conditions of dissemination and reception by the public, as well as the multiple readings carried out *a posteriori*, it is important to establish an analysis methodology that allows for a global understanding of the different works. To this end, the two selected projects will be analysed using an analysis structure that takes us through three layers of information:

- a) Contextualisation, identifying the date, location, scope of the project and the ways in which its participants took part, enabling an initial approach to the work carried out;
- b) Artistic and creative process, analysis of the themes addressed and the internal structure of each of the interventions that make up the project, which may include different artistic languages at plastic, photographic and/or audiovisual level, considering internal and external aspects. As for the internal nature, the themes addressed will be emphasised through a compositional and interpretative analysis that will focus on aspects such as context, narrative and technique, making it possible to understand the aesthetic and discursive dimensions. On the other hand, we will consider external aspects that refer to the deviations from the initial ideas that occurred during the creative processes. These external factors allow us to understand the artist's decision-making regarding aesthetic and discursive choices in relation to the themes worked on and the involvement (participation and/or collaboration) of communities in these choices;
- c) Dissemination of projects, which focuses on the communication modalities intrinsic to the narrative, discursive and aesthetic strategies mentioned above, considering the links between form, content, processes and dissemination formats that aim to affirm a given message within and outside the community and to spread the different types of community participation in the creative process and their perception of the final products.

For this research, a semi-structured interview was also carried out in order to gather information directly from the artist Vhils, taking into account his knowledge, values and experiences about his artistic and creative processes and, more specifically, about the selected projects. According to Tuckman (2000, p. 518), the interview is one of the most direct processes for finding information about a particular phenomenon, where the answers found reflect the perceptions, interests and knowledge of each of the participants.

3. Results

By linking artistic processes with *site-specific* interventions, it is possible to establish a series of approaches to the problem involving conceptions of the community and their respective degrees of participation in these practices (collaboration, co-creation, fruition). In this sense, two participatory and/or collaborative artistic proposals in the field of *street art* were chosen for analysis, in order to understand the level of participation and positioning of the communities in relation to the creative processes and the artist himself, and the repercussions these have had on their lives.

In carrying out projects with these characteristics, Vhils combines interventions in the urban space, where social exclusion is sometimes present, with works of different characteristics that are realised with the communities and are destined for exhibitions that mark the closure of these projects with the aim of giving the work back to the communities, giving them a voice and visibility.

3.1. Artistic projects developed with the community

3.1.1. "Fragments" project Rio de Janeiro - Brazil, 2013

Developed between October 2012 and May 2013, the project called "Fragments" began with the artist travelling to Morro da Providência - Rio de Janeiro, where he made a series of six interventions with the faces of residents who were going through a process of expropriation, which included the demolition of the houses they had always lived in. On the one hand, Vhils wanted to draw attention to the importance of the connection and ties that people establish with the places where they were born and have always lived and, on the other, to focus on that political and social situation through the media, so that the local authorities can find ways to resolve these setbacks.

This problem of expropriation and demolition of housing, which began in 2010, has once again become a focus of attention for the City Council with the approach of the World Cup and the Olympic Games. Among other places, Morro da Providência, Rio de Janeiro's oldest *favela*, was subject to a redevelopment project that included a cable car, an inclined plane and some new roads. As mentioned in the film directed by João Moreira (2013), during the expropriation process 832 houses were demolished, meaning that a third of the population was forced to leave their homes, causing the community to break up.

Faced with this reality, the artist and his team, guided by Maurício Hora (a local resident, photographer and social activist), set out to meet and identify the people who were in this situation, carry out interviews in order to listen to and record their stories, memories and concerns, do photo shoots and excavate their faces in the buildings or walls that remained of them. Referring to this phase of approaching the community, Vhils (2015) says

There was an approach to a local association (...) the expropriation process was underway, somehow a dispute between the residents and the City Hall. They were interested in doing a kind of residency project (...) their idea was purely artistic with a workshop involving the community.

During this initial phase, *Vhils* realised that the rehousing processes proposed by the Prefeitura had not covered everyone in the community and that some families had been left without their own homes, continuing to live in the favela with friends or relatives. According to Vhils (2015), these people had been expropriated but remained in the favela because they couldn't be integrated into the rehousing processes. As for the residents who were rehoused in other areas of the city, they showed some resistance to leaving the place where they had lived for many years and where several generations of their family had been born.

Realising that this situation of transition and pressure that the community was suffering was not being focused on by the media, becoming an invisible problem outside the affected area, the artist decided to develop a work that focused on some elements of this community.

This process began with filmed interviews with each of the people involved, who recounted their entire experience, what they had been through and their relationship with the space, followed by a photographic session. One example is resident Edson da Silva Oliveira, better known as Mr Edinho (fig.1).

Figure 1

Frames of Vhils (2012)



Source: João Pedro Moreira.

After this process, the artist analyses the captured photographs and digitally creates the drawing that will be projected onto the chosen wall. Once the drawing has been transferred to the wall, the process of excavating the image begins with the help of various hammers and chisels until the portrait is completed, which in this project's interventions has acquired three layers of color (fig. 2).

Figure 2.

Vhils, 2012. Mr Edson da Silva Oliveira. Morro da Providência, Brazil.



Source: João Moreira.

Realising the potential of this type of work to draw attention to the real problems faced by the population, the artist emphasises the role that the media can play in disseminating information

When they went there to report on my work, they also talked about the person who had lived there. I realised the kind of power this art/intervention has, to put the focus on situations.

Like Mr Edinho, the other five inhabitants portrayed by the artist were expropriated from their homes at a time when Morro da Providência was calmer due to a pacification process that encompassed the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro. For the artist, the reasons that led the City Council to displace and consequently fragment this community are related to economic factors aimed at destroying the housing in the Morro to make way for luxury developments in that area of Rio de Janeiro, due to the appreciation of the property sector.

Going through the same processes mentioned above, also depicted on the walls of Morro da Providência were: Mr. Piolho; Mr Ananias who, for a long time, played the role of the postman who refused to go up to Morro to deliver the mail personally door to door for security reasons; Fabrícia and Camilly Florenço Nunes, mother and daughter (fig.3), who were 20 years old and eight years old respectively, and saw their wishes thwarted by the forced resettlement programme; Mr. Elias Aparecido Dias, better known in the community as Cuca; and lastly, Mr. Humberto Luís dos Santos.

Figure 3.

Vhils, 2012. Fabrícia and Camilly Florenço Nunes.. Morro da Providência, Brazil



Source: João Moreira

This project also included a video, directed by João Pedro Moreira and produced by 78 Rotações and Vhils Studio. In this video, entitled "Vhils / Providência / Brazil", which lasts 5.10 minutes, the artist aims to give a voice to the people who live there, allowing them to express their opinions and points of view on the situation they are going through. These considerations made by the residents during the interviews were also documented through other media, such as social networks.

With this project, the artist created a symbolic representation of the lives of these people, in order to preserve the individual and collective memory of the community through a bet that involved creating a focus of attention, the aim of which was not to criticise, but to call for the

City Hall to resolve these situations in an equal way and through a balanced dialogue with the residents.

The second phase of the "Fragments" project took place a year later, as part of the celebrations for the Year of Portugal in Brazil, which took place between April and May 2013, in the Copacabana and Botafogo areas. Once again, the artist reflected on the processes of transformation that have affected the lives of that population, establishing a relationship between the contrasting socio-economic realities.

Vhils assumes that by working with the city as a raw material, the relationship between the individuals and their environment is mutually moulded, generating a critical reflection on the urban environment, socio-economic relations and their consequences. This working process gave rise to a video that shows the daily life of the population of Ladeira dos Tabajaras through the artist's eyes.

In this phase, a set of five faces were sculpted in three areas of Rio de Janeiro: a) Ladeira dos Tabajaras, Copacabana; b) in a building near the Siqueira Campos metro station, Copacabana; c) and at Rua Teresa Guimarães, number 35, in Botafogo.

These parietal interventions were realised using the same work processes developed by the artist a year earlier in Morro da Providência: a) approaching the community; b) identifying the residents; c) interviewing them; d) taking photographs; e) digitally editing the photographs; f) transferring the drawing to the wall; g) the excavation process (fig.4).

Figure 4.

Excavation Process in 2013



Source: João Moreira

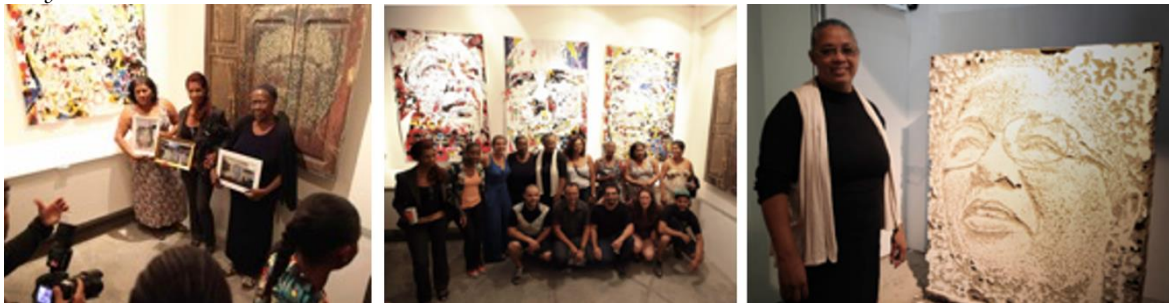
This project culminated in an exhibition of the artist's work on Brazilian soil at the Clark Art Centre Gallery, where fifteen new works were exhibited on various supports collected around the city, including wooden doors and windows, layers of posters, a wall with the face of a resident, Sister Fátima, which was transposed from the outside to the inside of the museum, and installations that gave the public the opportunity to view videos of all the stages of the work process.

In this project, the impact on the community can be analysed in two ways: on the one hand, through the working and interpersonal relationship that was established between the artist and the residents involved in the respective intervention context, and on the other, through

the holding of an exhibition that culminated in the presentation of some of the works in the presence of most of those involved in the process (fig. 5). This joint presentation of a piece of work in which many people took part made it possible to give visibility, voice, confidence and self-esteem to an entire community, once again drawing the attention of the different media to the problems that plague these communities.

Figure 5.

Visit by Morros residents to the exhibition, 2013



Source: Joaquim Henriques

This invitation to the residents to visit the exhibition, as well as the offer of a printed photograph of the building where his face was excavated, were two ways in which the artist thanked them. For some, this invitation was their first time in a gallery and the chance to have direct contact with works of art.

By using portraits of people who live or have lived in the area or who have a strong relationship with it, the artist gives a new face to the city, as he often says in interviews: "to give a face to the city to give meaning to the citizens and remind them that they are not just another person in the crowd" (The Telegraph, 2008).

3.1.2. "Bairro 6 de Maio" project Amadora-Portugal, 2017

In 2017, a project was launched in Bairro 6 de Maio, in Amadora, where six portraits were painted on some of the walls that had not yet been demolished in the neighbourhood. According to the artist Vhils (2017).

I painted the faces of some of the inhabitants of this neighbourhood that is being demolished and evicted, where they are leaving people on the street with no viable alternative to living with a roof over their heads. Those who were left off the 1993 PER register are seeing the house they lived in destroyed, with all their belongings left on the street. All this in the 21st century, in Portugal, in the European Union. When these walls where the faces of these residents are marked are demolished, let's take a moment to reflect that it's not just cement and bricks that are being destroyed. They are destroying the lives of people who have lived and are living in hardship and who are now having their most basic right taken away: housing.

This project began with a reconnaissance of the area, with the help of former residents who established the link between the inhabitants of the neighbourhood and the artist's team. During this reconnaissance, we identified the people who were willing to take part and those who made the walls of their homes available for the intervention.

This was followed by the process of decaling the drawing onto the walls at night using a projector (fig. 6), and finally painting their faces on the walls, such as Mrs. Ondina Tavares, who has lived in the neighbourhood for 16 years, and her neighbour and musician Katuta Branca (fig. 7).

Figure 6.

Frame of an interview with Joana Gorjão Henriques e Frederico Batista, 2017.



Source: Jornal Público

Figure 7.

Vhils, 2017. Interventions in Bairro 6 de Maio - Amadora



Source: José Amaral

A year after implementing the project in this neighbourhood in Amadora, the artist was invited to exhibit some of his work in the exhibition "Tirar Polo Natural", which was on show at the National Museum of Ancient Art in Lisbon between 29 June and 14 October 2018. With the aim of giving visibility to the community of Bairro 6 de Maio, the artist decided to sculpt the faces of former residents on a wall and create a video with part of the interviews so that

the public could listen and view them during the exhibition. This intervention by Vhils (fig. 8) could be seen in an exhibition that brought together approximately 150 works of portrait art from different historical periods (from the Middle Ages to the 19th century) and from multiple artistic disciplines, from various national and prestigious international institutions and collectors, such as the Prado Museum or the National Gallery of Parma.

Figure 8.

Vhils, 2018. National Museum of Ancient Art



Source: Joana Matos.

This crossing of styles, categories and genres has made it possible to put together the work of Vhils (b. 1987), a contemporary artist who is part of the street art scene, and works by artists such as Cristóvão de Morais (b. 1539-1580), Joseph Goupy (1689-1769), Domingos António de Sequeira (1768-1837), Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso (1887-1917), Columbano Bordalo Pinheiro (1857-1929), Aurélia de Souza (1866-1922), Júlio Pomar (1926-2018) Lourdes de Castro (b. 1930), Helena Almeida (b. 1934), Paula Rego (b. 1935), Julião Sarmento (b. 1948), among others.

Although it was made for this exhibition at the National Museum of Ancient Art, this intervention was based on a project the artist had already started a year earlier in Bairro da Damaia, the aim of which was to give a voice to the residents who had been evicted from the neighbourhood where they had always lived since coming to Portugal. Entitled "6 de Maio", this work was produced based on the testimony gathered from three former inhabitants of the neighbourhood: Tukaz, better known as UPA, aged 35, Mr. Avelino, aged 52, and 86-year-old Mrs. Carlota. Born in São Tomé, Mrs. Carlota left her country in search of better living conditions and came to live in Damaia-Lisbon, where she stayed for 43 years until she was evicted from the neighbourhood and the community. After moving into a building against her will, her life has never been the same, marked by the unhappiness in her eyes and in every word she uttered during the interview: "In Damaia everyone helps. Here I'm in a cage." (Carlota, 2007). This video, produced for the exhibition and featuring excerpts from the interview conducted by the artist, ended up being a tribute to this resident who died two months after filming.

Composed of these two elements, the purpose of the work was to bring the neighbourhood inside the museum by moving a wall from one of the houses into the exhibition space. The artist excavated the portraits of three generations of residents - one of the founders of the neighbourhood, an older resident and a young activist - inside the museum using hammers and drills. Contrary to Francisco de Holanda, who stated in his treatise that not everyone

deserved to have their effigy materialised, Vhils contributed to a discussion about the status of the portrait as a clearly socialised record. These portraits of the voiceless had the opportunity to be in the same place as other recognised works of Portuguese art history. However, this situation has provoked some controversy due to the fact that it pits against each other works that belong to a culture traditionally described as "erudite", elitist, such as 15th or 16th century paintings, and contemporary works that are somewhat popularised, such as Vhils's portraits. According to Filipa Oliveira, the curator of this exhibition, the aim of inviting the artist was to show that portraits can have different ways of being thought about and made.

This portrait of the street that Vhils brings, this drawing in the street by those who are from the street and who normally never have the right to enter the museum, is something that was very important for us to bring to this exhibition.

This two-stage project represents a convergence between art and society, in the sense that by transforming neglected urban spaces into more aesthetically appealing places due to its interventions, it promotes reflection and dialogue on social issues, namely social change and urban renewal.

4. Discussion

Analysing the two projects mentioned above allows us to identify some points that converge on common issues worth discussing.

Firstly, we can mention that the city is a raw material for the artist, since it is possible to collect a variety of materials that can be used in his interventions, along with the walls and streets of the city, the most degraded spaces in the urban environment, which are possible supports on which the artist can leave his mark. We assume that this same urbanised space encompasses a vast political, social and cultural domain whose economic growth and the expansion of the city may be at the root of a loss or reconfiguration of identity as contrasts of surfaces, materials and feelings.

Another characteristic identified refers to the ability of his projects to capture the public's attention at different moments: a) during the execution of the destructive technique he uses; b) through the monumental-scale faces that result from the whole process; c) and finally, a more subtle moment that concerns the deterioration of the intervention, realised naturally through the passage of time.

The ephemeral nature of the works analysed is an important aspect for Vhils, as it signifies the transience of things since everything changes and nothing lasts forever, highlighting the contrast between the glamour of the new and the decay of the old. All this ephemeral nature that can be observed on the street says a lot about the state of people and their way of life at a given time. This ephemerality means that the artist and his team attach great importance to video and photography as a record of the work process and the final product, for subsequent dissemination in the media and on social networks such as *facebook*, *instagram* or *youtube*. In this respect, Schiller & Schiller (2010) states that

Today's street artists diagram and print their images on photocopying machines; they are photographers as they document their work and they are sculptors as they search the city streets to define the appropriate building for their piece. The internet, combined with the digital camera, has allowed artists to see work from all over the world overnight. (p. 11)

With regard to the theme represented, the portrait, we can say that the artist has developed an approach to social and cultural issues which, on the scale of a globalised culture, seeks to highlight both the particularities of a local community and the transversality of the issues analysed in the two projects. Between the representation of the individualised portrait and the depersonalisation of the face, there are localised events resulting from global phenomena such as the growing urbanisation of societies, pressure from real estate, the appropriation of Western ways of life and the dilution of local cultures.

The more or less explicit declaration of these problems as a way of provoking reflection stands out in the work of Vhils, who finally combines technical knowledge based on experimental practice with an aesthetic discourse that rescues a symbol of Western art (the human figure) as a support for plastic and discursive intervention, and an interface of a conceptual, sociological, cultural and ideological nature.

Artistic practices that involve community participation call for an intersubjective dimension from which social, cultural and economic issues emerge that establish a clear link between the local and global scales. The artistic process of excavating, engraving, exploding or uncovering the multiple layers that make up the skin of cities, places and spaces of intervention is finally assumed as a metaphor for an archaeology of contemporary society that reveals the complexity hidden behind a daily life apparently governed by cultural and social habitus.

As an artist who works closely with communities, many projects are developed on the streets with the involvement of the local community. The initial ideas and preparatory work may take place in a physical space, but the rest of the project ends up on the street under the watchful eye of the citizens. According to Costa (2015, p. 78), for this artist the urban space is simultaneously a studio, gallery, platform and point of contact with the community, "the street is the space for intervention and the raw material to work with; the city is the theme, the support and the frame".

These types of proposals seek to stimulate artistic and collective creation within communities, culminating in an aesthetic and political project, in terms of its social dimension. This is a collaborative method that develops between a professional artist and a previously identified community, in which both the creative process and the artistic product are important. According to the Ontario Arts Council (1998), the broad scope of the *community art* definition means that it is difficult to distinguish between community arts and projects that actually involve community participation

Given the breadth of its definition, community arts is sometimes difficult to distinguish from those projects that have components of community activity. What separates genuine projects from others is the nature of the collaborative process and the active, co-creative involvement of the artist and the community. (p. 7)

In the specific case of the projects analysed, we can assume that the interventions and exhibitions held at the end of each cycle made it possible to give visibility to vital problems in local communities, such as urban regeneration programmes, forced evictions and involuntary resettlements, while at the same time expressing concerns and reflecting on the devastating consequences of a single market-oriented regeneration model that devalues the resident. For this reason, we can say that this type of artistic practice can act as a catalyst for triggering change within these communities.

5. Conclusions

The work of Alexandre Farto, aka *Vhils*, is fuelled by several legacies: on the one hand, the clean grammar present in the classic conservatism of his portraits, as can be seen in his various interventions around the world. On the other hand, it stems from the artist's reflection on the role of the ordinary citizen who wanders around the city and the problems he faces on a daily basis, while at the same time using abrasive processes, such as drills or explosives, to represent these same citizens, sometimes identified, but often incognito.

When we focus on projects developed by the artist with the direct and/or collaborative participation of the community in urban spaces, as is the case with the two projects analysed above, we believe that this type of artistic practice has the potential to change and improve perspectives on the reality and issues in question, but also the way that community looks at itself. According to Saraiva (2013, p.131), artistic practices with communities assume a dual identity between the art world and the political and social world, since these projects involve other contexts beyond the artistic, generating meaningful discussions for the community in question.

We believe that these project typologies intersect the artist's individual journey, his expectations and his personal and collective frames of reference. According to Sequeira (2015)

Street art initiatives, as contexts for its practice, can also be a way of establishing dialogues between artists, promoters and local populations, and also contribute to a certain sense of place by working on themes related to its history and cultural specificities. (p. 263)

It is also important to mention that these work dynamics make it possible to establish relationships of sociability between the artists and the communities, while at the same time fostering greater acceptance and recognition of the work on the part of the public, who will be able to critically confront the artist in terms of ideas and decision-making. According to Pasternak (2010, p. 308) these types of projects with social and political purposes "challenge notions of the artist's role in society, advocate meaningful exchanges with diverse audiences and promote ideas for effective social change."

As part of the links between artistic practices and the community, we should also mention the ways in which worldviews and/or problems experienced in a shared way are expressed. It is therefore essential to understand the context in which the intervention takes place, which will allow us to perceive the contingencies of a physical nature (materials and techniques used) and/or of an aesthetic nature. In other words, the way it is represented in the work will always contribute to its own unmistakable language, while at the same time strengthening its aesthetic significance.

These practices are often used to stimulate dialogue and encourage the self-empowerment of communities through collaborative artistic processes with the artists sharing their perspectives with a wider audience. As far as *Vhils*'s work is concerned, it has significantly amplified his impact by promoting greater engagement, empowerment and social cohesion in that community.

6. References

- Athins, R. (1997). *Art Speak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords, 1945 to the Present*. Abeville Press.
- Costa, F. D. (2015). *Atelier - Portraits of the Foundation*. Francisco Manuel dos Santos Foundation.
- Congdon, K., Blandy, D., & Bolin, P. (2001). *Histories of community-based art education*. National Art Education Association.
- Pasternak, A. (2010). Just Do It. In E. Seno (Eds.). *Trespass. An Uncommissioned History of Urban Art* (pp. 306-309). Taschen.
- Pereira, T., & Sá, K. (2016). Visual Arts and Community: artistic practices with higher education students. *Revista Medi@ções*, 4(2), 24-50. <https://doi.org/10.60546/mo.v4i2.129>
- Saraiva, C. (2013). Art and Community: A poetic archive on Ageing. *Vox Musei Magazine. Arte e Património*, 1(2), 128 -138. <https://issuu.com/fbaul/docs/digital/128>
- Schiller, M., & Schiller, S. (2010). City View. In Seno, E. (Eds.). *Trespass. Uncommissioned History of Urban Art* (pp. 10-11). Taschen.
- Sequeira, Á. (2015). The city is the habitat of art: Street art and the construction of public space in Lisbon (PhD Thesis). ISCTE - University Institute of Lisbon, Lisbon.
- Tuckman, B. (2000). *Handbook of Research in Education*. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

FINANCING

Financiación: This research received external funding from the Polytechnic University of Setúbal (Portugal).

AUTHOR:**Joana Gaudêncio Matos**

Polytechnic University of Setúbal, School of Education, Campus do Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal, Estefanilha, 2914-503 Setúbal, Portugal. Centre for Research and Studies in Fine Arts, Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Lisbon, Portugal.

Joana Gaudêncio Matos, PhD in Fine Arts from the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon; Master's and Licentiate in Teaching Visual and Technological Education from the School of Education of the Polytechnic of Setúbal. As a researcher, she has published in the areas of Visual Arts and Art Education, fields in which she has developed practical and theoretical action. As a teacher, researcher and visual artist, she has organised various research projects involving different areas of knowledge. In the field of photography and street art, she has developed collaborative projects with different communities. She is currently a lecturer at the Setúbal's and the Lisbon's Polytechnic Universitys of Education.

joana.isabel.matos@ese.ips.pt

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5406-8340>

Cienciavitaes ID: <https://www.cienciavitaes.pt/6819-396E-C9F7>