

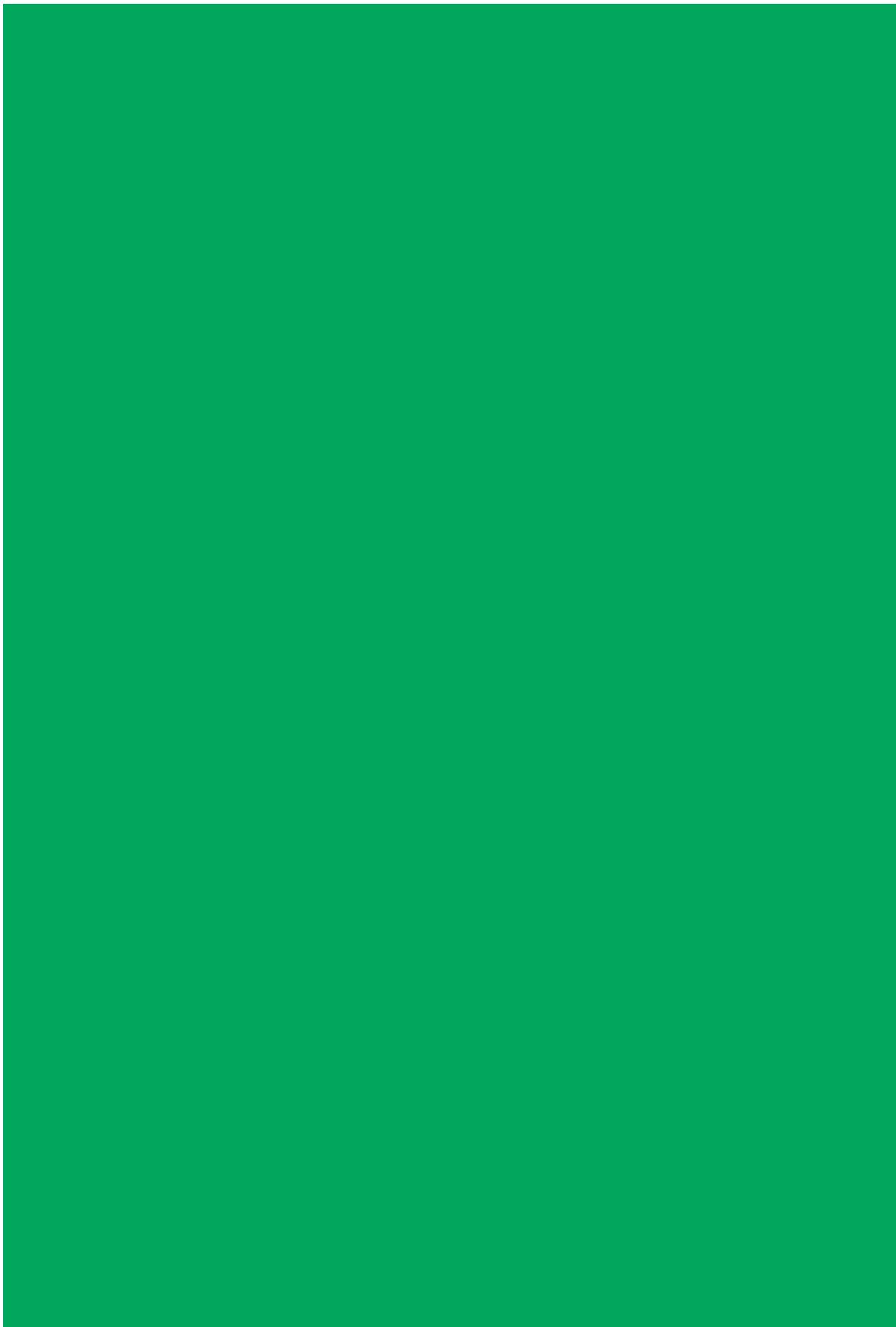


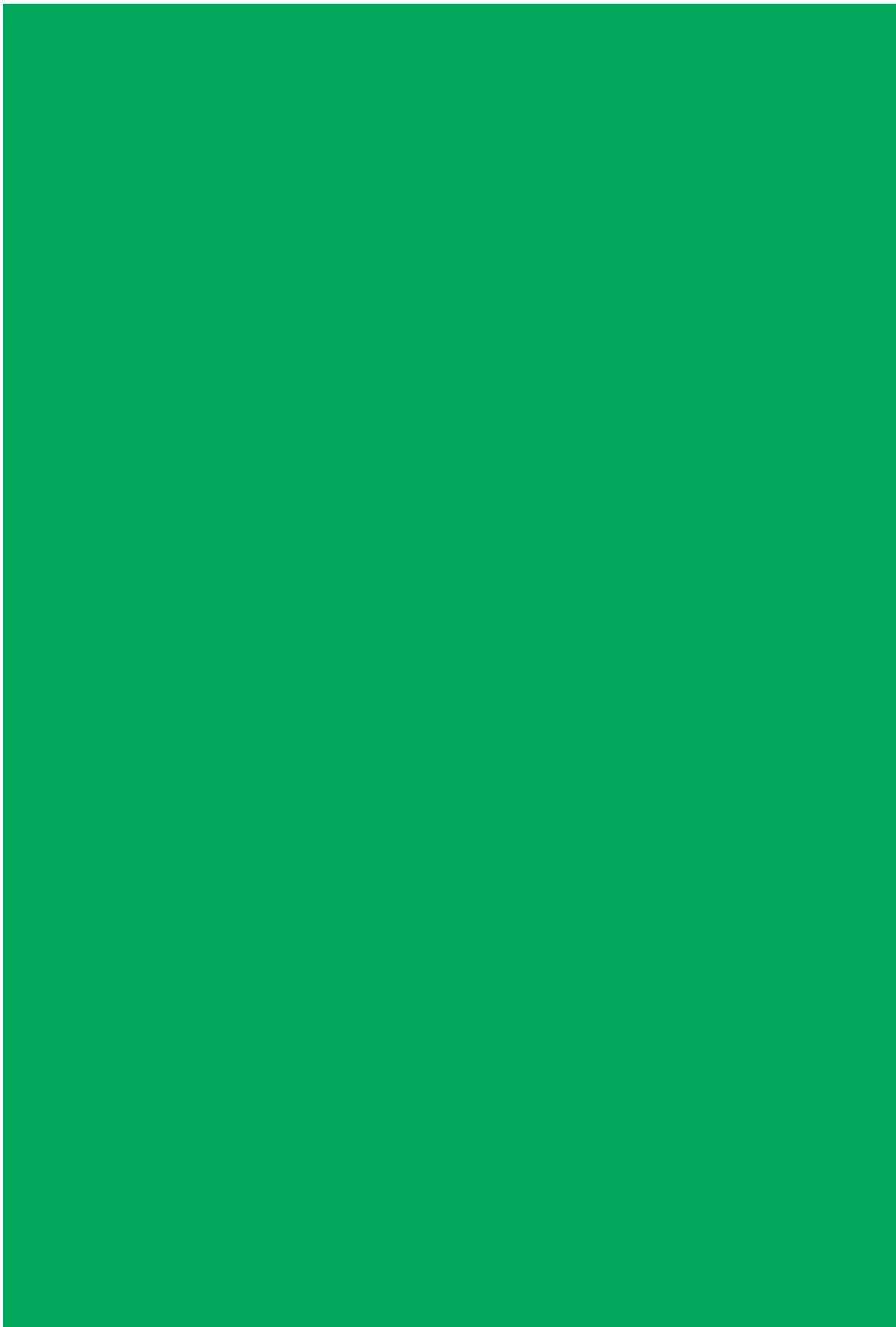
# crossmedia arts

## creative assemblages for social impact

Editors  
António Gorgel Pinto  
Paula Reaes Pinto  
Sérgio Vicente

calei  
dosc  
ópio







creative  
assemblages

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**Creative Assemblages for Social Impact**

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## Unidos venceremos!

# A transdisciplinary approach to participatory public sculpture in Canal Caveira, Portugal

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores a transdisciplinary approach to participatory public sculpture, focusing on the project Unidos Venceremos! – Arte e Comunidade em Debate as a case study. This project was developed in the village of Canal Caveira, in the municipality of Grândola, Portugal, in 2024, and it started as a proposal from the municipality to engage the local population in a participatory process, with the purpose of creating a monument to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Portuguese 25th of April Revolution. A multidisciplinary team - composed by artists, anthropologists, architects - built the mediation process and invited the local population for a 'collective construction' project. The current case study explores the citizen's involvement in public space reconfiguration through a process where the co-creation of a public artwork transcends its aesthetic and symbolic purpose, integrating functionality and the endogenous flora of the territory, ultimately nurturing an ecological intervention into the shared space. The article focuses on concrete examples how transdisciplinary collaboration among mediators allowed the project to evolve beyond its initial premises. By dissolving rather than reinforcing disciplinary boundaries - and thus avoiding the confinement of the artwork within a specific disciplinary category - this transdisciplinary process placed citizen agency at the core of decision-making, shaping a more inclusive transformation of public space.

### KEYWORDS

Public sculpture, transdisciplinarity, participatory art, co-creation, citizens agency

## Introduction

By exploring the transdisciplinary dimension of participatory public sculpture, this study provides examples of how the academic diversity of the mediation team – composed by artists, architects and anthropologists - influences both internal collaboration and community engagement, providing the conditions for an artwork that integrates both functionality and symbolism.

The project Unidos Venceremos! – Art and Community in Debate is an example of this approach, promoting a co-creation process in which citizens actively engage in the conception of a public sculpture. In this article, we begin by providing a brief contextualization of the community and the project. Next, we focus on transdisciplinarity, differentiating the concept from other approaches, such as interdisciplinarity - and exemplify how this process is operationalized in the present case study, emphasizing, in particular, the importance of intersubjectivity in the collective conceptualization and resignification of both the sculpture and the surrounding public space. In the final section, we address the expansion of the project into the landscape, incorporating endogenous trees in the area surrounding the public artwork.

Rather than adhering to rigid definitions of sculpture, urban design, or architecture, this project embraces a dynamic process, in which emerging concepts from the community shape the final artwork. Focusing solely on fixed concepts that crystallize disciplinary dialogues would mean, from the beginning, rejecting functionality, an essential need for the citizens in this case study. It is precisely this possibility of integration, beyond disciplinary boundaries, that we seek to demonstrate, bringing to light how such an approach was made possible.

## Brief contextualization of the project

Canal Caveira is a village located in the municipality of Grândola, Alentejo, formed in the confluence of two rural properties, (Canal and Caveira "herdades"), a place called originally São Lourenço, near the Canal Caveira railway station and the National Route259. Before the A2 motorway was built, this was the main road to the Algarve, and Canal Caveira became a well-known place, where it was possible to make a stop on the long car journey, to rest and satisfy the stomach. This crossroad location conditioned the village urban growth, as the residential part of Canal Caveira is hidden behind the continuous facade of restaurants and storages next to the National Road. The village is composed mainly by two roads, parallel to the Nacional Route. It doesn't have the organic structure of Alentejo villages, which usually expand more or less homogeneously from a central point, where the services (church, bank, cafes, post office) are located. Here, the 'centre' is a

multifunctional Community Centre where all the collective activities take place. It is located at one end of the village and is a building built in the 'new neighbourhood', the Unidos Venceremos (operations SAAL - Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local) neighbourhood, a housing complex of 46 single-family homes that began to be built in 1978 under the guidance of the municipality of Grândola, and occupies more or less half of the village perimeter. The other half is still known, by the residents, as the São Lourenço side.

Fifty years after the revolution, this participatory sculpture project revives the principles of self-construction from the SAAL initiative and once again fosters debate and reflection on public space. The project aligns with the methodological framework established in other participatory public art projects, such as the *Monumento à Multiculturalidade* (2011/2013, Monte de Caparica) and *Um Monumento para o Lousal* (2018/2021), which share the premise of co-creation with the community. However, it distinguishes itself through multiple factors, as each group of participants is unique, reflecting the social, cultural, and territorial specificities of the region.

On the other hand, the academic team members, which play a mediating and structuring role in the sessions, carry with them social representations that shape their unique identities. These representations are not static (Moscovici, 1981; Vala, 1986), they evolve over time, influenced both by the experience accumulated in previous projects and by the intersubjective dynamics established with new groups of citizens. Thus, this project does not merely replicate pre-existing methodologies but continuously adapts to the singularities of individuals, the context, and the territory in which it is located.

In this case study, the region's environmental context presents key challenges: located in the South of Portugal, where temperatures are high during the Summer, it is an arid area, and the scarcity of shaded spaces and outdoor resting areas is a significant issue for residents. The following section examines how these needs were identified by the mediating team and subsequently incorporated into the artistic creation process.

## **Transdisciplinarity, intersubjectivity, and social representations in the creation of the artwork**

### **From interdisciplinarity to transdisciplinarity**

The initial proposal presented to CIEBA – Centro de Investigação e de Estudos em Belas-Artes – aimed to explore how socially engaged artistic creation functions as a tool for action and reflection within key discourses on art as social practice (Vicente, 2023). Additionally,

the methodological premises were guided by a transdisciplinary approach, promoting the involvement of different scientific fields and the engagement of other R&D centers (idem). Thus, a transdisciplinary perspective, was, from the beginning, intertwined with participatory processes.

According to Olga Pombo (2021), interdisciplinarity can be understood as a specific way of producing knowledge, particularly in contemporality. It involves the need, for each discipline, to engage in dialogue with others, transferring concepts, hypotheses, methodologies, and technologies. It does not advocate for the disappearance of disciplines or the subordination of some to others. Instead, it demonstrates that knowledge has reached a point where each field requires connections with others to continue its program or trajectory. For this reason, interdisciplinarity can be considered a network strategy to solve complex problems that cannot be addressed by a single discipline.

Interdisciplinarity illustrates that the mode of knowledge production has evolved to a stage where each field (or discipline) must establish connections with others (not necessarily closely related fields) in order to sustain its progress.

Transdisciplinarity, in turn, extends interdisciplinarity beyond the cognitive realm, encompassing artistic, philosophical, political, and technological dimensions. It seeks to understand this interconnectedness (brought about by interdisciplinarity) in a broader sense and represents an expansion of the interdisciplinary concept to areas that are not immediately cognitive, reflecting the complexity of the contemporary world. Thus, the author argues that interdisciplinarity is a cognitive issue, whereas transdisciplinarity is a vital one.

Sue McGregor (2015) also discusses transdisciplinarity, identifying two main approaches: the Nicolescuian perspective and the Zurich approach. The Nicolescuian perspective is rooted in metaphysics, quantum physics, and complexity science. This approach seeks to establish a new ontology (reality), logic, and epistemology (knowledge as complex and emergent). For Niculescu, transdisciplinarity aims to unify knowledge from disparate sources, connecting the Object (science) with the Subject (humans). The author proposed that transdisciplinary ontology encompasses ten different Realities, organized into three levels: the internal world of humans, the external world, and a third mediating level, the "Hidden Third." In contrast, the Zurich approach focuses on the joint resolution of problems related to the science-technology-society triad. This approach defines transdisciplinarity as a new form of learning and problem-solving that involves cooperation between different sectors of society.

McGregor (idem) highlights that while both approaches are concerned with science, society, and the complexity of the contemporary world,

they conceptualize transdisciplinarity at fundamentally different levels. The Nicolescuian perspective emphasizes complexity through three key axioms (ontology, logic, and epistemology), whereas the Zurich group focuses on how to conduct science and research differently to accommodate complexity. Furthermore, for Nicolescu, transdisciplinarity exists between disciplines, across different disciplines, and beyond all disciplines. In contrast, the Zurich approach narrows the definition, asserting that transdisciplinarity pertains to the interaction between disciplines within social constraints.

Therefore, the key issue lies in the implementation of an approach that may either lead to the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries or, alternatively, align with the consistency and preservation of epistemological limits, which, in turn, adapt to the complexity that characterizes reality. In addition, these epistemological boundaries can themselves be challenged by expanding, in certain contexts, the very concepts that structure disciplines. For instance, Hal Foster (1996) reflects on the proximity between contemporary art and ethnography, discussing how artists adopt ethnographic and anthropological methodologies in community-based artistic processes. However, Foster (idem) also raises concerns regarding the risks of such an approximation or methodological appropriation without proper critical engagement, which, in our view, stems from a foundational knowledge of the respective disciplines involved.

In this case, collaborative practice - integrating various mediating agents, such as architects, anthropologists, artists and students - constitutes the fundamental base for unveiling a transdisciplinary approach, expanding the scope of artistic intervention, and fostering a process in which citizens actively participate in the transformation of their environment through co-creation.

### The transdisciplinary dynamics in practice

In this case study, all the members of the academic team actively participated in the mediation process with the citizens, regardless of their specific disciplinary backgrounds. As a result, not only was there a methodological horizontality, but all team members played an active role in shaping the experience. During the sessions, no rigidly assigned roles were enforced; instead, the team adopted a flexible approach, adapting to emerging dynamics and the evolving needs of participants. In this sense, the active mediation of the entire team was crucial in ensuring that citizens could freely express their ideas.

Intersubjectivity played a central role in the participatory process, both in the preparation phase - where the team engaged in dialogue, structured the sessions, and critically reflected on the different

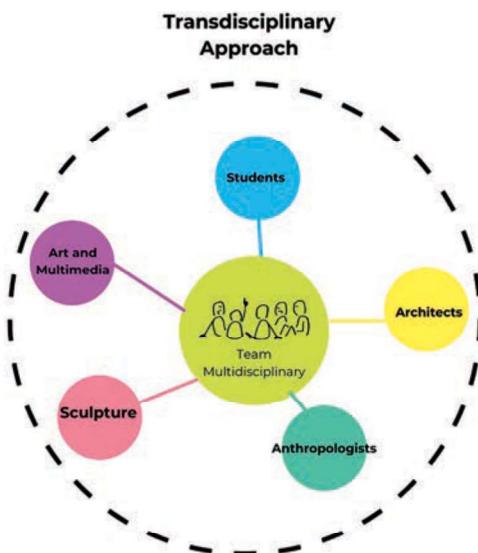


Figure 1 – Transdisciplinary approach scheme.

stages of the project - and during the sessions themselves, in direct interaction with the citizens. Drawing on the perspective of Husserl & Brough (1991) - who argue that intersubjectivity does not imply the uniformization of perceptions, but rather a space for negotiating different subjectivities - and on Freire's (1967) dialogical process, the mediators sought, throughout the sessions, to extract content through empathy and active listening. Their objective was not to impose fixed or rigid social representations, but rather to re-signify, support, and amplify the voices of the participating citizens, while remaining fully aware that, as mediators, their own perception of reality may always instill meaning and feeling.

On the other hand, in the process of designing each session, the approach was closer to interdisciplinarity or to the concept of transdisciplinarity derived from the narrower definition of Zurich (McGregor, 2015). Although the horizontality of processes remained a guiding principle, the preparation of the sessions relied on different contributions, depending on their nature and specific objectives. In a non-rigid manner, each discipline played a more significant role in shaping particular moments.

For instance, in the preparation of all sessions, the anthropologists emphasized the importance of randomly assigning participants to tables, preventing the formation of pre-structured groups. This strategy aimed to stimulate dialogue between different perspectives and ensure a more equitable participation among all citizens, guaranteeing that every voice was heard in the co-creation process.

Specifically, in the preparation of the first session, although members from different academic backgrounds were involved in the process, anthropology played a predominant role in conceptualizing the session, while the arts had a greater influence on its formalization. The focus on the genealogical and professional mapping of families aimed, not only to foster a reflection on the evolution of labor practices over time, and their historical and cultural significance within the local context, but also to serve as an icebreaker to encourage engagement and dialogue. When designing the second session, the team members identified, not only the data emerging from the previous session, but also the significance of citizens' spontaneous discussions about public space and their needs. This was only possible through the implementation of participatory methodologies, in which intersubjectivity played a fundamental role. In this sense, all team members made significant contributions to defining the objectives of the second session, ensuring that the concerns raised in the first stage were duly considered and integrated into the project's development. This step was crucial, as taking into account citizens' concerns regarding public space, the second session moved away from a rigid and purely symbolic definition of the sculpture. During the session, citizens were invited to design solutions for the surrounding public space, considering not only the sculpture itself but also the infrastructure around it. As a result, the fundamental need for elements such as trees, shade, resting areas (benches and/or tables), and access to water became evident. This moment marked a turning point in the case study, as rather than being conceived as an isolated object, the sculpture began to be thought as part of an integrated urban ecosystem.

In preparation for the third session, all team members actively participated in conceptualizing a question board (Who are we? Where do we live? What do we do? What do we want for the sculpture?). The initial idea, proposed by the artists, consisted of a rotating board where each group would answer one question before passing it to the next table, which would continue the process by responding to a new question based on the previous answers. However, the Anthropology team raised methodological and social concerns, arguing that this dynamic could become overly complex for participants and, more importantly, could compromise citizen agency. By fragmenting the responses and preventing participants from following the progressive construction of their ideas, there was a risk of diluting both individual and collective narratives, making the activity less meaningful. As a result, an alternative approach was chosen - each table would have a single board with no rotation - ensuring that all citizens in each group could develop a coherent narrative sequence from start to finish. The role of anthropology was thus crucial in ensuring that the methodology reinforced citizen agency.

While planning the fourth session, the contribution of the anthropologists once again played a crucial role in the project, suggesting the creation of 'word clouds' based on the data emerging from the answers provided in the previous session. These words were also quantified according to their frequency, meaning that the most frequently mentioned words appeared larger in the visualization. This strategy provided visibility to the collective ideas of the citizens, translating them into two distinct visual narratives: one focused on emotions - highlighting values of community unity, traditions, social cohesion, and the cultural heritage of the village - and another centered on material aspects, emphasizing the natural and built landscape, such as the Caveira Mine, the railway, endogenous trees and water scarcity. This exercise enabled a visual organization of potential concepts associated with the future artwork, marking a key stage for the beginning of its materialization.

The fourth and fifth sessions were thus dedicated to transforming abstract concepts into three-dimensional models. Between these two sessions, the artists and architects structured the progressive transition from a more free-form exploration of three-dimensional experimentation (using various techniques, including drawing, clay modeling, cutting, collage, and assembling different materials - fourth session) to an approach focused on technical feasibility, real scale, and construction constraints (considering materials such as concrete, steel, wood, water, and trees – fifth session). Additionally, all members of the academic team emphasized the importance of allowing citizens to freely select a set of models from the previous session to further develop the final iterations. During the fifth session, mediators provided support throughout the materialization process of the models.

The final artwork, *Raízes da Liberdade* – integrating an endogenous tree, a semicircular bench, and an arch structure – was developed through a co-creation process of six sessions involving 40 participants and selected in a public voting event with approximately 100 people, including both local residents and external contributors. This collective engagement reinforced the participatory nature of the project, extending its impact beyond the immediate community. The artwork reflects the dissolution of conventional sculptural categories and can be understood in light of Rosalind Krauss's (1979) concept of sculpture in the expanded field, as it blurs the boundaries between sculpture, architecture, and landscape.

After the sessions, the academic team convened to evaluate the project's next steps. A key idea, proposed by the Fine Arts members, centered on revitalizing the area around the artwork by creating a park with endogenous trees. Following this, the Architecture team provided essential project support in its design. This transformation will be symbolized by the planting of trees from the Grândola municipal plant nursery on the day of



Figure 2 – Preparation of the first session.



Figure 3 – Second Session: construction of models created in response to the question "What would you like that place to be like?" (Manuel Taveira, 2024).



Figure 4 – Fourth Session: construction of three-dimensional models (Manuel Taveira, 2024).



Figure 5 – First model of the final sculpture (Manuel Taveira, 2024).

the sculpture's inauguration, in a collective act inspired by Joseph Beuys' 7000 Oaks project (1982) and its capacity to transform a *non-place* (Augé, 1992) into a meaningful public space for the community.

## Conclusion

In this article, we focused on transdisciplinary dynamics of the mediating team within the present case study, highlighting concrete examples of group dynamics at different stages of the project. We acknowledge that any description is merely an attempt at approximation, as reality far surpasses any analytical and descriptive efforts. However, we emphasize the importance of sharing insights, traces of these actions and, above all, restoring the connection between theory and experience by highlighting key moments of team dynamics that can be adapted and improved upon in future participatory projects.

Moreover, when addressing transdisciplinary dynamics, we must not forget that this is a participatory project, with the ultimate goal of



Figure 6 – Top View of *Raízes da Liberdade*, including the surrounding territory (Sergio Vicente, 2024).

creating a public artwork. In this sense, transdisciplinarity also reflects the specific academic nature of the mediation agents - in this case study, architects, artists, namely sculptors, and anthropologists - who contribute with their knowledge to give shape to a public artwork, with a material and symbolic nature that responds to the citizens' conception, and, at the same time, is feasible on site, taking into account specific practical contingencies, such as the available budget, the need for an execution project, available materials and construction typologies, construction deadlines and the sense of openness of local political agents to a project of this nature.

In addition, we reflect here on the role that transdisciplinary plays in fostering openness - both for the mediating team and for the citizens that participate in the sessions - toward a work of art that transcends disciplinary boundaries. This occurs in two key aspects: a) a transdisciplinary academic team that is guided by participatory methodologies; b) through the agency of the citizens, who acknowledge that their needs are fundamental, and that an artwork can be both form and function, a built object and a natural element.

In this context, it is not relevant to define, here, whether the artwork is a sculpture, architecture, or urban design, nor to confine it within a specific disciplinary category. What truly matters is citizen agency, the impact on participants (Cruz, 2021), and the transformation of public space, addressing the community's needs.

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