

Mapping Creativity through Socially Engaged Visual Arts, Art Projects in two Amadora Neighborhoods

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Abstract

*This article addresses the notion of the socially engaged visual arts. The first part explores some fundamental historical periods to help understand this practice, from the Greek concept of *teknè* until the present time. Then, the idea of a machine for the emancipation of creativity is explained, as well as its operation in two neighborhoods of the Portuguese city of Amadora. Finally, as a result of this immaterial machine, the focus turns to a detailed description of an archive of audiovisual elements that represents each activity undertaken within the project.*

Keywords: Social Art, Multimedia, Machine, Creativity, Emancipation, Participation, Atlas.

1. Introduction

The aim of the present article is to characterize the socially engaged visual arts and to present two multimedia art projects developed under the title The Creativity Emancipation Atlas. As a starting point, with the objective of focusing on the hybridization between the arts, Bulat Galejev's system for the differentiation between them is analyzed. Departing from this theory, some historical key moments are taken into consideration, surrounding the ideas of art and technology, such as: the Greek and Roman notions of *teknè* and *ars*, respectively; the modern art period of the first decades of the 20th century; the visual art movements with social and political interests that occurred in the second half of the 20th century; and the art works of collaboration and participation that were developed in the 1990s until the present.

The second part of the text is concerned with the presentation of two visual art projects, which have the intention of being both symbolic and fruitful to society. The works have occurred in a couple of neighborhoods of Amadora, a satellite city of Lisbon. The main purpose of these projects was the development of participatory activities in the field of multimedia, the consequent improvement of the social cohesion

between the neighborhood residents, the cultural revitalization of the place where they live, and their involvement with skills that stimulate creativity.

In addition, this paper also focuses on some important postulates that this art investigation is based upon. First of all, the idea of a machine that has the objective of producing a set of audiovisual elements mounted in the form of an atlas. In turn, the machine has two main aspects informing its functionality, which are the particular notions of creativity and emancipation.

2. A social axis between the arts

The existence and development of various artistic media have always resulted in an attempt to frame them within a proper discipline, being the identification of territories and the interactions between these, as the main concern for both artists and theorists. The first in-depth study on these issues was developed in the 18th century by the German philosopher Gotthold Lessing. This resulted in the work entitled *Laokoön* (1766), a book that explores the specificities of painting and poetry, as well as the interaction between them. Subsequently, the North American art historian Thomas Munro, in

the book *The Arts and Their Interrelations* (1949), continued the same line of investigation and differentiation among the different artistic practices. The French philosopher Étienne Souriau, with the work *La Correspondance des Arts* (1947), is another relevant example concerning the same thought. The purpose of these investigations, in addition to the classification of the arts, was the establishment of a hierarchy between them. In the course of the 20th century, with the emergence of new technologies and experimental forms of artistic expression, reflection on these issues has become more urgent (Galeyev, 1991).

According to Galeyev, the perception of the dynamics of interaction between the arts led to the notion that it is an open system where it is possible to include new practices, in particular, new artistic expressions of a hybrid nature, or the result of using new techniques and technologies. In this context, Galeyev developed a method for the organization of these new artistic forms, the purpose of which is to check the unity of the evolutionary system of the arts, to

understand its inherent specificities, and to determine how to place everything within the artistic culture. The “system of art forms” initially proposed by Galeyev takes as its starting point the opposition principle between regressive and progressive dynamics defended by Sergei Eisenstein. It is a graphic diagram that identifies and locates, within a precise structure, a set of significant characteristics of the “creative individual”, which is an entity that serves as a reference measure between the axis of figurative/ expressive arts and the axis of audiovisual arts (Galeyev, 1991).

Over the structure created by Galeyev, where two axes are designed to represent all forms of art, it is suggested that a new parameter be included - a social axis, towards the characterization of the various artistic expressions according to their involvement with issues concerning society. This is intended to demonstrate that the social dimension is a quality that exists in most of the arts and a shaft with two poles - the more self-centered arts, focusing further on the medium itself; and the more social arts, pointing out a more functional and prolific interrelation with society (Figure 1.).

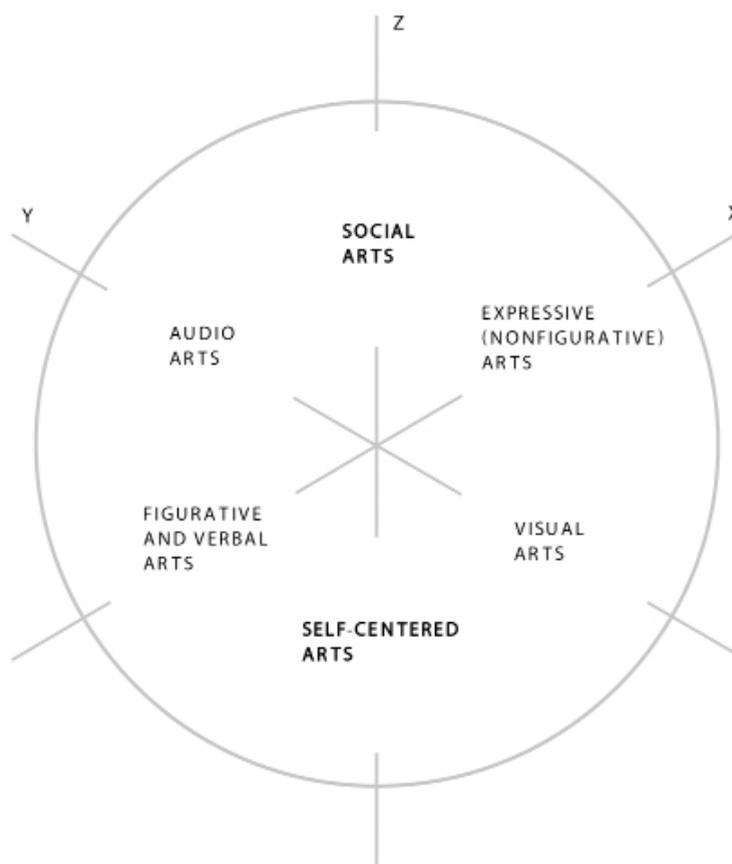


Figure 1. Galejev's organization of all the art forms and the inclusion of a social axis (Gorgel Pinto, 2015).

3. The intersection of art and technology I

Other relevant aspects to focus on are the notions of art and technology, in particular how they have evolved since they emerged, up to the present. The separation between these concepts began in the 17th century. Before this period the distinction between artists and craftsmen had not yet been made. It was a time where all of the various forms of artistic expression were referred to as techniques (Ingold, 2001).

The period where art and technique were together in the same concept dates back to ancient Greece, in which the word *teknè* signified both domains. This Greek concept was related to an empirical knowledge that by being systematized and taught had this designation. In other words, it was an organization of knowledge to give meaning to the notion of craft and all of the arts, as well as medicine and politics (Rawsthorn, 2013).

Both in the Greek and the Roman period, the terms *teknè* and *ars* were used with the same intent to describe a single profession and its activities concerning the production of objects. Although the society of this epoch did not distinguish between these concepts, the people knew how to make use of these professionals and distinguish utility value from aesthetic quality. During this time, regardless of the means used to produce a certain object, a greater relevance was given to the skill of the producer performer (Burford, 1972).

The idea of craft became reduced to its technical particularities and to the mechanical implementation of predefined operations. This way of thinking remained in society at the same time that art has evolved with the notion of being a superior kind of intelligence in which “the creative exercise of the imagination” occurs. As a consequence of these facts, near the end of the 18th century, there was a break between the work of art and the artefact that promoted the connotation of some creative practices of a useful nature with the field of technology, regardless of the expressive and sensitive characteristics of these kinds of hybrid practices (Coleman, 1988; Ingold, 2001).

4. The intersection of art and technology II

At the beginning of the 20th century there was also a transformation of the meaning of technology, which came to be understood as a logic with guidelines and specifications to enhance the production apparatus. Previously, technology was understood as a set of concepts and theories informing

productive practices and after a while it became reduced to a mere plan for the determination of production. Nowadays, the analysis of the concept of technology is excluded from most scientific studies that focus on existent techniques, centering almost restrictively on how the worker develops their own practice and implements specific techniques. Thus, the worker became a simple operator “bound to the mechanical implementation of an objective system of productive forces, according to principles of functioning that remain indifferent to particular human aptitudes and sensibilities” (Ingold, 2001: 18).

Although art and technology are related concepts and have a common origin, the idea of the separation between them arose in modern society, which developed the notion that technology is reduced to operation, while art is restricted to meaning. This rupture, which took the concept of technology far away from the territories of culture and society, contributed to a non-holistic understanding of the fact (Ingold, 2001). During the same period, in the field of aesthetics, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin created a number of theories relating the fields of art, technology and politics. This author, referring to Surrealism, argued that this movement developed a revolutionary action that was related to technological issues but with the objective of putting these means to serve the interests of the most disadvantaged social classes (Benjamin, 1996-2003).

In the 1930s, Benjamin’s fundamental concern was based on the question of the constitution of the artwork and its relation to the constraints of production. The influence of the photographic reproduction of the artwork promoted an easier understanding of these kinds of objects and a new interaction between these and the technological means. Until then the works of art were valued by their uniqueness, authenticity and originality, all of which contributed to the creation of an “aura” over these objects. Benjamin refers to this notion arguing that it is a materialistic view, protecting the economic value of the work and the social class of its owner. In this context, the art object can be misunderstood, if it is taken from the social and political context. In this sense, taking into account the new technological possibilities, the artwork conquered its autonomy and transformed its social function, no longer based on its ritual role and assuming a political character (Benjamin, 1996-2003).

5. Hybrid visual arts with social focus

With regard to art's social and political skills, it is pertinent to understand the critical sensitivity developed around some of society's problems. It is a kind of expression placed between art and politics that has the main objective of stimulating the viewer's awareness of the existence of "domination mechanisms" and transforming the viewer into a conscious actor with regard to the evolution of the world. In this context, it is possible to consider that aesthetics contains a political character, while politics has its own aesthetic. The aesthetics that are provided with a political character led art through two possible ways: the annulment of art because of its dilution with life, and the art practices that are developed with political objectives, knowing that politics is not their true domain. In this sense, this kind of critical art, located between art and "non-art" forms, has developed an activity based on the relationship between different speeches, thus being capable of a double communication (Rancière, 2006).

This interaction between heterogeneous elements largely manifested itself in the context of Dadaist collages, denouncing the claim of art to be part of life; later in Pop Art, pointing the aspiration of art to isolation; recently, using the same language of shock, other heterogeneous collages intended to expose the various layers of information existent in the artwork. The combination of divergent aspects denoted the juxtaposition of different critics, revealing, on the one hand, the capacity of art for self-criticism and, on the other hand, the criticism of the state system and the dominance of the market (Rancière, 2006).

Russian Constructivism introduced this critical sense in the first decades of the 20th century, which united the arts, design and architecture for the benefit of society. In the second half of the 20th century it reappeared associated with the ecological culture and the eclectic practice of the Situationist International group. Later there were a series of avant-garde architecture groups such as Archigram, Ant Farm, Archizoom and Superstudio. Recently, social art and design has become a transdisciplinary field with specific objectives regarding the development of society.

6. Participation as a medium in the social visual arts

The experimental art practices undertaken in a participatory way are characterized by the random use of various media.

During the 1990s, a set of artists, such as Maurizio Cattelan, Pierre Huyghe and Rirkrit Tiravanija, developed several interaction possibilities with participants in artistic events. However, these kinds of projects, covered by the concept of "relational aesthetics," had as their main purpose presentation in the museum space. Later this art language assumed a different character, where participation was incorporated into the artistic process as a means of social and political action. In the course of this transformation, and depending on the degree of autonomy shared with participants, the artist moved away from the production model, which was restricted to his action, and assumed a shared authorship within which the participants also have a creative key role (Bishop, 2012).

The viewer's participation in the artistic event is a fact that depends on their engagement with the art object. The observation of a piece is already a form of participation, which in turn may vary in intensity and eventually grow to a kind of authorship. However, analyzing the phenomenon in more detail, it is possible to distinguish between various types of participation: in "nominal participation" the observer passively contemplates and reflects on the work; in "directed participation" the observer contributes to the realization of the piece; in "creative participation" the observer produces certain contents provided by the author; and in "collaborative participation" the observer is, with the artist, co-responsible for the preparation and systematization of the contents of the artistic project. In "collaborative participation" and "creative participation" the inherent details are usually developed over long periods of time; while in "directed participation" and "nominal participation", the works are done in encounters especially for that purpose (Helguera, 2011).

The fundamental objective of contemporary social art practices that are developed within certain communities is to emancipate the people involved, so that they feel encouraged by the experience of participating in the development of the art work, and eventually to produce the same effect on other people for the benefit of the social body. This emancipatory action is usually comparable with the social activity of other agents operating with a conventional approach in relation to the visual arts, making it often difficult to distinguish between what belongs and what does not belong to the domain of aesthetics. The difference lies in the objectives to be achieved, since the social action is restricted to the exercise

of certain ideals such as justice and social inclusion, while the artistic practices, in this context, in addition to the reflection and exploration of the same ethical values, are mainly intended to highlight the existent social problematic in order to promote a reflection on them in society (Helguera, 2011).

7. The creativity emancipation atlas

The aim of The Creativity Emancipation Atlas is the representation of two Amadora neighborhoods, in a city nearby Lisbon, namely the Bairro da Estrada Militar do Alto da Damia and the Bairro do Alto da Cova da Moura. The idea is to produce one atlas for each group of participatory activities, which were based on learning activities in the fields of computer literacy, for adults, and photography, for youngsters. The atlas, as a medium for the representation of social action, is a way of mapping the functionality of an immaterial machine, which was specifically designed to stimulate the

creativity of the resident participants. The main objective was to contribute to the cultural development of the participants so that they lose any preconceived sense of inferiority when comparing themselves with other elements of society. It was expected that these two projects developed within the respective neighborhoods would have a positive cascade effect that could, somehow, contribute to the qualification of the place.

Concerning the machine and its goals, it is relevant to emphasize the need of a kind of software for its functioning. This program is informed by a philosophy of education around the idea of emancipation and an aesthetics ideology as a powerful way to develop the intersubjectivity related to social awareness. Lastly, The Creativity Emancipation Atlas aims to contribute to a reflection about more socially sustainable ways to reduce the problematic situations that usually occur in degraded and deprived urban areas.

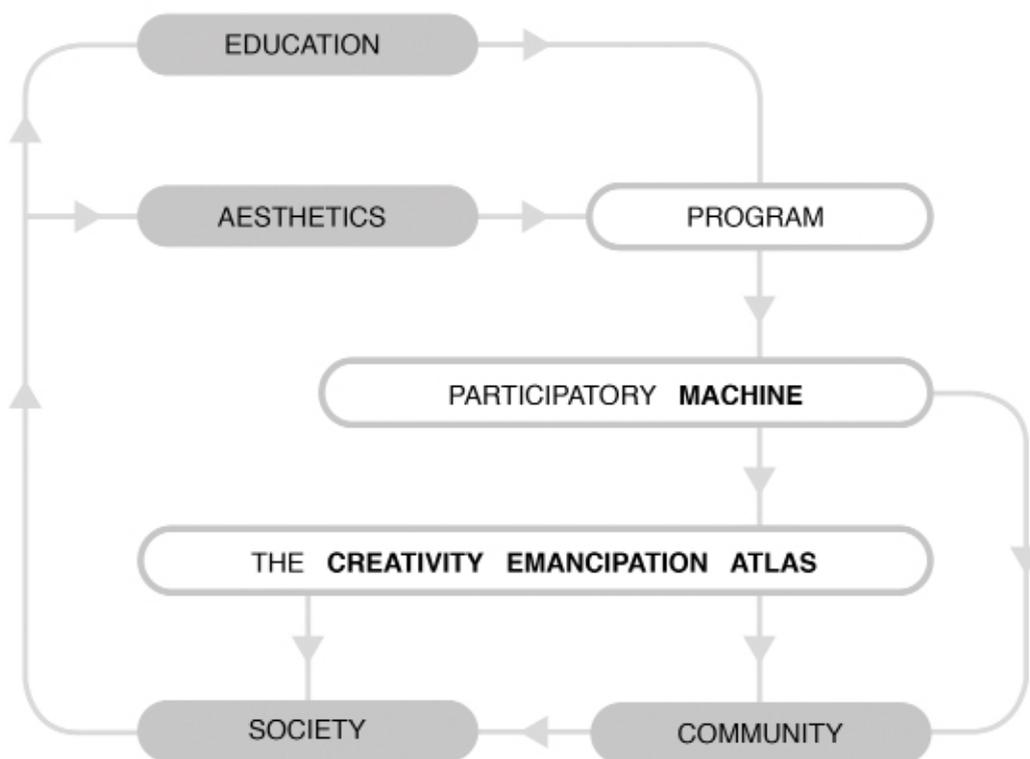


Figure 2. Machine operational scheme (Gorgel Pinto, 2015).

7.1. Machine

The designed machine for the creativity emancipation of the participants (Figure 2.) is based on the assumption that there is no division between human beings and their creations. In other words, the notion that the objects invented by the human being, due to technological skills, produce considerable transformations such as those that are related to its functionality, as well as to other changes that are perceived in thought and contribute to the evolution of intelligence. This is a philosophy focused on a particular notion of technique, which considers the transformation of something as well as how it affects human thought. In this sense, the technique is also a way of thinking in which the human being reflects on their actions. It is a machine logic that implies a set of “artificial automatisms”, in which there is no need of a physical object to put everything into practice. For the artistic actions in question, what justifies the need of a specific machine are the various functionalities surrounding the participants (Vengeon, 2009).

7.2. Creativity

One of the most important elements in the present projects is the use of a universal notion of creativity, which is a quality that is common to everyone in humanity and also a value of exchange with more logic than capital and profit, whose effects have dominated the development of the recent culture. Creativity is one of the most powerful characteristics in every human with creative sensitivity, being a quality that is not limited to the genial character or to a rare aptitude of an individual in particular.

In this sense, according to the principle that creativity is a common good in society and not an exclusive quality of artists, it is possible to engage participants in the social project activities and stimulate them for their own advantage. Consequently, through their emancipation, it is expected that they can later repeat this kind of behavior and actively contribute to the development of a freer society. In other words, this expanded idea of art points out that every human being has creative capacities that can be boosted in order to stimulate their involvement in the transformation of their own urban community and so on, in a resonance effect, throughout society (Beuys apud Gomes, 2010).

7.3. Emancipation

In the course of the participatory actions in question, a learning process based on guessing is used. In this context, the artist also functions as a teacher guiding each participant every time they lose focus in learning. Thus, the interaction between the artist and the participants in the learning activities is not the submission of one intelligence to another, but a relationship that enhances the connection among wills. In this sense, the most important element lies in the initial ideas and orientations of the artist followed by the free exploration of the participants, who collaborate with each other and indicate other sources of knowledge, such as the stories and interests that are shared by everyone during the actions.

The residents' will, and the artist's' capacity to emancipate, are the most sensitive issues in the development of participatory activities. This art project follows the Universal Education principle, in which there is the objective of learning anything and, consequently, relating it to other knowledge “according to the principle that all men have equal intelligence.” Following this philosophy, the pre-existence of social disadvantage is a reality that must not be boosted in the learning process. In contrast, it is important to enhance the equality among participants at the outset, and not as the main purpose. Therefore, the artist must be sensitive to the knowledge that the participants already have and both must be placed in the same zone of understanding from which they can start sharing information (Rancière, 2002).

7.4. Atlas

The participatory actions that occurred during the projects are represented through a set of audiovisual fragments that, in turn, constitute an archive of the developed work. Each neighborhood project has its own archive, which is a form of showing everything done to the non participant residents, to the urban community, as well as to other individuals interested in this kind of transdisciplinary work.

However, the archive in question, instead of being a dense set of all the audiovisual elements representing the art project, is a kind of atlas that has a selection of the most significant reproductions, as well as some drifts somehow connected to it. This way of mapping the participatory practice within the neighborhoods is organized by a group of guidance panels, which have the objective of revealing clues,

where gaps between images can guide the viewer to other thoughts (Didi-Huberman, 2010).

The concept of the atlas is a kind of visual knowledge based on the interaction between the aesthetic and epistemic thinking models, in which “the sensitive dimension, the diverse and the lagoon-like nature” that is present on every image is enhanced. Another atlas relevant feature is the eventual inclusion of dissonant notes, which allow the counteracting or expanding of what is pre-established by intelligence. In this sense, departing from a particular intelligible analysis, this type of media promotes the diversification of thoughts and freedom of reasoning, launching alternative perspectives for the viewer with the objective of questioning the “self-proclaimed certainties of science convinced of its truths, as the art is convinced of its criteria” (Didi-Huberman, 2013: 11-13). Another important possibility given by this kind of archive is the appearance of “interstitial” spaces of exploitation between the selected images, which emphasize the continuous possibility of formulating new ideas. Contrary to this perspective are the prevailing “ideals of uniqueness, specificity,

purity and integral knowledge.” The role of imagination for the atlas’ understanding should also be noted, since this is the characteristic that allows a “transversal knowledge” and other possibilities of understanding every time the viewer is confronted with an assembly of unlikely elements (Didi-Huberman, 2013).

8. Art projects in two Amadora neighborhoods

The socially engaged art projects were developed in two disadvantaged urban neighborhoods from the city of Amadora, named Bairro da Estrada Militar do Alto da Damaia (Figure 3.) and Bairro do Alto da Cova da Moura. The city is close to Lisbon and has other urban areas with the same characteristics, such as illegal construction and the lack of support from the Government and City Hall to fix situations like poverty, low education levels, and crime, among others. The population of the places in question is mostly comprised of immigrants, and their descendants, from Portuguese-speaking African countries.



Figure 3. Bairro da Estrada Militar do Alto da Damaia, Video frame (Gorgel Pinto 2015).



Figure 4. Local association, Video frame (Gorgel Pinto 2015).

The projects were developed more or less at the same time in both neighborhoods. One of the relevant aspects is the definition of a methodology to be repeated in similar future projects. Before all else, the social intervention must be proposed to a local association (Figure 4) that has the residents' confidence and, in collaboration, the artist and the association, begin planning many details. During the first meetings, it was essential to understand the cultural needs of the local residents, and also to think about useful activities that could develop the creative energy of the residents. It is fundamental to emphasize that the actions to be established – namely the work with multimedia and audiovisuals – should be based on the artist's main practice – . Both projects had a first phase dedicated to computer literacy with adults (Figure 5.), and a second phase about photography for youngsters (Figure 6.). This second part has, to date, only applied in the Bairro da Estrada Militar do Alto da Damaia, but will also occur, in the near future, in the Bairro do Alto da Cova da Moura. After the outline of the project activities, the initiatives were spread in the neighborhoods, which had no problem in receiving people with interest in participating. It is also important to mention the collaboration, (in both projects), of multimedia students from a local high school.

The artistic practice developed within the projects had two different moments. The first one is based on a participatory

learning system, which was implemented with the objective of later constituting a symbolic art piece that stimulates thought about the place and the community where the actions took place. During the participatory activities of the first part, both the people, who acquired new knowledge, as well as the artist and the students who collaborated, exchanged information and gave some ideas for the actions in the course. Despite the participatory activities being previously prepared by the artist in collaboration with the association's responsible persons, it was crucial to be open to the residents' ideas and to follow their own interests. At the same time, DSLR cameras were always present at the learning activities, with the aim to capture some video footage, photographs and audio recordings, to later integrate into the projects' archive.

The second moment, a work that is still ongoing, is concerned with the observation of the archive and the subsequent selection of audiovisual fragments that may represent the socially engaged art project. In this sense, the archive is being designed, for each set of participatory activities and its respective neighborhood, as a multimedia atlas with the title *The Creativity Emancipation Atlas* (Figure 7.). The goal of the atlas is to confront the viewer and refer them to a deeper meaning in a space of multiple referents.



Figure 5. Computer lessons for adults, Video frame (Gorgel Pinto 2015).



Figure 6. Pinhole photography workshop for youngsters, Video frame (Gorgel Pinto 2015).

The multimedia atlas will be permanently placed online, in a specific web design composition, as well as temporarily in a physical location. The objectives of this double presentation are to: (1) recognize and praise the culture of the citizens who live in these disadvantaged neighborhoods, (2) confront the rest of the urban community about the common interest concerning the development of these kinds of places and

the government entities about their responsibility in solving problems such as social and cultural inclusion and, finally, (3) question the visual arts about its awareness of this and other social problematics. The Creativity Emancipation Atlas online and place exhibition to the local community, and to the public in general, is scheduled for the year 2016.

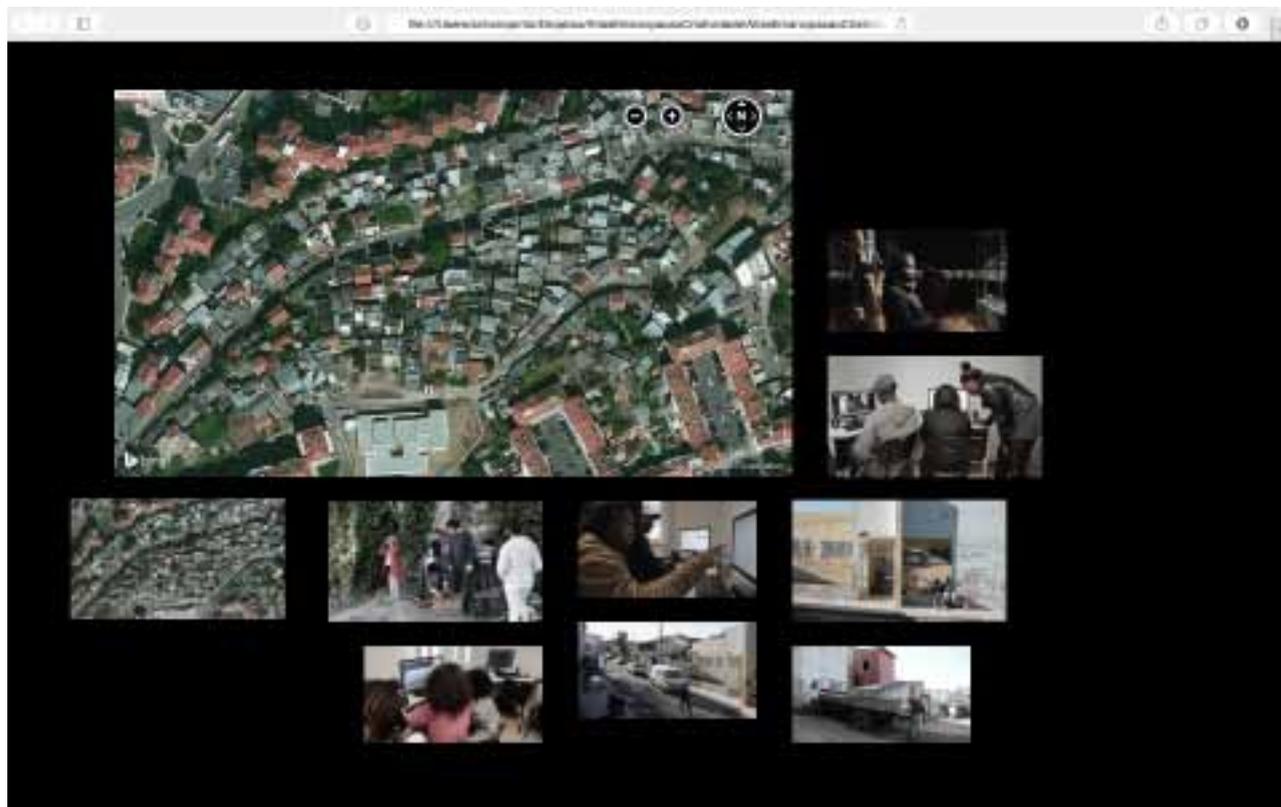


Figure 7. The Creativity Emancipation Atlas, Website screenshot (Gorgel Pinto 2015).

9. Conclusion

The aim of this socially engaged visual art research project was to emphasize the potential of the arts, and the visual arts in particular, for a different and useful perception of the various issues that interest the common good. This is an ethical and aesthetic kind of knowledge with the objective of promoting a better understanding of the social problematic. What is in question is the development of a kind of sensory intelligence that has a powerful effect in the dissemination of intersubjectivity and that can contribute to the evolution of a more sustainable society.

Over the history of the visual arts and technology, there have been some significant periods in which the interaction with society to produce something practical and more useful was a clear objective. Thus, it is important to understand these periods of time in detail in order to develop other synergies between society and creativity.

The art practice under development in both neighborhoods was informed by various dimensions of knowledge with the objective of being simultaneously symbolic and prolific to society. This is the reason that it was designed as an immaterial machine for the emancipation of creativity, with the aim of helping to improve the socio-cultural community context.

As foreseen, the valorization of the existing creative energy in these kinds of disadvantaged urban areas is a form of reducing the gap between local residents and other citizens that belong to higher social classes and have better education levels.

After the definition of the methodology of this socially sensitive multimedia visual art practice, the aims for the near future are to complete all of the works associated with the two projects described in this paper, as well as continuing this theoretical and practical research through the development of related projects with other urban neighborhoods around Lisbon.

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