

Coimbra's Plastic Arts Circle in the 1970s

An Experimental Art Educational Laboratory in the Framework of the Traditional University of Coimbra

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Abstract

Founded in 1958 within the traditional, conservative University of Coimbra in Portugal, Coimbra's Plastic Arts Circle (CAPC) was remarkably active in the 1970s, especially after the Portuguese Revolution of April 25, 1974, and the democratization of the regime. With the aim of promoting contemporary visual arts and raising public awareness for the realization of related causes, CAPC fostered relevant experimental, performative and educational programs and activities, which are the subject of this article. Special attention is paid to the 1970s, when the collective was an important and innovative field of experimentation in a country that had just opened to democracy (1974) and was emerging from 48 years of dictatorship. Contact with the international neo-avant-garde was extremely difficult under the conditions of the time, as it was the first attempt to effectively activate and establish democratization in the artistic field in a rural and geographically peripheral country. The CAPC had a remarkable impact on critical, progressive art education and continues to be active up to the present day, albeit in a modern and international context.

Keywords

CAPC (Círculo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra) – Portuguese contemporary art – neo-avant-garde – Carnation Revolution – performance art

1 Revolution, Democracy and Political Culture

This study deals with the situation of art and the importance of art education for the change in art production after the Portuguese Revolution of April 25, 1974. The political openness that emerged was not only linked to the expansion of public and collective spaces but also to the concept of Celebration (Festa),

which encompassed sharing and artistic experimentation. Indeed, collective events, particularly in the realm of visual arts, were a constant feature of those years. The opening of the regime, which had political, social, cultural, and artistic repercussions, seemed to set in motion a parallel movement in the visual arts. This cultural movement was evident in several collective events that were significant not only for the period but also for the history of Portuguese art, as they intersected with the specific revolutionary moment and the broader international neo-avant-garde movement. Many of these events also had an intrinsic educational function at a time when art and culture needed to expand and mature. The final years of the corporative dictatorship, known as the Marcelist Spring (1968–1974), were marked by mounting crisis. The political and economic turmoil, exacerbated by the 1973 global oil crisis, evolved into a social crisis in a country that was increasingly claustrophobic and depressed. It is crucial to recognize that the Portuguese dictatorship, while ideologically aligned with Italian fascism, diverged aesthetically by adopting a reactionary stance, rooted in the context of a poor, predominantly illiterate, and rural society. Peripherality, ruralization, and dictatorship undoubtedly formed a challenging context for artistic and intellectual activity (Nogueira, 2024). But what was happening in the visual arts during these years?

The 1960s were characterized by a pronounced creative individualism, evidenced by a range of developments emerging from pop art and conceptual art. This period saw the rise of new figuration, which often continued into informal art, op art, land art, conceptual art, minimalism, process art, performance art, assemblage, and more. Artists aimed to be genuinely modern, despite their geographic and political constraints, although asserting this modernity was naturally easier outside the oppressive confines of a dictatorship. This diversification of artistic approaches was largely influenced by international contacts that were facilitated by emigrated artists, brief visits to major artistic centers, foreign specialized magazines, direct or indirect connections with journalists covering important art events abroad, and the rare exhibitions of internationally renowned artists held in Portugal.

Between the late 1950s and the early 1970s, large numbers of Portuguese artists emigrated to Europe and occasionally to the United States. An important factor driving this emigration was the financial support provided by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation from 1957 onwards (Nogueira, 2022). Among the various artists who left the country were prominent figures such as Alberto Carneiro, Ana Hatherly, Ângelo de Sousa, Costa Pinheiro, Eduardo Batarda, Fernando Lemos, Graça Pereira Coutinho, João Cutileiro, João Vieira, Jorge Martins, Jorge Pinheiro, José Barrias, Júlio Pomar, Lourdes Castro, Manuel Alvess. Helena Vieira da Silva had relocated to Paris early on and became a

French citizen in 1956. Most of these artists settled in Munich, Paris, and London. Exhibitions in Portugal showcasing the work of these and other Portuguese artists living abroad likely provided a crucial link to current artistic trends, especially in a country where information was scarce and working conditions were restrictive.

During the Marcelist era, official interest in modern and contemporary art was predictably low and contact with art from the United States and Eastern Europe was limited. Thus, the official art events organized by the National Secretariat of Information (SNI), which was transformed into the State Secretariat of Information and Tourism (SEIT) in 1968, were rather mediocre, as were the National Art Salons (1966–1969). In 1969, university students (felt most strongly by the students of Coimbra) took to the streets to protest against the oppressive regime, to which the government responded with imprisonment and forced conscription into the Colonial War. By 1972, repression and censorship had intensified, along with a rise in political arrests. The clandestine struggle against the regime grew stronger across intellectual, student, labor, and military circles

The Revolution of April 25, 1974, ended an anti-democratic, colonialist, isolated, and authoritarian regime. Portugal maintained the longest dictatorship in 20th-century Europe and possessed the most enduring colonial empire, extending across four continents. The Revolution was instigated by the military, disillusioned by the protracted colonial wars, and by the more or less clandestine actions of the anti-fascist movement over the years. This pivotal event opened the door for democracy in Portugal. The subsequent democratization process led to the stabilization provided by parliamentary democracy within a still dynamic society. The first constitutional government was elected in July 1976.

Despite the profound socio-political changes brought about by the Carnation Revolution, its impact on the development of art was less substantial than one might expect. One reason for this was that the structures in the institutional context, that is, in universities and museum settings, were deeply rooted. On the other hand, it was also due to the lack of a sufficient number of artists who could have brought about immediate change. Following the Revolution, only those artists who had left Portugal for overtly political reasons returned. Most of those who had emigrated mainly for artistic, intellectual, practical or educational reasons did not return, which illustrates the continuing problems in Portuguese cultural and artistic life. The change that has nonetheless taken place since the 1960s could only be driven forward by artists who felt committed to modernism regardless of their political or geographical context. This development stands in contrast to the assumption—often held during the

revolutionary period—that political upheaval would inevitably lead to artistic innovation.

The need for reform in art education was clear, although significant changes from official side did not occur until the 1990s. In particular, the Schools of Fine Arts in Lisbon and Porto were elevated to faculties and thus integrated into the university sector. Equally significant was the creation of Ar.Co in 1973, in Lisbon, originally conceived as an alternative to the Lisbon School of Fine Arts and offering a different educational approach (Nogueira, 2007, pp. 131–136). Our focus, however, is not on the universities of Lisbon or Porto, but rather on the University of Coimbra—originally founded in Lisbon, in 1288, and relocated to Coimbra in 1537, has consistently been one of the country's most prominent centers for scientific inquiry and classical studies—which, notably *Parte inferior do formulário*, never had a Faculty of Fine Arts. It was within this context that the striking experimentalism of CAPC emerged vividly in the 1970s. The 1970s were, in fact—contrary to the assumptions of more traditional historiography—among the most modern and artistically consequential decades of 20th-century Portugal (Nogueira, 2022).

Another important reason for the delayed change in art, which was similarly institutionally constituted, was the lack of museums of modern and contemporary art in Portugal for several years during this period. The Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea—Museu do Chiado, originally founded in May 1911, faced numerous challenges and did not open to the public until July 1994. In July 1983, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation inaugurated the Centro de Arte Moderna (Modern Art Center, CAM), which later adopted the name of the Foundation's first president and was henceforth known as the Centro de Arte Moderna José de Azeredo Perdigão. Additionally, a temporary contemporary art museum was established in the Vizela-Riba d'Ave Mansion, also known as the Serralves Villa, in May 1987. This initiative eventually evolved into the Serralves Contemporary Art Museum in 1999, marking a significant development in the contemporary art landscape in Portugal. In 1976, also in Porto, the CAC (Centre for Contemporary Art) was established, operating between 1976 and 1980 within the Soares dos Reis National Museum. It was not a contemporary art museum per se, but rather a space dedicated to contemporary art within an institution primarily focused on naturalism.

Immediately following the April 25, 1974, Revolution, the state proved incapable of developing a coherent and structuring cultural policy, resulting in the continued fragmentation of efforts among various actors within the artistic field. In this context, it can be concluded that the core issue lay in a certain fragility inherent to Portuguese cultural and artistic history, primarily manifesting in the difficulty of establishing innovative institutions—a constellation

of spaces, practices, and routines capable of fostering a fertile environment for sustained and consolidated artistic experimentation. Indeed, these challenges and deficiencies could not be simply overcome by the April Revolution and the subsequent democratization of the regime, as they are rooted in a persistent sense of political, institutional, and cultural modernity that has been repeatedly deferred, thus becoming increasingly difficult to structure and implement. But have these poor conditions completely prevented the emergence of contemporary artistic work?

2 Visual Arts in the Context of Democracy

Although there was no general restructuring in the arts and their institutions, the state at least supported some cultural promotion campaigns aimed at uniting the Armed Forces Movement, the National Salvation, the population and artists. One notable initiative was the creation of the *Painel do 10 de Junho* [June 10th Mural] in 1974, a tribute to the April Revolution organized by the Democratic Movement of Visual Artists. This large mural, divided into three tiers and comprising 48 square panels, symbolized the number of years the dictatorship had endured. It was destroyed in a fire at the Belém Gallery in 1981. In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, there was a period of intense, militant engagement from artists, who were committed to a culture “in the service of the People” (Chicó, 1984, pp. 20–21; Nogueira, 2024; Couceiro, 2004). This era was characterized by slogans such as “Fascist art is bad for the eyes” (Marcelino Vespiera)—a motto announced at an event organized by the Democratic Movement of Visual Artists on May 28, 1974, at Palácio Foz—, “Fight aggressivity with creativity,” and “Aesthetic quality is progressive; mediocrity is reactionary” (Salette Tavares).

From this decisive moment for a new way of engaging with public space emerged the joint actions of two prominent groups of artists who were committed to freedom of intervention and creative expression. Both groups, which were closely associated with CAPC, particularly through the artists’ movement, attempted to adopt Wolf Vostell’s concept of the “artist educator”. This concept assumes that artists can contribute to the education and integration of the public and the community through their work. The “Acre Group” (1974–1977) included Alfredo Queiroz Ribeiro, Clara Menéres, Joaquim Lima Carvalho, among others (Sabino, 2021), and the “Puzzle Group” (1975–1981) included Albuquerque Mendes, Armando Azevedo, Carlos Carreiro, Dario Alves, Graça Morais, Jaime Silva, João Dixo, Pedro Rocha, and later, Fernando Pinto Coelho and Gerardo Burmester. Both groups, in their own way, embodied a

plastic-performative language with a conceptual orientation and a focus on social and artistic intervention, representing an innovative approach in the Portuguese context. About the "Acre Group" and its activities, the curator, artist and creator Ernesto de Sousa, who had developed a vague notion of experimentalism and a fascination with the transformative potential of art and who became a key figure in many of the most important activities and exhibitions of the 1970s, stated in 1975:

Acre Group was built after 25 April as a serene and conscious attitude. [...] it is a project, and only projects are consistent. Today. Like the revolution. Everything else is outdated. When Acre Group rolled out a strip of plastic from the top of Torre dos Clérigos it was the dazzling body of Clara Semide that extended out. [...] As well as [the body] of other companions. And our own, as we start to understand all this. Extended (by the invented appropriation) of Nasoni's architecture, of Oporto, of the City, of the Country, of Dream, of Utopia. And this is worth as much, or more, than painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. (Sousa, 1975, p. 41)

The "Puzzle Group", founded in December 1975, made its first public appearance with an intervention at the Alvarez Gallery in Porto in early 1976, and was subsequently presented to a wider audience at the 3rd International Art Encounter in Póvoa de Varzim in August 1976. In 1977, Egídio Álvaro wrote a commentary on the group's activities:

I think that underneath the whole activity of the Group there is a polemic attitude. [...] While in the last two years the stress has been exclusively on political intervention, PUZZLE dare to talk about themselves, about family and everyday problems, about the problems of art, about current myths and taboos (the national flag is just one among many) and even, and also, about politics, which is seen from an ironic, critical, dangerous point of view. [...] The primacy of ideas over technique. [...] For all this it seems to me that PUZZLE Group occupy a position at the avant-garde of the art field. (Álvaro, 1977, pp. 18–20)

During this period, a particularly notable event was the series of International Art Encounters, orchestrated primarily by critic, curator, and gallerist Egídio Álvaro in collaboration with the Alvarez Gallery, and widely publicized by *Revista de Artes Plásticas*. These encounters commenced in 1974 in Valadares and continued in Viana do Castelo the following year, subsequently moving to

Póvoa do Varzim in 1976, and concluding in Caldas da Rainha in 1977. The primary aim of these events was to convene both national and international artists—including Alberto Carneiro, Ângelo de Sousa, Carlos Barreira, Christian Parisot, Espiga Pinto, Fernando Lanhas, João Dixo, Manoel Barbosa, Miloslav Moucha, Orlan, Pineau, Serge III Oldenbourg, Shirley Cameron & Roland Miller, Tomek Kawiak, and Yokoyama, among others—in a series of round tables, debates, interventions, and exhibitions. These gatherings addressed pivotal topics such as “Art and Revolution” and “New Trends and the Avant-Garde” (Álvaro, 1975, pp. 8–18).

3 CAPC: Facilitating Collective, Educational, and Public Engagement

One of the most active collectives during this period was the *Círculo de Artes Plásticas de Coimbra* [Coimbra Plastic Arts Circle] (CAPC). Founded in 1958, CAPC aimed to promote contemporary visual arts and strengthen public commitment to their appreciation through a series of experimental, performative, and educational activities (Nogueira, 2005, pp. 169–182). These experimental efforts were closely linked to the work of de Sousa. One of the first encounters between CAPC and de Sousa took place in 1972 at the Ogiva Gallery in Óbidos on the occasion of the gallery’s second anniversary. At this event, de Sousa presented and discussed images from *Documenta 5* (1972), where he had met and interviewed Joseph Beuys. This conference, which saw vigorous participation from CAPC members, was instrumental in fostering further collaboration. The encounter also inspired de Sousa to write one of his first critical texts about the Coimbra collective:

An intervention-like-the-name-of-Joseph-Beuys, which could have turned sour. But that is how it can go when one finds valid interlocutors instead of a passive, masochistic audience which even applauds and pretends to feel insulted. The *Círculo de Belas-Artes/Fine Arts Circle* (is this really their name?) de Coimbra were present, and their presence enlivened a *DIALOGUE* that was exceedingly more important than many ex-cathedra pedagogical flights. A dialogue that perhaps promises a whole future. (Sousa, 1973, p. 4)

Indeed, a highly productive collaborative workspace emerged among de Sousa, Alberto Carneiro, António Barros, Armando Azevedo, João Dixo, Rui Órfão, Tília Saldanha, and other artists.



FIGURE 7.1 *Semana da Arte na Rua*, Coimbra, 1976. Photograph: unknown. Courtesy of Collection CAPC, Coimbra

Given the cultural situation outlined at the beginning, it is important to see CAPC as an independent entity in the context of Portugal's oldest and most traditional university. This helps to understand its surprisingly laboratory-like and innovative character, given its academic setting. CAPC's activities encompassed a range of exhibitions, aesthetic interventions, and performances. Notable projects include *A Floresta* (The Forest) at Alvarez Gallery in Oporto, 1973 and at Alternativa Zero in Lisbon, 1977, *Prenda para Josefa de Óbidos* (Gift to Josefa de Óbidos) at Ogiva Gallery in Óbidos, 1973, and *1 000 an.º Aniversário da Arte* (Art Anniversary), a project co-developed by de Sousa and CAPC based on Robert Filliou's original 1963 concept and publicly presented in Arles in 1973. Additional significant activities included *Arte na Rua* (Art on the Street) in Coimbra, 1974, *Semana da Arte na Rua* (Street Art Week) in Coimbra, 1976



FIGURE 7.2 CAPC performance Cores at Alternativa Zero: *Tendências Polémicas na Arte Portuguesa Contemporânea*, Lisbon, 1977. Photograph: unknown. Courtesy of the Collection Ernesto de Sousa, Lisbon

(see Figure 7.1), and *Cores* (Colors) in Coimbra and at Caldas da Rainha, Lisbon, 1977–78 (see Figure 7.2).

De Sousa described the group as “the only arts society in the country with a workshop spirit” (Sousa, 1976, p. 70), a sentiment further elaborated in his writings:

CAP or C.A.P. these are the letters to keep in mind by readers travelling to Coimbra and wishing to talk under the pretext of art with art people. Action arts, fine arts, dark arts of freedom: to meet oneself and others. [...] What matters is not the whole dreariness of techniques and alienation, a convolutedly pre-built and pre-established beauty, that path leading to all the Academies (and, of course, to market economy). What matters is that discovery, which can only be achieved in a full exercise of body and mind, hands and head. Such exercise is the everyday practice of CAPC. (Sousa, 1974, pp. 4, 6)

On the subject of *Arte na Rua* (Coimbra, 1974), de Sousa has stated:

[Notice] the exaggeration. For instance, to live in Coimbra, to be from Coimbra, our city that belongs to them, and to dare a (visual) activity that

may go beyond the limits (of the city, of the street) and returns people to the lost dimension (to Paradise Lost). [...] to Celebration [Festa]—that is the example of the most complete exaggeration, of the clearest modernity, [...] 'ART can be LIFE.' (Sousa, 1976, p. 70)

In conclusion, the experience of celebration (festa), especially within the collective public space and fostered by the democratization of the political regime, was emblematic of Portugal in the 1970s. Concurrently with the political and social transformations in Portugal, artistic media—such as video, 8mm film, performative body work, and the “actions” of “aesthetic operators”—expanded and gained new significance. The 1970s, especially in the wake of the creative freedom unleashed by the revolution, were therefore pivotal, defining an era of rich and intense artistic activity that was unparalleled in both Portuguese and broader Western art contexts. This period was also a critical moment for the public affirmation of prominent female artists (Túlia Saldanha, Clara Menéres, Helena Almeida, Ana Vieira, Lourdes Castro), further marked by the activities of the CAPC, which functioned as a genuine laboratory of experimentation in a country emerging from dictatorship. While the 1970s occasionally produced art deeply engaged with the Revolution, the decade predominantly fostered works that were profoundly aligned with modernity, establishing it as one of the most politically and artistically significant decades of the Portuguese 20th century.

Indeed, at a time when the overhaul of higher artistic education (both theoretical and practical) was slow and, even by the 1990s, when its effective reform and modernization were finally realized, the updating of university curricula took considerable time to reflect contemporary art practices. In fact, it was at CAPC, in the 1970s, as a free and experimental laboratory, that true modernity in art education occurred. This was achieved through discussion cycles and conferences, as well as non-formal courses given by some of the country's most famous artists, who traveled to Coimbra specifically for this purpose. It is noteworthy that this way an informal, free and modernized artistic education was able to develop, and thus modern educational progress took place in the environment of Portugal's oldest university.

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