



# 10+1

**Access, participation  
and cultural democracy:  
visions and experiences**



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# Foreword

# **Acesso Cultura: 10 years**

In 2023, Acesso Cultura will celebrate its 10th anniversary. **Ten years of “action, attitude, and a beacon”,** as described by one of our course participants. Acesso Cultura exists to promote physical, social and intellectual access to cultural participation. We work to help build **a curious and inclusive society, in which anyone can dream, have opportunities to participate, and be the best they can be.**

On the occasion of our 10th anniversary, we spoke with ten cultural institutions and colleagues with whom we have collaborated in various ways. In their work, we find food for thought on access, participation, and cultural democracy in Portugal. In addition to these 10 interviews, we have included a conversation with Ben Evans, Director of Arts and Disability at the British Council, who brings an international context to the reflection – and above all – to action. It is with great pleasure that we gather and share these conversations in this publication.

At moments of assessment, reflection and also celebration, like this one, it is natural for us to think about what has changed and what still needs to be done.

We are convinced that access and inclusion have become a natural part of the discourse of those working in the cultural sector. It is this very positive and hopeful change that the Portuguese National Railway Museum speaks of when it says: **“Colleagues have become ‘assertive’ in advocating for better accessibility conditions at all levels”.** D. Maria II National Theatre considers that, **“we have reached a unique moment in time because all areas of the Theatre are aligned with the objective of creating the best conditions for access and tackling inequality”.** Access and inclusion are increasingly taking a central place in the thinking and

actions of various cultural organizations. Through our close collaboration, we are creating a large critical mass that questions intentions and practices, becoming more aware of the need to understand and defend the cultural rights of every individual.

A country that aims to have a good democracy and understands the importance of caring, happiness, and well-being in building that democracy cannot afford to exclude anyone. In this sense, we believe that cultural organisations have a political role in our society. UMCOLETIVO, based in Alentejo, shares that, **“one of the main challenges was to recognise the centrality that each territory already possesses”**. Perhaps by gaining this awareness, we are already halfway there. It is about looking at people, caring about them – their desires, anxieties and needs – seeking to create relationships based on respect and recognition for what each person can bring to those relationships. It is also about making an effort to engage, as Teatrão says, with those people who **“do not have, do not want, or believe they do not need theatre in their lives. In this exercise, we cultivate balanced doses of risk, ambition and humility”**.

Communication is the foundation for these processes, and Acesso Cultura has invested heavily, since its beginning, in raising awareness in the cultural sector through the use of clear language that allows for encounters between experts and non-experts. A language that neither infantilises nor trivialises nor “simplifies”, but reveals an honest desire to communicate with more people and not just with peers. The right to access information and knowledge is equally fundamental in building a strong democracy. The scientist Joana Lobo Antunes recognises that, **“the way scientists speak is still very inaccessible for people outside the field”**,



and we know that this should not be a concern only for the dissemination of scientific culture. However, this area shows a great awareness of communication failures and their impact on the relationship with society. It is not by chance that several scientific outreach projects have been recognised over the years with the Acesso Cultura Award and honourable mentions.

However, we know that there is often a large gap between theory and practice. While we celebrate the small yet significant steps taken to improve access conditions, we remain aware that much remains to be done. Reflecting on and confronting ideas is essential, but action is equally necessary. As long as we do not act, people's opportunities for participation remain limited. Dancer and choreographer Diana Niepce comments on the perversity of our cultural system regarding disability: **“We have cultural spaces funded by public money where people with disabilities are not allowed to sit in the theatre seats or access the stage”.**

We need **“programming structures that truly embrace the challenge for change - availability, sharing and transformation”**, according to Terra Amarela, an artistic structure that works with artists with and without disabilities. **“A lot of hard, continuous work needs to be done on training teams and cultural institutions regarding these issues throughout the country”**, emphasises Alcantara. This awareness and these practices, which are paving the way, owe much to the work of those on the ground who see them as a priority. However, they also need intersectoral policies, continuity, and funding. **“For example, it is essential for Arts Council (DGArtes) programmes, such as partnership support in the area of accessibility, to be multi-year instead of one-year programmes”**, states the association Materiais Diversos.

In 10 years, many things have changed, others not so much. The slowness of change can sometimes be frustrating and demotivating. However, we know that we are not alone and that this “family” – which includes colleagues, cultural organizations, public and private partner entities – is growing every day, along with their determination to assume their responsibilities, including political ones. Although museums are structures that move slowly – Senior Museum Consultant Elaine Heumann Gurian compares them to ocean liners, which turn so slowly that it seems like they are not moving at all – the truth is that some, like the Lisbon Museum, are open **“to topics that are not widely discussed but are highly relevant in contemporary society, always related to Lisbon’s identities. These topics include sustainability, urban challenges, racism and slavery, discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity”**.

**“There is a momentum!”**, Ben Evans states. **“The mainstream cultural sector is finally noticing that some of the most radical and innovative cultural practices are emanating from those who have often been ignored.”** This is precisely where we wish to focus. At Acesso Cultura, we want to continue working and evolving. We promise to do so with dedication and curiosity, openness and sincerity.

**Rita Pires dos Santos, President of the Board**

# Interviews

# Alcantara

*Rethinking participants' sense of citizenship.*



Opening of Alcantara Festival 2021 © Tiago Moura

**Alcantara** is a non-profit cultural association led by Carla Nobre Sousa and David Cabecinha. It develops projects stemming from the performing arts – dance, theatre, and performance – and their intersections with other artistic and knowledge-based practices. The name Alcantara, derived from the Arabic *al kantara*, means “bridge”, reflecting the association’s aim to create relationships between artists, audiences, and cultures.

The association builds on the work of Danças na Cidade (Dances in the City), a platform first created by Mónica Lapa to provide visibility to the first generation of Portuguese contemporary dance artists, which then evolved into an international dance festival (1993-2002). Expanding to include other disciplines, the Alcantara Festival was held as a biennial event from 2006 to 2018 and has been held annually since 2020.

Through co-productions, as well as national and international partnerships, Alcantara runs a regular programme of residencies and encounters, with its epicentre in the space with the same name on Calçada Marquês de Abrantes, provided by the Municipality of Lisbon.

[www.alkantara.pt](http://www.alkantara.pt)



Launch party of Alcantara Festival 2022 © Joana Linda

The concepts of otherness and multiculturalism, for example, are still important but currently appear as slightly remote in the discussions with which we would like to engage. Instead of otherness, we are currently interested in exploring subjectivity, multiplicity, and diversity. Similarly, instead of multiculturalism, we focus on interculturality, intersectionality, and encounters.

**The Alcantara Festival has expressed a particular focus on social, political, and cultural issues. Indeed, otherness and multiculturalism are inherent traits of the festival's programming, from its inception as Danças na Cidade to its current editions. The Porto Santo Charter, in one of its recommendations, calls on cultural institutions to become “protagonists in the development of more aware, democratic, diverse and equal social and cultural consciences”. Does Alcantara see itself in this role?**

Absolutely. Although the Porto Santo Charter (2021) did not serve as our guideline, Alcantara's mission (as we have presented it since 2020) can be seen as a variation of the phrase presented in the Charter: “We believe that the unique visions and explorations of artists can contribute to collective reflections and the development of more open, just, and attentive societies. The projects we develop are rooted in the performing arts – dance, theatre, and performance – which intersect with other artistic and knowledge-based domains. They foster dialogue and relationships with different contemporary discourses and contexts.”

When we started working as artistic directors of Alcantara, we were aware of the place it holds, since its foundation as Danças na Cidade, as a political project that seeks to act in society through the artistic practices it promotes. As we laid out our artistic direction, we had the opportunity to reflect on this aspect, both during the festivals and in the projects Alcantara develops throughout the year.

It was interesting to look at a project like Alcantara and understand that many relational formats – with audiences,



with the established artistic community, or even in the training of emerging artists – had already been tested. Many of the intervention strategies only required reinterpretation and updating in light of contemporary discourses and the evolving nature of certain concepts. This also involved revisiting and re-evaluating who should be involved in this process.

The concepts of otherness and multiculturalism, for example, are still important but currently appear as slightly remote in the discussions with which we would like to engage. Instead of otherness, we are currently interested in exploring subjectivity, multiplicity, and diversity. Similarly, instead of multiculturalism, we focus on interculturality, intersectionality, and encounters.

**In recent editions, the festival has prioritised the availability of accessibility resources. How did it start, how has it been going, and how do you envision the future?**

Working on accessibility is something we have sought to consolidate since the beginning of our artistic direction at Alcantara in 2018. The first significant action we took in addressing this issue was to establish a specific role within our team focusing on access and audience programmes. This included the coordination of the project Sete Anos Sete Escolas (Seven Years Seven Schools) which we produced between 2016 and 2021. The Access and Audience Programmes position has been part of our team since late 2018, and it was filled in 2019 through a competitive recruitment process. In 2021, when the person responsible for this job changed, we reconfigured the role to Access and Audiences.

In our work, the idea of accessibility (to artistic practices) extends beyond the resources we can provide. At Alkantara, facilitating access and promoting diversity (in the audience, on stage, within teams, and in decision-making roles) are closely interconnected actions which occur simultaneously. That is one of the reasons we believed that efforts to facilitate access could be carried out in conjunction with actions for audience development and engagement.

Implementing accessibility services has primarily been a learning experience, involving collaborations with professionals, theatre teams, and audience mobilisation. For example, when we sought to have subtitles adapted with audio descriptions for some shows at the Alkantara Festival 2021, we realised that this type of service did not yet exist in Portugal. Some professionals were providing it for films and TV series but not for theatre/dance performances. There were no models or professionals that could perform this task. Nonetheless, we managed to work with a professional who had learned by studying other contexts. The sharing and dialogue among peers that this step opened up paved the way to important actions, such as a training course facilitated by Acesso Cultura for various professionals.

We also want to highlight that, in our recent years of work, actions and practices we have implemented have been just as important as providing accessibility services at Alkantara events (both at the festival and in the PISTA training programmes, in collaboration with the Polo Cultural Gaivotas | Boavista and Loja Lisboa Cultura divisions of Lisbon City Council, or in workshops for artists). These include our attempts to implement affirmative action in recruitment processes, invitations for independent

curatorial roles by individuals from historically oppressed and under-represented groups, and the establishment of internal procedures for team inclusion. Nonetheless, we recognise that there are specific features (many of which we may not know and should not assume to know) that need to be identified and tended to.

**What changes in public cultural policies could provide greater support for your goal of facilitating access and promoting diversity?**

There is a serious lack of demographic data in our country. This is a fundamental issue that goes beyond the cultural sector. Despite the successive recommendations from the United Nations to collect ethnic and racial data, we missed an opportunity during the 2021 Census to learn more about the composition of Portuguese society. We hope that the data collection carried out by the National Institute of Statistics in 2023 will correct this situation.

An important step would be to devise an ethnic and racial self-identification model that could be used transversally. This would allow us to understand how our teams and programmes are composed with regard to this aspect. Another key focus should be to study and test affirmative action policies in the Portuguese context, including quota systems, to address the unequal access and lack of opportunities (in various areas) faced by certain groups in our society.

While our understanding of what access and diversity mean has progressed in recent years, a lot of hard, continuous work needs to be done on training teams and cultural institutions regarding these issues throughout the country.

In the medium term, this could mean having a greater diversity of people producing, programming, presenting their work, and attending cultural spaces, without this being seen as niche or unique programming.

**In developing projects within the context of cultural democracy, it is important for processes and outcomes to be disseminated and communicated, as a way of inspiring and sharing good practices. This publication seeks to contribute to that purpose. In this regard, how does the active participation of citizens as cultural agents find a place at Alcantara? How does this currently take shape or how could it take shape in the future?**

One example of a project we have developed that is closely linked to the idea of cultural democracy and active citizen participation is the project *Sete Anos Sete Escolas*, under the artistic direction of Cláudia Dias. This project involved the publication of the book *Sábado - Aprendizagens no cruzamento entre arte, educação e cidadania* (Saturday - Lessons on the intersection of art, education, and citizenship), co-edited by Alcantara and D. Maria II National Theatre, with the support of the PARTIS programme by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

Over the course of five academic years, the project involved school communities – students, teachers, and education assistants – integrating the creation of an artistic object (performance, exhibition, film, etc.) inspired by a dance piece by Cláudia Dias into the class curriculum. Through discussions based on a dance piece, the tools and design of a piece of artwork, participants were able to rethink their own sense of citizenship.

In reality, a significant part of our intervention goes beyond the notion of “active participation of citizens as cultural agents”. We perceive cultural agents (artists, production professionals, technical staff and programmers) as active citizens who have the right to participate in cultural projects within the organisations they work for or wish to work for. They also have a duty to create favourable conditions to include an increasingly wide and diverse range of individuals in cultural projects within these organisations.

An example of Alkantara’s ongoing work in this regard is the PISTA training and forum programme. PISTA serves as a space for professional development, discussion and identification of concrete actions (in the case of cultural forums) around specific issues that need to be reconsidered and acted upon. Examples of topics addressed in these forums include black representation, coordinated and moderated by Raquel Lima, and mental health, coordinated and moderated by Luísa Saraiva, which will take place soon.

With a more defined time scale, we are also working on two recently initiated international cooperation projects with co-financing from the European Union Creative Europe programme. One project aims to promote the professional integration of artists living in exile in Europe, while the other seeks to foster diversity around the narratives presented in the programming of our cultural spaces.

Both projects involve a range of activities designed for the teams of the organisations involved. These activities serve as moments for reflection, identifying best practices in welcoming artists and their work, developing more diverse

programming and fostering relationships with audiences. In addition to these moments, there will also be spaces for public reflection and the dissemination of results.





# Diana Niepce

***There will always be my body  
and the body of the other,  
and these will never be alike.***



T4 © Alípio Padilha



**Diana Niepce** is a dancer, choreographer and author. She graduated from Lisbon's Escola Superior de Dança, with an Erasmus year at Theatre Academy Helsinki, going on to obtain a Master's in Art and Communication at Nova University Lisbon. She has also completed a Performing Arts Management/Production course at Forum Dança.

She created the contemporary circus piece *Forgotten Fog* and the dance pieces *Raw a nude*, *12,979 Days*, *Duet*, *T4*, *Anda*, *Diana* and *The Other Side of Dance*. As a performer, she has worked with various national and international artists.

She has published articles in the book *Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker em Lisboa* and in the performing arts journal *Coreia*. She has also published the children's story *Bayadére*, the poem "2014" in *Flanzine* magazine, the book *Anda, Diana (Come, Diana)* and the story *Partidos e fedidos, são os calhaus (Broken and stinking are the rocks)* for Rota Memorial do Convento (a novel and cultural trail). She works as a curator of training courses for artists with disabilities and sits in various juries. In 2022, her piece *Anda, Diana* won the Authors Awards by the Portuguese Society of Authors, SPA, in the Choreography category.

[www.aniepce.com](http://www.aniepce.com)



Anda, Diana © Alípio Padilha

It is time to make room for the voices of artists with disabilities, to give them space to take control of inclusion. An artist without a disability doesn't know what it's like to have a disability; they will always be remote from that political position and will never truly represent a person with a disability.

**The synopsis of *Anda, Diana* reads “I stopped searching for my body in the body of others and found myself by meeting the other”. What conditions has the cultural sector, and particularly the performing arts, been providing for these different bodies - those on stage, those in the audience, or both - to meet each other?**

As well as being a book, *Anda, Diana* is also a piece portraying the reconstruction of my body after an accident which transformed it. During my process of adapting to the new reality of my body, I noticed a reality of which I had never been aware - that society has “normalised” a series of behaviours and discourses that made me feel “less than”, or even invisible. Over time, I realised that what inclusion sought in my body was not its true identity, but to make it as close as possible to the notion of a traditional dancer, when that notion already differs from the current philosophy of the performing body. In the piece, I sought to destroy the very concept of the dancing body and reconstruct my body from its own history. A rigid body that I work on through the bodies of others, as extensions of each other, like prostheses. I worked with the performers Bartosz Ostrowski and Joãozinho da Costa. The piece is defined through this manifesto, because I no longer cared about what others thought of my body. There will always be my body and the body of the other, and these will never be alike.

Until now, encounters between various artists have been provided through inclusive companies, and it was very difficult to access the world of dance as an artist with a disability. Accessibility issues were addressed through people’s own volition, through empathy: a fellow artist

would carry me, another would invite me to attend a rehearsal... If an event was not accessible, institutions would tell me not to go, as if it were not an act of discrimination. Accessing the world of performance, both as a spectator and as an artist, was not seen as a right, but from the perspective of charity and empathy. Constant negotiation becomes unbearable.

**As artists with disabilities increasingly collaborate with companies whose focus is not solely on inclusion, how do you see the role of inclusive companies evolving?**

Inclusive companies continue to play an essential role for a marginalised and institutionalised community. Their work remains necessary to provide opportunities for professional artists. Although we are starting to witness a rise in the authorship of artists with disabilities, we cannot overlook the fact that these inclusive companies originated within the scope of activities run by private social solidarity institutions. These institutions provide occupation and employment for people with disabilities, and these people need to continue working.

However, I believe that the work of inclusive companies should be led by individuals with disabilities and always involve discussions with artists with disabilities. I also believe that the relationship between artists with and without disabilities will always exist, but the presence of leaders who understand and personally confront social barriers is crucial. Only then can we reformulate the system.

**Alongside the work of other artists with disabilities, your work has also contributed to debunking prejudices, changing mindsets, and promoting new production and programming practices. How do you envision the future? What do you consider to be the main obstacles to that conception?**

The first step is to change the status conditions for performing arts professionals, which is not designed to accommodate the specific needs of artists with disabilities. There should be a training plan for all professionals so that the sector can adapt.

In the future, I dream of international relationships researching more ethical and just practices that focus on creation rather than just labour rights, these being far from satisfactory. However, we still need to overcome primary obstacles, such as physical barriers, the medical model of disability that views it as a form of “overcoming”, and logistical issues that are not yet adequately addressed for all. Once we have tackled these challenges, we can chart the path forward.

**You mentioned “more ethical and just practices that focus on creation rather than just labour rights”. What do you mean by that?**

One thing cannot be separated from the other. The needs of artists should be considered, and this is still not happening. If I want to go to work and come across a step to access the rehearsal space, I won't be able to get around the barrier and ignore the fact that my access rights are not being upheld. While we're discussing ramps, accessible bathrooms, and independent stage access, I cannot chart a path because

I can only access places that allow me access. These are still relatively sparse.

Ethical and just practices involve multiple layers in project design, which, given the precariousness of the industry, often become unaffordable. Institutions need to discuss their own policies with artists, read and comply with access riders, understand that we have always been the least represented in the diversity field, despite representing a significant percentage in society.

People with disabilities do not feel represented when a normative choreographer presents a piece with disabled artists. The representation of an artist with a disability should always be done by artists with disabilities, with their voices being heard. We are tired of hearing the voices of the “normal” people of this world. It is time to make room for the voices of artists with disabilities, to give them space to take control of inclusion. An artist without a disability doesn’t know what it’s like to have a disability; they will always be remote from that political position and will never truly represent a person with a disability.

In other words, a piece by a normative creator working with a marginalised community will always be created from the perspective of someone who is not marginalised, but privileged. It will always be an unbalanced process that doesn’t begin from common ground. A normative creator will always have an outsider’s perspective on the community because they don’t have a disability and are not part of that community. For example, disability arts are created solely by artists with disabilities. A normative body often lacks the ability to perceive that the body on stage is being humiliated. During the creative process, the artist often realises what they are representing only later.

Creation reflects on the voices that have been silenced by the virtuous hierarchy of the performing body, which mirrors a larger problem in society and keeps us perpetually discriminating in an ableist discourse.

**And what about programming? Are the promoting institutions and festivals in Portugal keeping up with the changes happening in other countries, such as the growing concern for cultural democracy?**

I am seeing a significant effort on the part of organisations. However, this new model of thinking diversity has brought about a sometimes ill-considered trend in what they actually choose to present. What is the implicit political discourse in the piece? What is the process? Do they still condone oppressive systems and unfair models of working with the community?

I believe that institutions need curatorial support to understand the implications of their choices: whether a piece is ableist, condescending, or paternalistic. As long as normative programmers are making the selection, it is clear that they grew up in an ableist system that does not allow them to see beyond it.

It is not enough to programme works by artists who want to include marginalised bodies. It is very dangerous to bring communities that have been vulnerable for decades into the realm of creation. Either way, they are being exposed, with working conditions equal to those of a normative artist, without assessing their specific characteristics and without a critical perspective on what still needs to be done.



I believe that the role of training and critical analysis of performances will be essential in changing the landscape of contemporary art in relation to disability.

**There has been widespread and growing interest in artistic discourses that address identity issues. For example, questioning has focused on the under-representation of minorities and the lack of job opportunities. In your own career as an artist, do you foresee that these themes will continue to be relevant?**

We are far from reaching a point where these themes cease to be relevant. As long as artists with disabilities continue to represent the most neglected minority in the performing arts, I will continue to develop projects that enhance and promote the creative work of artists with disabilities – until the day I no longer need to do so.

Given the specific characteristics of how I approach these topics, I believe that this continues to be important. However, in reality, I am interested in a broader field of conflicts in my research. While the question of representation belongs to this field, I think it is closer to my role as an activist than to my artistic role. I see it as a social responsibility. I am interested in thinking about dance, regardless of the body that arises from it, but I cannot neglect my duty as a citizen to revolutionise a system that was not designed for everyone.

**How do you think public policies in the cultural sector should be developed, taking into account the specific needs of artists with disabilities?**

Public policies should be designed and reconsidered based on models applied in other countries. However, this requires interest and dedication to truly understand how perverse our cultural system is when it comes to disability. We have cultural spaces funded by public money where people with disabilities are not allowed to sit in the theatre seats or access the stage. There is no support to make work institutions accessible. There is no support for Portuguese Sign Language interpreters or audio description for creative processes, leaving blind and Deaf artists without the autonomy even to audition.

Given that there is no specific support for these resources, creators who want to work with these artists receive less compensation for the creative process than the interpreter, making it ruinous and impossible from a budgetary point of view. There is no support for personal assistants or choreographic assistants for artists with disabilities. In this country it is impossible to obtain insurance for artists with disabilities, which is mandatory, when in the dance sector insurance costs are unaffordable even for normative artists.

Policies should be developed alongside artists with disabilities and people who continue to fight for their rights. They should also be efficiently implemented and enforced. It is not enough to simply tick a box on a funding application with the participation of an artist with a disability; the rights of these artists must be protected and prioritised.



# Joana Lobo Antunes

*The art of relevance  
involves listening to people  
before we start speaking.*



The team of 90 Seconds of Science © Sara Matos

**Joana Lobo Antunes** has a degree in Pharmaceutical Science and a PhD in Organic Chemistry. She is a professor in Science Communication at the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences of Universidade Nova de Lisboa, and Head of Communication, Image and Marketing at Instituto Superior Técnico.

She also teaches science communication skills, including the use of storytelling and theatrical improvisation for science and the use of social media as a science dissemination tool. She has worked as Head of the Communication Office at ITQB NOVA, Director at Centro Ciência Viva de Sintra and post-doctoral fellow in the Promotion and Administration of Science and Technology. She founded the Portuguese Science Communicators Network SciCom.Pt.

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Joana Lobo Antunes © Rui André Soares, Comunidade Cultura e Arte

We have to meet people where they are (geographically, emotionally, in terms of basic knowledge) and find what sparks their interest in the topics, in order to reach out to them.



**You have been working on promoting scientific culture for various years. In your opinion, what have been the sector's main achievements in this area? And what challenges still persist?**

I believe that two very important movements have contributed to the development of scientific culture initiatives in Portugal. On the one hand, universities and research centres have considered it strategic and essential to have dedicated and trained personnel for full-time science communication (with the vital contribution of scientists, of course). On the other hand, museum structures connected with non-formal education, such as Science and Technology Centres (Centros de Ciência Viva), work on promoting the connection between young or student audiences and various aspects of science.

One of the most challenging issues that still persists is funding. The sector would greatly benefit from the regular allocation of competitive funding for new projects, which would bring in new people and new perspectives, opening up new horizons for a wider audience.

**Can industries that depend on science and technology for their production processes play a role in promoting scientific culture in Portugal?**

I think companies and sectors that rely on science and technology can play a role in funding activities that promote scientific culture or directly engage in them. The first model has the advantage of not requiring companies to invest in their own human resources, while the second model can leverage the value they already possess. In the first case, a good example is Novartis, a pharmaceutical company



that has been funding the project 90 Segundos de Ciência (90 Seconds of Science) for the past six years and won the Acesso Cultura Award for Intellectual Accessibility in 2018. An example of the second case is the Merck MSD Manuals, which provide high-quality communicational and scientific information about diseases for both patients and healthcare professionals.

**Clear communication is crucial for scientific literacy and creating a critical mass among citizens. In terms of intellectual accessibility, are institutions dedicating enough attention to audiences with specific needs?**

One of the major concerns in this area is making science content accessible to non-scientific audiences. We still struggle to reach specific needs because the first barrier is difficult to overcome.

According to the 2021 Eurobarometer, which collects surveys from tens of thousands of European citizens, one of the main reasons why people don't engage in science outreach events is because they feel they lack sufficient knowledge of science and technology. This means that we are failing in our communication with the people we want to reach - in the language we use to invite them to engage with us. We still have a long way to go in making language accessible to non-experts, and this has greatly hindered our ability to think on a broader scale. Perhaps we can challenge ourselves collectively to come up with projects for audiences with special needs, through which we can reach other people as well.

During the pandemic, we implemented a programme of live science conversations on social media called Explica-me como se tivesse cinco anos (Explain it to me as if I were five years old) at Instituto Superior Técnico. In the preparatory sessions with all the scientists, we asked them to design presentations with an audience of that age in mind, which was our target audience. Everyone mentioned how difficult and demanding it was, but they accepted the challenge.

Based on the evaluations we received from participants, we concluded that by explaining to that age group, the scientists ultimately made the topics understandable to people of all ages. Perhaps if we start designing programs with different needs in mind (such as age, prior knowledge, sensory conditions), we can reach even further – the target audience we aim for and many others along the way.

**Do you consider it inevitable that the focus on making communication accessible to non-scientists compromises efforts to include audiences with specific needs?**

Nothing is inevitable. The issue is that we still have so much difficulty in overcoming the first barrier that we can't even reach the others. However, I am pleased to see some initiatives springing up. For example, the recent Science Communication Congress held in May in Bragança provided simultaneous interpretation into Portuguese Sign Language, sparking a debate among professionals in the field about the need for inclusion of a broader spectrum of audiences.

We also attended an interesting lecture on inclusion and equity by Lenna Cumberbatch, which opened up perspectives for many people in the room.

Moreover, we discussed science communication in Portuguese-speaking countries, where science faces even more barriers in reaching society. In previous editions of these meetings, we had keynote presentations from Elisabeth Rasekoala in 2022, who spoke about the reality in African countries and the importance of decolonisation in science communication, and from Maria Vlachou in 2019, who discussed inclusion and how to implement it in our realities. It is a long journey, but one that involves persistence and constantly looking around us.

**What resources or training programmes could be made available to science professionals to make their language more accessible? After all, communication is not their area of expertise.**

The first step, which I have been working on, is language. The way scientists speak is still very inaccessible for people outside the field. We work on contextualisation and the use of language, both with scientists themselves and with institutions, to make technical papers understandable to a wider public. We are also working on including captions in multimedia materials, such as videos, in order to include people who are D/deaf or hard of hearing. However, there is still a lot to do for people with specific visual accessibility needs and other types of needs. We believe that we are still on a journey and have much progress to make.

**The easy access to information we have today seems like a double-edged sword. On one hand, we have immediate access to a huge amount of content allowing us to broaden our knowledge and encounter various points of view. But on the other hand, it becomes difficult to distinguish between science and pseudoscience. The issues related to Covid-19 vaccination were paradigmatic of this situation. How do you see science communication playing a mediating role in this context?**

The widespread, easy, and often free access to information is a great advantage. It is a tremendous opportunity to have a well-informed population on a wide range of subjects. However, the increase in access and sheer quantity of information has changed consumption patterns. There is a preference for quick and visual ways of digesting content, reading only headlines and retaining an image, when most topics require a bit more attention. This leads to the rapid spread of misinformation and unverified information.

Mediation by science communicators seems to be very important on two levels. Firstly, by preparing and supporting scientists who are called to speak in public, especially on television. There has been a prevalence of the same individuals commenting on different angles of Covid-19 in the media. With some training and support from communicators who could help prepare the message and make television appearances a safe space, there could have been more diverse voices.

Secondly, communicators can help with the design and implementation of science communication initiatives

that can efficiently reach different audiences. The only way to combat misinformation is by providing quality and accessible information, while equipping people with the tools to discern between the two.

**What factors most influence scientific literacy in Portugal, which is crucial for improving cultural democracy indicators?**

The first step is to awaken people's interest in the subject, so that they want to be informed, seek knowledge, think, and study. We have to meet people where they are (geographically, emotionally, in terms of basic knowledge) and find what sparks their interest in the topics, in order to reach out to them.

We need to learn how to make science relevant to people beyond curious facts about how wine affects blood pressure or which foods help with weight loss. As the curator, activist and writer Nina Simon eloquently stated, the art of relevance involves listening to people before we start speaking. We need to listen more.



Joana Lobo Antunes © Rui André Soares, Comunidade Cultura e Arte



# Materiais Diversos

*The path to cultural democracy is forged through collaboration, sharing successes and failures.*



E depois do Paraíso © Luísa Baeta



The cultural association **Materiais Diversos** is recognised for its role in supporting artistic creation and dissemination, particularly choreographer and programmer Tiago Guedes, co-founder of the association in 2003 and its first artistic director. It was one of the entities in Portugal which invested in cultural promotion and revitalisation outside of major urban areas.

Directed by Elisabete Paiva since 2015, the mission of the organisation is to promote artistic research and creation, as well as to bring the public closer to the performing arts, especially dance. It develops projects supporting creators, artistic residencies, educational activities, and, every two years, the homonymous festival in the municipalities of Alcanena, Cartaxo (2013-2021), and Torres Novas (2009-2016).

[www.materiaisdiversos.com](http://www.materiaisdiversos.com)



The Workshop of Transition © Catarina Louro

The fact that we publicly commit to “current affairs” and do not separate artistic activity from its political dimension is not because we choose one theme over another, but because we engage in community life as much as possible. This framework aligns our programme choices with the public sphere and reverberates through people’s cultural participation.

**When presenting the festival, you state that you aim to “bring together different audiences and imaginations around the arts and thought, questioning current issues and promoting cultural participation as a condition of citizenship”. How has this participation evolved? What difficulties have you experienced and what results have you achieved?**

The diversity of artistic languages and projects, ways of engaging with the audience, and aesthetics have always given the festival a multifaceted quality. Thus, it enters into dialogue with very different people and imaginations. This path is not easy, and we do not know if it ever will be, but it has become a commitment that we wanted to make public.

From our point of view, the challenges we sometimes encounter – such as the distancing of some people who consider certain proposals strange, or resistance to certain projects – go beyond the artistic field and relate to a growing social fragmentation.

On the one hand – and this is not limited to the areas where we perform – we observe a distancing between people who disagree with each other, looking for spaces of comfort and consensus. On the other hand, we are aware that some artistic proposals programmed over the years have required more consistent mediation and a proximity that we have only recently been able to provide to people. This has been made possible through a local team and the consolidation of our regular programme.

Another factor that hindered our efforts was a lack of local political support between 2015 and 2021. The quality of this political support, achieved through the new executive (since October 2021), is important not only for financial sustainability but also for supporting dialogue with our local peers, associations, cultural institutions, and audiences.

Investment in ongoing activities in schools, the existence of the Regular Programme, and the 2021 festival have cemented this work. They have made us more present, brought us closer, more able to listen to diverse sensitivities and welcome suggestions. The fact that we show resilience and creativity in the face of challenges and that we back our words with actions, has also renewed the local community's trust in us.

Finally, the fact that we are increasingly committed to the youth community, including supporting local artists through specific programs, has also resounded decisively.

### **What role does Materiais Diversos take on as a promoter of cultural democracy?**

We believe that it is our responsibility, as cultural agents, to take a proactive approach. Moreover, because we are a medium-scale professional structure in a rare area from the point of view of the professional cultural ecosystem, our work is of greater importance. At the same time, what we do is more scrutinised while simultaneously having the potential to become a reference. This makes it extremely demanding, creates tensions and sometimes fatigue, but it also makes each successful step more significant and impactful, which is rewarding.

That's partly why we attach so much importance to the discursive dimension of our work, from concepts and vocabulary to the relationship between what we communicate and what we do.

If you look at our working documents with partners, project dossiers, and even our communication materials, you will see that we repeat ideas, words, and approaches. We embrace the pedagogical and influential aspect as part of our work. This influence supports the work of younger colleagues and smaller structures in the region, impacting pedagogical practices and perceptions of the arts in schools through continuous engagement with children, young people, and teachers. It also inspires the work carried out by public institutions in the region, primarily through their teams.

The path to cultural democracy is forged through collaboration, sharing successes and failures, sharing learning and knowledge, and seeking to contribute to a common agenda.

The fact that we publicly commit to “current affairs” and do not separate artistic activity from its political dimension is not because we choose one theme over another, but because we engage in community life as much as possible. This framework aligns our programme choices with the public sphere and reverberates through people's cultural participation.

**We are talking about a biennial festival. Between each edition, what guides your actions? What work do you do with the community, and how extensive is the relationship between moments of greater and lesser visibility?**

The festival was annual before becoming biennial. The reason for the change in pace is precisely what guides our actions: the awareness that only by spending more time with people, whether they are audiences and/or partners, and by establishing deep connections, can we achieve our objectives. Therefore, our focus is on continuity, sharing, and the idea of coexistence.

Between each edition of the festival, we have three main types of activity: artistic residencies, collaboration with the Alcanena School Group (ASG) and the spectator club. We are starting other activities, complementary to and stemming from these.

The residencies focus on ongoing projects to be presented at the festival. They generate curiosity and initiate dialogue, reveal different facets of the artistic teams, both from the point of view of methodologies and the personal relationships established. Some of these projects are participatory, and therefore have a wider reach. For example, we have been supporting and co-producing a dance project for children every year since 2018. This support is not only financial, it also includes research workshops, open rehearsals and conversations over the course of the residency period and the presentation. This is an emblematic case as the children get to know every aspect of the show, reflecting ideas, experiences, and conversations shared during the creative process.

Collaborating with the ASG has involved developing artistic workshops with middle-school students since 2017 and upper-school students since 2022. These workshops have included visual arts and philosophy, but they focus on dance because we consider the body as the primary place of belonging, and because we have chosen two local dancers and dance teachers as our partners. These workshops focus on contributing to artistic literacy and fostering reflection on citizenship and diversity, the inseparability of humanity and nature, the notion of belonging, and heritage.

The spectator club Ver no Escuro (Seeing in the Dark) invites the community to discover more experimental shows in line with the festival's programming. These shows are not usually accessible in the region and allow various worlds to be brought together.

**Do you develop any strategies specifically targeted towards non-youth audiences, who typically do not have the same access through collective mediation forums?**

Between 2018 and 2022, we developed specific programmes for this type of audience. Encontros que Contam (Meaningful Encounters), an annual oral storytelling cycle which we developed in collaboration with António Fontinha, is the best example due to its continuity. Through accessible forms such as tales from oral tradition, we sought to create intergenerational meeting opportunities that valued the memories and knowledge of older people. Initially, the programme was centred around the Roque Gameiro Agarela Museum in Minde, then expanded to different parishes, reaching out to communities with the support of local parish councils and folk groups.



We also organised dance workshops in collaboration with the Em Órbita (In Orbit) project, dedicated to senior citizens and those working with senior citizens in social solidarity institutions in the municipalities of Alcanena and Cartaxo. Additionally, we partnered with the project Causa Maior (Greater Cause), by Companhia Maior, from 2021 to 2023.

However, we realised that we do not have the structure to focus on all audiences. Therefore, we returned to the previous model for the work cycle that started in 2023, primarily targeting young and adult audiences, and occasionally including projects involving older audiences in our programming. That was the case with *Hotel União* (*Union Hotel*), a play by Cão Solteiro featuring senior actors from Minde, performed during the 2010 festival. It is also the case with the project *Mil e Uma Noites* (*A Thousand and One Nights*) by UMCOLETIVO, which we are developing this year for the festival. It focuses on the written and oral literary production of women, mostly over the age of 70, in the 20th century.

There are other strategies, primarily in the field of mediation – such as small group conversations about festival programming – which we have carried out in collaboration with local ambassadors or based on team contacts. Another strategy is providing accommodation for the artistic teams in private homes. This aspect was very important in the early years of the festival, but decreased in scale with the ageing of the first “grandmothers” and the need to gauge what we asked of people. It now continues as a more defined practice, with short stays. This kind of conviviality in domestic settings and the informal time that the team dedicates

to people while developing projects on the ground are essential in the context where we work. To some extent, it addresses various limitations on access.

**Tell us a bit about your experience implementing accessibility resources and the path you aim to follow in this area.**

For a long time, accessibility was not among our top priorities. We had structural issues to address in terms of sustainability and strategic partnerships, which fully occupied our time. It was between 2020 and 2021, when we received support from DGArtes (Arte sem limites - Acessibilidade à oferta artística [Art without limits - Accessibility in the Arts] Programme) to implement an accessible programme, that we were able to devote ourselves to this aspect. In terms of communication, progress has been significant. We adapted our language and revised our websites with the assistance of a consultant.

However, because our activities take place in partner spaces or unconventional venues (squares, forests, gardens, closed buildings), physical accessibility will take some time to be implemented. It is a slow process which requires us to be well-informed, raise awareness, and foster dialogue. Nothing can be achieved through imposition, but conveying to colleagues that accessibility is a right for all people has generated changes. In addition to awareness-raising actions and workshops, we have invested in a portable ramp that we can use in any space for inclines ranging from 5 to 20 cm. The ramp fits into the boot of a car, which is incredible.

With the support we have received, we also started offering Portuguese sign language interpretation and audio description in the shows. Hiring these resources was possible, but our biggest challenge was attracting audiences. We mapped out the organisations working with people with disabilities in the region, ranging from associations to schools. However, many were not accustomed to leaving their institution or faced transportation difficulties. We reached very few people.

Through this experience, we realised that the best way to play our part in this area was to include activities involving people with disabilities. This was the case with workshops conducted by choreographers Diana Niepce, Tânia Carvalho and Mariana Tengner Barros with the APPACDM dance group from Santarém. The next step, which we will only be able to start in 2024 due to the need for more financial resources, will be to programme shows involving people with disabilities. This can be done by inviting artists to work with local associations specialising in this area or by programming creations by artists with disabilities.

**Considering the challenges you have encountered and the shift in your approach, do you believe that specific public policies (in the cultural field or elsewhere) are needed to overcome the lack of resources and practices? Do you have any suggestions in that regard?**

Yes, there is a need for intersectoral policies, continuity and funding. For example, it is essential for the Arts Council (DGArtes) programmes, such as partnership support in the area of accessibility, to be multi-year instead of one-year programmes. One year is clearly insufficient to develop appropriate strategies and deepen partnerships, let alone

evaluate impacts. This could also be a more transparent way to deliver support to priority areas, many of which are diluted within so-called “cultural policy objectives”. Indeed, only those who prioritise a particular aspect would apply for each type of support.

Another interesting measure would be to provide paid internships for artists, young people or those interested in renewing their training and practices, who would like to work in collaboration with technical teams in social or educational institutions dedicated to disability. I believe that several institutions would be open to such collaborations. In both the social and the cultural fields, teams are small considering the work that needs to be done.

Another, more cross-cutting measure would be to strengthen and specialise the cultural mediation teams in municipalities or create incentives for municipalities to establish long-term partnerships with artistic organisations to work on cultural participation. We have noticed that these teams are small, mostly focused on administrative or production tasks. There is a lot of cultural mediation work to be done, which could involve, among other things, promoting mobility along with local cultural and environmental programming and heritage.





# The Museum of Lisbon

*Decoding narratives, articulating and promoting the complementarity of different discourses, multiplying and humanising them.*



Workshop by the Education Service © José Avelar, Museu de Lisboa

Governed by Lisbon City Council, under the management of EGEAC, the **Museum of Lisbon** consists of five sites with complementary capabilities and objectives: Pimenta Palace, the Roman Theatre, Saint Anthony, West Tower, and Casa dos Bicos. In these locations, visitors can explore the history, heritage, and communities of one of the oldest cities in Europe, both in the past and present, envisioning possible futures.

In addition to these five core sites, the Museum of Lisbon, led by Joana Sousa Monteiro and David Felismino, also manages the biennial public opening of the Roman Galleries in Rua da Prata. Furthermore, it will soon integrate a new space dedicated to the promotion of Lisbon's industrial heritage, to be installed in the Milling Factory of the former army industrial area located in the Hub Criativo do Beato innovation centre.

[www.museudelisboa.pt](http://www.museudelisboa.pt)



**Marking the Place - Encounters in the Museum** © Museu de Lisboa



Engaging in dialogue and collaboration with other entities, associations, and civil society actors is essential in the pursuit of shared knowledge and authority. This collaborative approach is crucial for fostering diversity and inclusivity and for positioning the museum (or any other cultural institution) as a promoter of change in contemporary society.

**The Porto Santo Charter recommends that cultural institutions promote “the plurality of voices, practices, ways to see, interpret and mediate art, culture and heritage, thus multiplying the points of view on assets, collections and programmes”. How would the Museum of Lisbon describe the path taken in this regard?**

The Museum of Lisbon has embraced this approach as one of the pillars of its activities. It focuses on programmatic plurality, discourses, and approaches to different audiences. The museum’s polycentric nature, with five distinct spaces (and a sixth under development with the same mission), enhances the diversity of content and environments.

Over the past eight years, the museum has actively sought to question and diversify methodologies and choices, aiming to broaden the topics addressed in exhibitions, publications, mediation activities, and cultural events. This includes alternating between different chronologies and themes, creating dialogues between distant and recent pasts, and even reflecting on the present and future, while experimenting with the use of different languages.

The Museum has opened its doors to topics that are not widely discussed but are highly relevant in contemporary society, always related to Lisbon’s identities. These topics include sustainability, urban challenges, racism and slavery, discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity. These are not occasional events but rather integrated as ongoing lines of work within the regular programming.

**In striving for thematic diversity and reflection on topics that society is currently grappling with, what are the main challenges and difficulties that you face, which can serve as lessons for those embarking on a similar path?**

Dealing with “difficult” and sometimes “divisive” subjects that are often embedded in polarised and emotionally charged debates poses challenges. These issues require a calm and profound analysis that can be hindered by the intense emotions surrounding them. Presenting accessible and diverse perspectives is not always easy. However, it becomes possible by decoding narratives, articulating and promoting the complementarity of different discourses, multiplying and humanising them.

Engaging in dialogue and collaboration with other entities, associations, and civil society actors is essential in the pursuit of shared knowledge and authority. This collaborative approach is crucial for fostering diversity and inclusivity and for positioning the museum (or any other cultural institution) as a promoter of change in contemporary society.

**Can you tell us a little more about how you have prioritised the plurality of voices, languages, and practices, particularly (but not exclusively) by integrating guests who are not necessarily from the field of museology?**

The integration of diverse and plural voices and practices has been essential in constructing exhibition discourses, mediation programs, and promoting cultural activities that open the museum to society. This approach fosters a sense of belonging among different communities, contributing to the democratisation of access to culture.

The Museum has employed two primary forms of collaboration. Firstly, it has worked in partnership with universities, research centres, and laboratories, which has been crucial in incorporating specialised knowledge from various disciplinary areas and promoting diverse, articulated, and complementary narratives. Examples of this strategy include collaborations with scientific and technical universities in the context of exhibition and editorial projects, such as *A Luz de Lisboa* (*The Light of Lisbon*, 2015), *Futuros de Lisboa* (*Futures of Lisbon*, 2018), and *Hortas de Lisboa* (*Lisbon's Vegetable Gardens*, 2020). Secondly, the Museum engages in dialogue with local agents, community associations, and certain activist movements, which has helped to transform it into an inclusive space for meeting and sharing. This approach has made it receptive to new discourses, reflective and participatory ways of relating, both with its traditional audiences and in reaching out to new communities.

For instance, it has formed an ongoing collaboration since 2020 with the association Batoto Yetu Portugal, dedicated to promoting African culture. This collaboration is reflected in the development of joint educational and cultural programmes, such as the guided tour *Lisboa Africana* (*African Lisbon*), which is narrated in two voices. The programme aims to promote knowledge about the history of slavery in Lisbon, contextualising it within the city's urban development and evolution. The project provides visibility to the African community and its role in the city, both in the past and present, while highlighting the tangible and intangible heritage associated with this community and its presence in Lisbon.

**Lisbon is a city where very diverse social and cultural realities converge. What challenges and opportunities does this pose for the cultural participation - of audiences, residents and visitors - that you seek to promote?**

The Museum of Lisbon's primary audience includes the residents of the city and the metropolitan area, regardless of their origins. The Museum aims to strengthen their sense of identity and empathy with the city, its characteristics, and its values.

The city's scale, diversity, inequalities, and constant changes present considerable challenges, but also opportunities, for a Museum whose mission is to better understand, reinterpret, and communicate Lisbon. The Museum works to increase knowledge, question narratives, and seek new approaches to the past and present, aiming to enhance the level of audience participation and contribute to active and engaged citizenship. However, we do not presume to cover the multiple dimensions of Lisbon's entire extensive history or its complex present reality.

The development of projects in collaboration with institutions, associations, and individuals has been a promising and often effective strategy for promoting self-reflection and expanding audiences, including those who may not typically engage with cultural and museum institutions.

**Can you tell us in more detail about one of the projects you have developed in partnership?**

In recent years, we have been working towards promoting well-being, improving quality of life, and enhancing physical and mental health, with the objective of expanding audiences, fostering proximity to society, and promoting inclusion and participation.

The multiple pathologies associated with mental health are one of the main challenges for individual and collective health in contemporary and future societies. Since 2020, we have partnered with Alzheimer Portugal, Acesso Cultura, and the Institute of Health Sciences at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa to implement the program Marcar o Lugar – Encontros no Museu (Marking the Place – Encounters in the Museum) providing meaningful activities in a museum context for people with dementia and their caregivers. These programmes take place at the Museum of Lisbon and the MAAT – Museum of Art, Architecture, and Technology. Participants with dementia take part in workshops that promote intellectual and sensory stimulation, creativity, memory reactivation, and the construction of narratives to maintain their identity, using art as a means of communication and interaction.

Since the beginning of 2023, after four pilot editions, the Museum of Lisbon offers three programmes under the Marcar o Lugar initiative: biweekly workshops for people with dementia and their caregivers (who have been part of the project since 2020), cycles of six workshops for new participants, and customised, scheduled workshops and tours specifically designed for people with dementia and their caregivers.

**What have been the most significant achievements and challenges for the Museum in the area of accessibility? How do you envision the future?**

In the area of accessibility, the Museum has been breaking physical, communicational, and interaction-based barriers, although the challenges are significant. Over time, greater physical and communication access has been achieved as

various spaces within the Museum undergo improvements. The architectural and historical nature of the buildings within the Museum of Lisbon – including an eighteenth-century palace and a 2000-year-old archaeological site – call for a delicate balance between heritage preservation and physical accessibility, which is not always easy to achieve.

One of our long-term goals has been to develop more accessible writing in exhibitions and catalogues, as well as more accessible language in all mediation activities. In relation to audiences with specific characteristics, we have focused on people with dementia and their caregivers, individuals with special cognitive needs, infants and their families, as well as blind and Deaf audiences. However, with regards to the latter two groups, the Museum still falls short of its objectives, which we plan to address in the near future.

**Since November 2022, EGEAC has had an office dedicated to accessibility, equality, and diversity issues. What does this appointment imply in terms of greater visibility and responsibility for the Museum regarding these aspects?**

The establishment of this office has been crucial for the production of guiding and normative documents, the promotion of courses and training programmes, and the fostering of practices that enhance equitable physical, social, and intellectual access for all individuals.

These additional measures to promote inclusion and diversity align with a core aspect of EGEAC's mission and enhance the efforts the Museum has undertaken in recent years to become an inclusive, participatory,

and transformative space. This encompasses not only the adaptation of physical spaces but also the accessibility of the Museum's discourse. This appointment gives the Museum further responsibility in continuing to pursue these objectives through the implementation of increasingly effective and efficient strategies.

### **What role does the Museum of Lisbon take on as a promoter of cultural democracy?**

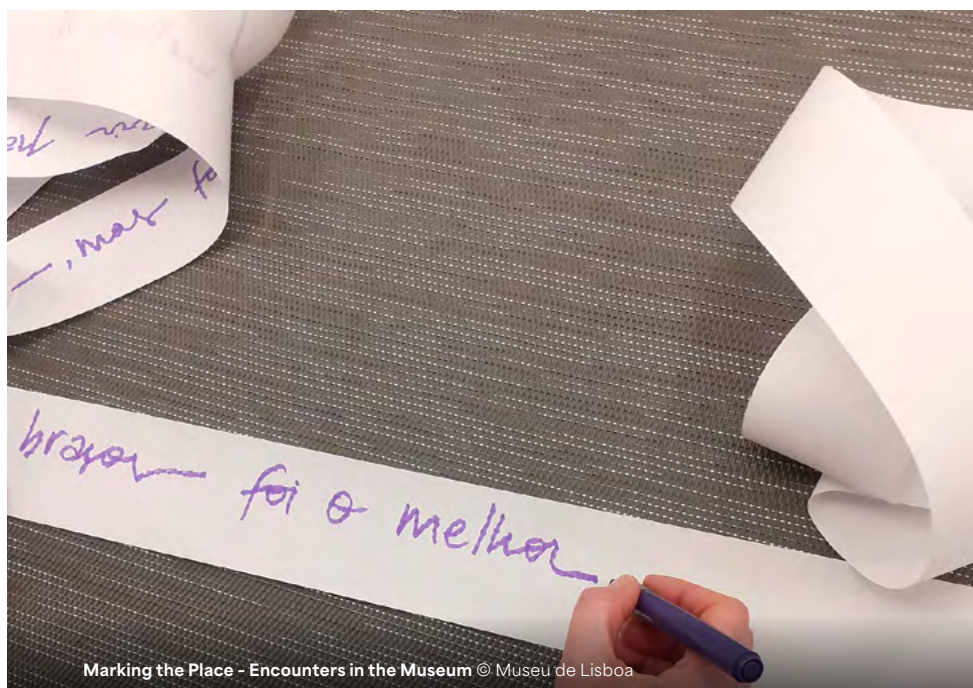
As a city museum, the purpose of the Museum of Lisbon is to showcase Lisbon's cultural, social, economic, political, anthropological, and territorial identity, reflecting its historical evolution and the diverse population that characterises it. By interpreting the city through its material and immaterial evidence, the Museum aims to reveal its plural and diverse cultural heritage, both past and present, and contribute to the construction of possible futures. The Museum sees itself as a place of inclusion, dialogue, experimentation, and the coming together of multiple voices. It acts as an active and relevant agent in the construction of the city, both in the present and the future.

In our activities, we seek to promote values and principles of freedom, equality, and the fight against all forms of prejudice, in order to enhance active and participatory citizenship based on social justice and equity. However, we recognise that there is still much to be done in this area, particularly in reaching out to audiences who are traditionally less engaged with museum institutions. Nevertheless, we strive to contribute to the common good and a sustainable future, aspiring to be a space of cultural democracy and the democratisation of culture.





Visit to the museum's permanent exhibition © José Avelar, Museu de Lisboa



Marking the Place - Encounters in the Museum © Museu de Lisboa

# The National Railway Museum

*We haven't forgotten about all the people whose relationship with technology is not yet “organic”.*



Audioguides with audio description © Museu Nacional Ferroviário

The collection of the **National Railway Museum** can be visited in various locations throughout the country - in Entroncamento, where the central hub is based, and in the museum centres of Arco do Baúlhe, Bragança, Chaves, Lousado and Macinhata do Vouga. The Museum collection tells the story of over 160 years of railway history in Portugal and represents the communities connected to the railway lines and their infrastructure, reviving the individual and collective memory and identity of each region.

Inaugurated in 2015, the Museum originated from the initiative of railway workers who preserved various vehicles and specimens in former locomotive sheds and depots. Several of these locations have become the current museum centres. The National Railway Museum Foundation, directed by Manuel de Novaes Cabral, is responsible for the installation and management of the National Railway Museum in Entroncamento and in the museum centres, which are managed in partnership with the municipalities.

[www.fmnf.pt](http://www.fmnf.pt)



Virtual tour © Museu Nacional Ferroviário



While the need for a wheel-chair ramp at the entrance of a museum is an obvious necessity – without a ramp, people cannot come in – we [the museum community] still display captions with very small font sizes, write texts that are overly complex, and rarely remember to create specific content for children, for example.

## **What importance did the Acesso Cultura Award in 2022 have for the positioning and recognition of the National Railway Museum?**

The Acesso Cultura Award 2022 is very important because it recognises our efforts to make the Museum more accessible to more people, rewarding the dedication of the team and the support of the administration. It is also a strong incentive for us to continue improving, always keeping accessibility in mind in all the work and actions we develop. We are very pleased with the results. We have noticed a slow but steady and progressive increase in the number of visitors with specific needs, both in terms of individual visits and group visits.

We have integrated accessibility into our work practices: for example, touch tours have become part of our regular programme, and we have included Portuguese Sign Language translation in most activities. We are also excited to have scheduled our first visit from a group of Deaf individuals.

From our perspective, one of the most interesting aspects stemming from our work on accessibility and receiving the award was the internalisation of accessibility by the Museum team. Our colleagues have become advocates for better accessibility conditions at all levels. Furthermore, it has contributed to increasing the Museum's visibility, and has been an important factor in reaching our position as a finalist in the Portuguese National Tourism Award, for the Accessible Tourism category. The award has helped us in our work and encourages us to continue. The National Railway Museum is reaching more and more people, and we are proud of that.

**The Porto Santo Charter focuses particularly on digital media as a tool for empowering cultural democracy, mobilising institutions and citizens as collaborators and participants. How would you characterise your experience in this domain?**

We recognise the importance of digital media as an excellent tool in supporting the democratisation of culture. However, as mentioned in the Charter, “its use will depend on the paradigm we follow and the objectives we wish to achieve”.

At the current time, the National Railway Museum systematically uses digital media to communicate with our public. We have invested in a fully accessible website with multiple languages, knowing that the majority of our visitors plan their visit in advance.

The audio guides with audio description have also been helpful, especially as support for touch tours. We have also developed virtual tours of the Museum, for anyone who may not be able to visit physically for any reason, in particular the guided tour option, with museum guides. We have learned that, even after doing a virtual tour, people are still keen to visit the museums physically when they can. Three-dimensional vision, touch, sounds and smells remain highly relevant for the visitor experience.

However, our current priority has been to focus on people, their welcome and assistance within the Museum. We confess to having mixed feelings about the use of technology in the democratisation of culture. On one hand, we recognise its usefulness, but on the other hand, we haven't forgotten about all the people whose

relationship with technology is not yet “organic”. We consider the use of technology in museums as a way to showcase and exemplify what cannot be physically displayed, as well as to support access to content.

Although we have incorporated technology into our practices and exhibition context, we still face many challenges in designing a more structured strategy. The best and most recent technological solutions are often costly and require systematic maintenance and updates, which means museums need to have a robust technology management strategy accompanied by a corresponding budget.

In our opinion, it is worse to introduce solutions without the capacity for their maintenance and updates than not to use the latest technologies at all. We also come across difficulties with suppliers, who prefer to sell museums “closed” solutions heavily reliant on their own technology. They are still hesitant to develop solutions tailored to the specific needs, collections and audiences of each museum.

**The elimination of physical barriers to accessibility is a goal pursued by the museum community. Do you notice the same level of concern for intellectual and social accessibility?**

We have noticed that intellectual and social accessibility issues are not yet addressed in the same way as physical accessibility. However, this situation may be related to how we perceive people. While the need for a wheelchair ramp at the entrance of a museum is an obvious necessity – without a ramp, people cannot come in – we still display



captions with very small font sizes, write texts that are overly complex, and rarely remember to create specific content for children, for example. Social accessibility is even less considered because it is not seen as an issue. The prevailing idea appears to be that the museum exists and the door is open, so it is up to people to visit or not.

However, it seems to us that the situation is improving and the work of organisations like Acesso Cultura and Access Lab, among others, is contributing to this improvement. Examples such as Casa Fernando Pessoa and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation also serve as inspirations.

At the National Railway Museum, we are embarking on this path. We started by establishing a protocol with the Centre for Education and Rehabilitation of Entroncamento (CERE). Working closely with CERE has allowed us to better understand diverse realities and receive groups of people with intellectual disabilities more safely. For example, we involve CERE's own clients in the meal preparation and service for these groups.

We also have an accessible pricing strategy and always make an effort to programme for everyone. Through the Welcome All project, people with specific needs are a target audience, and the Museum aims to progressively improve its accessibility conditions for better reception. However, we still have a long way to go in terms of intellectual and social accessibility. We are on this journey, knowing that it is the only path that makes sense. As custodians of the national railway heritage, it is our obligation to ensure that this heritage reaches people, regardless of their condition.

**How would you describe your relationship with the local community? Do you see it as a priority in defining target audiences? What kind of initiatives foster this relationship?**

Empirically, the National Railway Museum considers the Middle Tagus Region, with approximately 229,000 inhabitants, as its local community. However, we see our target audience as anyone residing in or visiting Portugal. Of particular significance among them are those who have an interest in and are passionate about railways, as well as all train users.

While we are aware of the need to study our audiences, it has not yet been possible to do so yet. At present, we are recovering from the impact of the pandemic, which not only reduced visitor numbers but also changed their profiles. Only in 2023 did we see a full recovery of school and senior citizen groups, both of which are key audience categories for the Museum given its location away from major urban areas.

Regarding the Municipality of Entroncamento, the Museum has developed projects targeted at local residents, often in collaboration with the Municipality. We have a close relationship with the local school group, and have worked on numerous initiatives together. We organise an Open Day in collaboration with the Municipality and strive to ensure that our programming is inclusive and aligned with the interests of the local population.

As soon as we are able to gather the necessary conditions, including expanding our team, we plan to develop other participatory projects with this community. There are already some topics under consideration.

Currently, our team is still small, and we are dedicated to meeting the increasing demand that the Museum is experiencing. As our work focuses on providing excellent reception and guidance to our visitors, the growing number of visitors (which we are grateful for) increases the need for resources.

On another level, which we consider crucial, we aim to have a positive impact on the local economy. Whenever possible, we recruit locally, have agreements with local artists for the sale of items in the gift shop, involve local associations and organisations in our initiatives, welcome interns from the entire region, and participate in local events and initiatives.





**Signing of protocol with Centre for Education and Rehabilitation of Entroncamento**  
© Museu Nacional Ferroviário

# O Teatrão

***In this exercise, we cultivate  
balanced doses of risk,  
ambition and humility.***



In My View project © Carlos Gomes

Having started out in Coimbra in 1994 as a professional theatre company, **Teatrão** has expanded its areas of participation over the years. It began with initiatives for children and young people and later diversified its programmatic activities (at the Museum of Transport), as well as touring its own productions and developing a solid educational project. Since 2008, it has also been involved in the management of Oficina Municipal do Teatro, cultural facilities set up in partnership with the local council.

Under the direction of Isabel Craveiro, Teatrão has become a multifaceted entity that offers the city a wide range of shows for diverse audiences and genres. It has also established itself internationally through partnerships with European organizations and academia. The theatre company has created and coordinated projects to form cultural programming networks such as Rede Artéria (2014-2021), set to release its final publication and a new edition by 2030, Network of Portuguese Theatres and Cinema-theatres and the Network of Theatres with Accessible Programming.

[www.oteatrao.com](http://www.oteatrao.com)





O que é Invisível © Carlos Gomes



The underlying idea we pursue is that our production and programming make sense, whether on the street or in the theatre, bringing people together and evolving in an informal environment that invites participation. It may seem difficult to be demanding in terms of the quality of the work we develop while also trying to reach different audiences. And it is. Because standards are equally high in all the various domains.

**As a theatre company with intentionally broad involvement in various cultural areas, how would you characterise the work of Teatrão and Oficina Municipal within the city and region?**

We sometimes practise making a diagram to explain our artistic project. It's not easy, but it's fun. We start by mapping out three areas of work: the creation of shows for various age groups, the educational project, and the external programming of Oficina Municipal do Teatro (Municipal Theatre Workshop), which we plan and manage. The fun part is always seeing the innumerable connections and intersections between these areas, thanks to our constant efforts to work on the different projects in a consistent, integrated and dynamic way.

Since our work cycles (4-6 years) are based on our own reflections and concerns about the world, we tend to create narratives that give meaning to our proposals. We often adjust, integrate or correct our initial ideas. These scribbled connections between various areas of work are what characterise us.

We try to ensure that they represent a real range of contact with audience members of all ages, from the city centre to the outskirts, from different socioeconomic levels and contexts.

The underlying idea we pursue is that our production and programming make sense, whether on the street or in the theatre, bringing people together and evolving in an informal environment that invites participation. It may seem difficult to be demanding in terms of the quality of the work we develop while also trying to reach different audiences.

And it is. Because standards are equally high in all the various domains – both purely artistic endeavours and activities that foster people’s engagement and participation. Teatrão consistently provokes communities. People who already participate need to find incentives to evolve their relationship with us, and we must reach more people who do not have, do not want, or believe they do not need theatre in their lives. This exercise requires us to cultivate balanced doses of risk, ambition and humility.

**In what ways has this “provocation” of communities been put into practice? In other words, how does provocation generate participation? What barriers have you come up against and what solutions have you found to overcome them?**

Provocation often goes against “official” discourses. Given the fact that we frequently work with audiences who have limited access to the city’s cultural programming and many people are convinced that theatre spaces are not for them, most people are surprised by our shows. These initial encounters with our activities are crucial, and are often mediated through existing projects or regular audience members. Informality and vitality are major components of how we work. In a city like Coimbra, with centuries of pronounced social divisions, this is a provocative attitude.

Regular audiences, institutions, and local authorities are repeatedly provoked by our approach to projects, which are always developed in response to our own concerns and those of the communities. Our projects value both popular and erudite forms, do not compromise on entertainment and enjoyment, reveal and enhance what is not usually

seen, and do not hide their political engagement as part of the artist's social responsibility.

Typically, the closeness developed by the way we work, the value placed on each audience member's opinion, the challenges created, and the sense of commitment that Teatrão fosters, all encourage participation. Any barriers that come up are often due to a lack of knowledge about our processes, conservatism regarding participation, or prejudice towards our approaches. When this happens, we do not give up. We rarely give up. We cannot. We also extend processes over time, empower people, exchange knowledge, build trust, and restore hope. For others and for ourselves.

**The Porto Santo Charter recommends that cultural organisations call in external professionals from different fields of expertise to “promote analysis and change processes, in collaboration with the institution's members, making the institution more inclusive, diverse and accessible in a social, economic, intellectual, physical, and sensorial way”. Do you recognise yourself in this movement? Is it or has it been part of your strategy?**

We're not sure if ours is a conscious, perfectly designed and calculated strategy. We preserve and develop the heritage we have been handed down in the field of theatre and education, and this serves as the basis for Teatrão, which aspires to include everyone.

We are also ideologically committed to the role of artists in transforming communities. We are willing to take risks by inviting and challenging other fields, opening our doors

for collaboration with other artists, researchers, managers, programmers, animators, teachers and audience members.

A key concern is the production of knowledge from our projects, studying the impact they have and ensuring the transparency and participation of people in our association. These are aspects we have learned from others, and they emerge as our work evolves. It is a very challenging task and sometimes it doesn't go as smoothly as we hope, because it requires people and partnerships that are truly committed to these goals.

**What does the artist's role in transforming communities look like in practice? Does it relate to the concept of cultural democracy?**

Certainly. If art is thought, as we believe it is, then the continuous exposure of audiences to various artistic forms is transformative. If art is utopia, that transformation moves communities towards more positivity, collectiveness, and tolerance. Of course, these beautiful words are extremely challenging to put into practice. Teatrão's regular activities over the past thirty years have been fundamental in helping the city address its challenges.

In addition, we have been trained to be attentive and curious about the local area, to be challenged by it and to design specific interventions. However, we also need to culturally map and study communities, identify their problems, setbacks and ambitions, and take on the challenge of engaging everyone with the artistic work we develop. We need to listen and never impose, we need to seduce and allow ourselves to be seduced. And we need to observe the community, understand why they want or don't want a

particular project, why they attend or don't attend, why they give up or continue.

**The concerns of Teatrão with regards to improving access to culture for various audience communities, including specialised ones (such as young critics), are evident. What priorities have you set for the implementation of the accessibility policy?**

We interpret cultural accessibility needs in a broad sense. The educational project we have been running since 2001 operates as a large mediation and training forum. From the beginning, we have had very specific concerns regarding pricing policies, different age groups, and the decentralisation of activities.

Our participation in specific communities, such as social housing estates, immigrant communities, Roma communities, populations at risk of school drop-out, unseen places like nursing homes and day care centres, amateur theatre, school contexts, and the blind community, have led us to develop work methods that do not cultivate the transient nature of our presence but rather establish lasting connections and circulate people within our projects. We are constantly challenged by individuals and institutions to design artistic interventions in different communities.

Nowadays, our goal is to ensure that physical and intellectual accessibility issues are on par with the social impact we generate through our projects. We designed the project A Meu Ver (In My View) for the blind and low vision population. Through this project, we introduced audio description, received specific training, connected with other national and international groups, and now

regularly involve the blind population in our activities. We started a partnership with the Portuguese Sign Language degree course at Coimbra Higher School of Education, which has developed over time. Currently, we have interns from the course participating in our creative processes and investigating possibilities for enhancing inclusion in our performances.

We have appointed a person with Down Syndrome to work in the front office of the Municipal Theatre Workshop, and this has had a tremendous impact on both the audience and the employee. We engage in discussions with research centres at the University of Coimbra and Coimbra City Council regarding accessibility to cultural spaces in the city. We also strive to share our experiences and findings with other stakeholders. However, we feel that we still have much to learn and that further training is necessary. We actively seek out partnerships to acquire knowledge and skills, either through existing collaborations or through new ones we establish.

**Emphasizing the question about the priorities that have shaped your action, can you tell us a little more about the “social impact” you referred to: what it entails, and how it manifests in your context?**

We advocate the need to study audiences, their backgrounds, levels of participation, and the changes generated by their engagement in specific artistic projects. This awareness, which has developed through the sharing of projects with social scientists from the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra, has resulted in a project to regularly monitor and study audiences/ participants in the company over the coming years.

When we prepare a project, the mapping phase presents us with challenges but also opportunities – possibilities to change very specific aspects of people’s lives. For example, if we are preparing a project with the blind community and realise – through contact with the family, partner institutions, and technical teams – that a particular person has a very limited social circle, almost non-existent cultural consumption, total financial dependence, or compromised autonomy, it becomes clear that studying the impact of the project must address these aspects. We can then work towards the cultural, social, and professional emancipation of the participants.

In terms of intellectual accessibility, the employee with Down Syndrome that I mentioned (who has been involved in the educational project since 2013) is currently attending higher education, having gained work experience with us that strengthens her path to independence. In this field as well, we are designing artistic creations for 2026 involving artists with and without disabilities, further advancing the normalisation of artists with disabilities taking part in our projects.

This has a direct impact on the lives of the participants. But it also has a significant social impact on the rest of the audience/participants in the company, as shown by their inspiration to take part in artistic projects that unpretentiously seek inclusive participation.





Teatrão's Theatre Classes © Carlos Gomes



Band Apart II project © Carlos Gomes

# Terra Amarela

*Nourishing the desire to  
receive and be received.*



Directed by actor and director Marco Paiva, **Terra Amarela** is an organisation bringing together artists from various creative forms of expression, as well as other professionals linked to cultural and social practices.

Established in April 2018, it presents itself as a collective space for transformation, opportunity, and transgression, aiming to change the relationship between people and territories through encounters with inclusive artistic creation.

Its creation responds to the need to foster a broader artistic, social, and community-based dialogue, building upon the work initiated in 2000 with the Crinabel Teatro project, a group comprised of performers with intellectual disabilities.

[www.terraamarela.pt](http://www.terraamarela.pt)



Zoo Story © Filipe Ferreira

Understanding the collective space as a place for sharing responsibilities, ideas, and privileges equitably, where the right to individual identity comes first, serving as a basis for building a common space; experiencing the joy of growing with the worlds of those around us, embracing the pleasure of taking action and being attentive and available to others' actions; cultivating a certain detachment that allows us to be present when we can contribute value and vacating spaces where we no longer contribute, making room for others to continue building the future in those spaces we have vacated.

**Marco Paiva founded Terra Amarela after 18 years of cultural activity with people with disabilities. How has your approach to accessibility in artistic creation been (trans)formed throughout the different stages of your journey?**

Our relationship with accessibility in artistic creation has followed a journey which started from the unconscious pleasure of being part of a group, experiencing world views radically distinct from the norm. It gradually evolved into a more genuine awareness of a democratic failure that prevented us from finding the same pleasure within the cultural and artistic sphere that we had occupied as a profession.

Initially, the constant discovery of creativity emerging from different physical and intellectual positions seemed like the realisation of the idea of artistic accessibility. Yet, as I gained a greater understanding of what lay beyond the intimacy that defined my daily work with the Crinabel Teatro project – where I worked from 2000 to 2021 – I was compelled to pause and reflect on the true scope of what we were doing and the ethics encapsulated in my previous understanding of the concept of accessibility. Was the world only as big as our rehearsal room?

As I personally gained a deeper awareness of the meaning of accessibility, I inevitably started establishing a different connection between this concept and artistic creation. While initially the close and intimate relationship fostered within the rehearsal room seemed sufficient to cultivate the quality time we needed to get to know each other in our diversity, at a certain point, it became necessary to make way for other thoughts and practices.

These included self-determination, representation, public policies, labour rights, continuity, questioning the dogmas that have confined artistic expressions, and engaging in discussions surrounding a paradigm shift in the cultural and artistic sector. These thoughts and practices were required in order to transform the concept of accessibility into true systemic changes rather than fleeting action solely responding to immediate needs. It was a revolution for both the creators and the audience, seeking to overcome the democratic failure that insisted on telling us that the world was only as big as a rehearsal room.

**Terra Amarela defines itself as an inclusive artistic creation platform. What is its *modus operandi* and how does it see and practise inclusion?**

The work of Terra Amarela is strategically divided into two main strands: the creative strand and the training and qualification strand. In the artistic creation strand, we develop creative projects in the field of performing arts that bring together artists with diverse physical, intellectual, linguistic, aesthetic and cultural identities. Within this strand, we practise a correlation between the plurality we foster in the artistic teams and the plurality we aim to find in audiences.

To achieve this, we extend the needs and expectations of the artists we work with to the public, seeking to design production, communication, mediation and enjoyment mechanisms that respond to the wishes of both artists and audience. We aim to make the performative event a place of inquiry and transgression, but also of trust, happiness, participation and representativeness.



As part of the training and qualification strand, we seek to create moments of learning and experience-sharing that contribute to the training of the artists we work with, while also helping to prepare professionals in the cultural and artistic sector to have a greater awareness of artistic diversity, audience development and cultural accessibility in the performing arts.

For Terra Amarela, inclusion is found in this constant movement between creators, audience members, planners, programmers, communicators, producers, and mediators. Inclusion, for us, means the ongoing dance of shifting between positions, sharing our experiences, and carrying a piece of others' experiences with us. Nourishing the desire to receive and be received.

**Programming organisations seem to have a defining role in your systematic approach, both facilitating and conditioning it. What are the main challenges for mobilising these partners and how have you overcome them?**

Programming organisations have indeed played a crucial, structuring role in our approach. However, there are two main challenges that we regularly face. The first is finding programming structures that truly embrace the challenge for change – availability, sharing and transformation. The second is the lack of a strategic vision for many organisations, which generally compromises the definition of their own programming identity. Programming is not just about thematic scheduling; it is about identity, participation and roots. Embracing this depth in such a small, asymmetrical and permeable circuit is generally complex.



Terra Amarela's strategy has been to anchor our journey to structures that embody this depth. In fact, over the last ten years, the number of programming structures that define their identity around a systemic and articulated approach has increased. We grow and learn with these structures. We join forces with them, creating a collective strength that spreads and invites more structures to think and act with us.

In our particular case, our early encounter with D. Maria II National Theatre greatly potentiated the path we wish to tread and subsequent encounters. Initially under the direction of Tiago Rodrigues alongside Magda Bizarro, and then under the direction of Pedro Penim in collaboration with Luís Sousa Ferreira, we have never only discussed shows.

We have always talked about how an artistic structure like Terra Amarela could build on the solid and steady path of D. Maria II National Theatre in relation to artistic diversity, accessibility and territory. It has never been just about the present; it has always been about the future. This is only possible when an organisation's identity is so strong that it understands that identity is not a crystallised place but a constantly evolving process. And, of course, the presence of a strong partner like D. Maria II National Theatre has allowed our work to expand more rapidly, giving a much wider reach to the subjects that define us.

A systematic approach is only possible when there is a commitment to building that system. It involves fostering dialogue, participation, and cooperation not just momentarily but continuously, with the maturity to overcome difficulties and find solutions. It involves understanding the richness of the plurality of identities and working together to enhance them.

**What role does cultural participation and democracy play in the new ways of seeing the world that you seek? How has this role materialised and what are your ambitions for it in the future?**

When we founded Terra Amarela, we sought a phrase to guide us. A phrase that would indicate our purpose as an artistic structure in moments of decision-making. Terra Amarela and the new ways of seeing the world. Within these new ways of seeing the world, there are artistic and ethical purposes.

Understanding the collective space as a place for sharing responsibilities, ideas, and privileges equitably, where the right to individual identity comes first, serving as a basis for building a common space; experiencing the joy of growing with the worlds of those around us, embracing the pleasure of taking action and being attentive and available to others' actions; cultivating a certain detachment that allows us to be present when we can contribute value and vacating spaces where we no longer contribute, making room for others to continue building the future in those spaces we have vacated.

In this way, we become mediators of identities, allowing those involved to participate on their own behalf and not on behalf of our organisation. Joana Honório, Rui Fonseca, Tony Weaver, Marta Sales, Jesus Vidal, Fernando Lapaña, Ángela Ibañez, Paulo Azevedo, Luís Garcia, André Ferreira, Andreia Farinha, Duarte, Margarida, Rafaela, Gonçalo, André, Mafalda, and so many others are themselves and not Terra Amarela. They are the ones who, over the past five years, have brought different thoughts, bodies, languages and stories to the performing arts. Perhaps that is what

cultural democracy is: the ability to be ourselves, here and now, in our diversity.

As for our future as an organisation, it will be like everything else: knowing how to come to an end. If we want a living cultural and artistic system that is in constant relation with contemporaneity, we have to pay attention to the relevance of our work at every moment. I have no doubt about the relevance of what we do today, at a time when artistic diversity and cultural accessibility still seek structural existence. Being optimistic, I foresee that structural existence materialising in the medium term. And then, we will have to know how to come to an end in order to build something else that challenges and amazes us.

**In your creations, many accessibility solutions are solved through their integration into the artistic object, rather than being external services and resources. How has this experience been and how can we inspire other creators to follow this path?**

We always start with the assumption that all elements that structure the artistic object have their own identity, and this identity should relate to the others. We constantly strive to work on this relationship.

For example, when we introduce a captioning panel on stage, that object has formal and conceptual value. Its presence opens up the possibility of setting up a scenographic idea or a new scenic and dramaturgical relationship with the performers. In this way, the object transcends its mere function of providing information about a text and becomes part of the scenographic construction that fully shapes a dramaturgical idea. Thus, we are not only

continuously discovering that object, but also demystifying any preconception the audience may have about their perception of a captioning panel.

The best way to inspire other creators is to keep creating, materialising ideas and rhetoric. It has always been like this. When we look at the outcome of the process; when that process materialises into a performance, that performance validates the experience and challenges us to continue. I believe that the best way to influence continuity is to keep proving that there are discoveries yet to be made. I still believe that what art and artists seek is the possibility of being amazed by revelations. And it is this amazement that fuels the desire to keep searching.

**In this regard, what paths do public policies in the cultural sector still need to tread?**

They need to tread the path of dialogue and courage. Firstly, they need a vision for this path. When you combine very low financial investment with a cultural policy that is reactive to the current environment instead of being strategic, you come face-to-face with unpredictability. And this unpredictability has worn down the sector. We are unable to optimise logistical, human, and financial resources, we do not monitor investments and practices, and we intentionally perpetuate the almost unilateral dependence of creative structures on state agencies and their interests.



# D. Maria II National Theatre

*Placing people at the  
centre, making time for  
encounters and empathy.*



Established by royal decree and under the leadership of the writer and politician Almeida Garrett, **D. Maria II National Theatre (TNDM II)** has been operating in Rossio since 1846. It has experienced successive stages of public and private guardianship, spanning periods of monarchical, republican, dictatorial and democratic regime.

Under public management since the beginning of this century and as one of Portugal's three national theatres (officially state-owned entities), it undertakes the task of commissioning, producing, presenting, and touring new theatrical creations - with Portuguese and international dramaturgy - contributing to the aesthetic renewal of this art form.

Currently under the direction of actor and director Pedro Penim, TNDM II comprises a main hall and several other spaces. The theatre is planning an extensive tour throughout all regions of Portugal in 2023, to coincide with the structural rehabilitation of its building.

[www.tndm.pt](http://www.tndm.pt)



Accessible dressing room © Filipe Ferreira



Cultural institutions, including D. Maria II National Theatre, rarely reflect the communities they are a part of or serve. We come up against this issue (and will continue to come up against it) as long as our teams remain homogeneous, European, white and predominantly ableist.

**In some aspects, the TNDM II has been a pioneer in recognising and addressing disparities in access to cultural participation. The Primeira Vez programme initiated in 2018 and the regular availability of accessibility resources, for example, have paved the way in this respect. Reflecting on this avant-garde status, how does TNDM II view itself now and what does it plan for the future in terms of helping to tackle inequality?**

During 2023, TNDM II will close its doors in Rossio and embark on a National Odyssey, visiting all regions of mainland Portugal, the Azores, and Madeira. The Theatre currently finds itself in a unique and unrepeatable situation. Being away from home will give it the opportunity to rethink its working procedures and organisational principles. It should find time for reflection, reconsider its activities, look at its audiences, and design a place for the near future when it returns to Rossio. This work will be a collective effort, in collaboration with the theatres around the city and the country.

We have reached a unique moment in time because all areas of the Theatre are aligned with the objective of creating the best conditions for access and tackling inequality, from artistic direction to the board of directors. There is a concern for promoting the participation of all communities, following accessibility, diversity, and equity standards, and considering long-term processes based on autonomy and freedom in a way that allows for scrutiny by the team itself.

Finally, we would like to believe that this will also be an opportunity to devote genuine attention to the D. Maria II team – placing people at the centre, making time for encounters and empathy, valuing the experience of each individual and empowering team members. This includes providing space for action, giving people a voice, listening, considering their well-being and happiness.

**Recalling the pioneering nature of your work, can you share some of your most significant achievements in improving accessibility conditions, and some of the “growing pains” experienced in this process?**

As regards sharing some of these achievements and building on what was expressed in your previous question, We would highlight the regular availability of accessibility resources in our offering, resulting in the expansion of our audience, and now also the extension of this offering nationwide. In addition, having our main partner, Grupo Ageas Portugal, by our side in this accessibility project brings many other possibilities for collaboration and synergies in the near future.

We would also like to highlight the presentation of the play *Zoo Story*, and its precursor *Mãos a Dentro* (Hands In), a theatre creation course for D/deaf artists, co-produced with Terra Amarela. It was presented at D. Maria II and is now part of our National Odyssey, exclusively performed in Portuguese Sign Language, with audio description and Portuguese subtitles in all performances. *Zoo Story* raised a diverse range of issues related to communication, audience reception, and the inclusion of artists involved in the production and workshop. It also brought new audiences to D. Maria II and the theatres where it was presented.

One thing that we feel hampers our progress in this area, more than other issues, is the lack of a dedicated team member specifically focused on accessibility, despite having someone responsible for coordinating this area. Lastly, we need to be mindful of the daily challenges and overwhelming activities that we face, which we consider one of the greatest obstacles to reflecting on and implementing these projects, despite our planning and goal-setting efforts.

**For the institution, what is the strategic importance of asserting a visible corporate social responsibility (CSR) policy when it should already be inherent in its mission as a public theatre? Could the absence of support compromise your willingness or ability to implement your policy?**

This question, which actually consists of two questions, brings us to a point we would like to emphasise first and foremost: the area of social responsibility and accessibility is truly one of the areas that has evolved the most in the work carried out by TNDM II in recent years, and it deserves increasing visibility. Furthermore, the strategic importance of asserting a corporate social responsibility policy goes beyond the theatre's mission as a public entity.

While the absence of support may compromise our willingness or ability to implement this policy at D. Maria II, the experience of recent years tells us that – given the budgets of our institutions – some projects can proceed with greater confidence and speed when financial support is obtained from external entities. We are referring, for example, to projects aimed at eliminating architectural barriers and adapting the building to improve audience

accessibility. Moreover, the fact that TNDM II has been able to secure funding for accessibility has brought us visibility, new synergies, and the possibility of continued investment over time.

However, I should highlight two crucial points here. First, the importance of the institution explicitly including social responsibility and accessibility in its management tools and organisational structure. This refers to tools such as the annual activity plan and budget, as well as the management and financial reports. Additionally, something as practical and operational as including a budget item specifically designated for accessibility, along with an appropriation, in the organisation's annual budget makes a significant difference. These are less visible but important achievements.

A second point relates to the institution's expressed desire to expand and diversify its sources of funding. The development and consolidation of the Theatre's artistic and institutional project in recent years, along with the need to overcome limited public funding and supplement self-generated revenue from its activities, have led to a focus on other funding sources. Our experience shows that by initiating structured and consistent work in this area, D. Maria II has significantly increased the share of revenue coming from sponsorship, patronage, and partnerships in its budget. This has expanded and deepened relationships with corporate and institutional networks.

**Alongside rehabilitation works, there has been significant progress in eliminating physical barriers to accessibility (for artists, technicians, and the audience), an objective that cultural organisations in general have been working towards. Do you notice the same level of concern for intellectual and social accessibility?**

We do feel that there is a growing concern among cultural organisations to address these areas. Naturally, the starting point is often focused on removing physical barriers – and in our case, that was also the path we followed. However, we have observed that the next step has been taken towards eliminating other types of barriers, such as social, intellectual and communication aspects. In Lisbon, the situation we are most familiar with, a wide range of entities have been carrying out very interesting, consistent, and ongoing work in this area. They serve as both inspiration and potential partners for new projects to be developed.

Considering the national territory as well, initiatives like Rede de Teatros com Programação Acessível (Network of Theatres with Accessible Programming) make a significant difference. As part of our National Odyssey, we have encountered theatres that genuinely care not only about removing physical barriers but also about addressing issues surrounding intellectual and social accessibility.

**In the Porto Santo Charter, one of the recommendations associated with improving the cultural democracy index mentions “ensuring that cultural institutions’ staff reflect the cultural diversity of the communities they assist”. Has TNDM II come up against this issue? If so, in what way?**

Our response to this question would be to say that cultural institutions, including D. Maria II National Theatre, rarely reflect the communities they are a part of or serve. We come up against this issue (and will continue to come up against it) as long as our teams remain homogeneous, European, white and predominantly ableist.

However, a second interpretation of the question brings us to two central and relatively recent concerns in our work. Firstly, as mentioned in the Porto Santo Charter, cultural institutions cannot represent the diversity of the communities they serve if they do not know them. In this regard, the D. Maria II National Theatre has been a pioneer in recognising the need to include an evaluation and monitoring department within our team. One of the first challenges of this work is the lack of data on the Theatre’s activities and its audiences, both within and outside our doors.

A strategy has been developed based on the cultural democracy principles that govern the D. Maria II National Theatre, including its public service mission and its promotion of access and enjoyment as a right for all. The strategy focuses on the individuals who make up the Theatre and aims to give them a voice. These individuals include people who work there daily, those who work there occasionally, those who come to watch performances, and those who participate in activities and projects, both within and outside the theatre.

Secondly, for the past two years, the TNDM II has been working to make its recruitment process more inclusive. A concern underpinning recent recruitment processes has been the need to reflect the diversity of Portuguese society within the Theatre team. We were keen to encourage applications from individuals regardless of their ethnic background, disability, age, gender identity, sexual orientation and religion, particularly from individuals who identify with under-represented groups in the performing arts field. We are also involved in an ongoing initiative to develop an inclusive recruitment manual, led by the Performart - Association for Performing Arts in Portugal, of which the D. Maria II National Theatre is a member.

In our view, the path we have taken has evolved naturally in response to the diversity of our audience - which is still far from what we aspire it to be - leading us to consider the representativeness of our artists and, ultimately, the plural team we want to have. This is the path we are currently embarked on, side by side.





Zoo Story © Filipe Ferreira

# UMCOLETIVO

*The future is a seed that  
is becoming visible.*



**UMCOLETIVO** is a cultural association founded in 2013, made up of Bruno Caracol, Cátia Terrinca, David Costa, João P. Nunes, Raquel Pedro, Ricardo Boléo, and Rui Salabarda. It developed a strong relationship with the municipality of Elvas, where it was based and where it implemented most of its activities before moving to the city of Portalegre in 2022.

The association is dedicated to creation, its main lines of focus being the relationship with the local area, visual exploration of words, and inviting the public into the epicentre of the artistic object. Their work seeks to reach a symbiosis between audience development and programming. They perceive the artistic creation space as a shared, horizontal, and open place.

The association is involved in mediation projects, working with the National Plan for the Arts, the Organisation of Ibero-American States for Education, Science, and Culture (OEI), as well as several educational institutions. In partnership with the association Sílabas Dinâmicas and with the support of PARTIS & Art for Change, **UMCOLETIVO** is conceiving a Nomad Museum that aims to bridge the ancestral gaps between mainstream society and the Roma community.

[www.umcoletivo.pt](http://www.umcoletivo.pt)



Lungo Drom © João P. Nunes

To sow the seeds of cultural democracy, it is essential to recognise centralities that go beyond economic and political power, inviting audiences to listen to other voices, accents, and silences. In this sense, we would like to bury the notion of a country that exists solely between Lisbon and Porto, applauding the vast world of villages, towns, and cities where aspirations sprout but, due to a lack of support, often wither long before they become more than just ideas.



**In the development of your theatrical creation and programming work in rural contexts, what are the main challenges you have encountered?**

In chronological terms, the first challenge was to overcome the feeling that the language we wanted to speak was not the same as those who wanted to listen to us. Often, this mistakenly made us believe that we were not wanted. It was, and still is, unusual for many people living in rural areas that someone would choose to move from a centre of power to a place that is said to be “no longer what it used to be”. We were received in Elvas with a mixture of curiosity and disbelief. We had to unlearn and relearn much of the academic vocabulary we used when talking about democratising access to culture. For example, we stopped talking about decentralisation because one of the main challenges was recognising the centrality that each territory already possesses.

Another challenge was overcoming loneliness, the absence of peers and colleagues. However, that loneliness also bore fruits: the need to programme artistic residencies, the blurring of boundaries and prejudices between art, culture, and craftsmanship. These fruits led us to new colleagues and friends, from whom we learned and whom we invited to join some of our projects.

There is one last challenge that we have not yet overcome, which is to intercept media and programming circuits, leading them to new places and new routes. Perhaps this is not the last challenge. Perhaps the challenges are not confined to rural areas either. Certainly, the challenges of working with limited financial resources and being on the threshold of political judgement are not limited to those

areas. This political judgement questions, more or less explicitly, whether what we are doing is art for everyone, grossly confusing the idea of what an artistic object can be for everyone with the idea that it must please the masses...

**Two of your lines of action are “the relationship with the local area” and “inviting the public into the epicentre of the artistic object”. How have these been put into practice? How do you provoke this movement and involvement?**

The relationship with the local area is a question that we seek to address from the outset in terms of production. If we want to establish roots in a place, then we work to make our resources come from that region, which transforms an ethical intention into an aesthetic possibility: what materials, substances, textures, colours and sounds do we choose in the area where we live? (And to what extent can an artistic object make one see what has already been seen as never before?).

Communities are driven by the curiosity to see what is “theirs” transfigured as well. Gradually, UMCOLETIVO became part of the landscape (or perhaps landscapes would be more fitting), with which we wanted to blend and merge. Theatre – the foundation of our thinking and practice – allows this transfiguration to be created little by little, offering a rhythmic pace to life which would otherwise us pass by. This is an affective process (and project), allowing us to become part of the microsystem of a place. Beyond planned actions, we spend a lot of time on the streets, in cafés and in grocery shops.

Even so, we often directly invite the audience into the epicentre of our activities. We're talking about doing reading rehearsals in schools. We're talking about involving communities as host families for artists during the A Salto Festival, of which we were promoters for seven years. We're talking about cooking with the chefs from the Senior University. We're talking about organising programming meetings. The epicentre of the artistic object is shared when the audience is not seen as a consumer - they share the rehearsal space, and engage with it at different stages, transforming the text and/or the scene with their opinions. In fact, regarding the audience as consumers would assume that what we do is more of a product than a process. For us, the audience is an accomplice, a companion, a friend.

**On your website, we find the statement: “We perceive the artistic creation space as a shared, horizontal, and open place - an incubator for affection and democracy, where we thoroughly explore ideas and raise questions.” This consideration refers to the idea of cultural democracy. Tell us a bit about how this goal influences your work.**

We always aim towards utopia in order to drive learning. When we defined ourselves ten years ago (who we would be, what name we would have, based on what principles), it wasn't clear that the name UMCOLETIVO could open doors to what we now know is part of our identity.

The idea of being a collective and, therefore, belonging to many people, is the search for a fulfilment that we can only recognise after the journey has begun. This fulfilment comes from us as a team, as we create spaces to listen to



each other, avoiding hierarchy, drawing from the diversity of our lives and our backgrounds. This family unit we are becomes more porous and permeable over time. With each proposal and each idea, we are like clay in search of waters and hands that can tune into our vibration, transfiguring us. Democracy is a poetic quest for us. Perhaps with every show, we are seeking qualities in different audiences that can help us to understand ourselves.

We remember how at different moments of creation, we clearly realised that we wanted to be with people, to be part of their families. In 2018, we started the process of *Tempestade* (*Tempest*), a co-production with the Centro Cultural de Belém through Fábrica das Artes. The fact that we had funding for the first time made us sit down and think about the process. A first dramaturgy residency was created, which we carried out with secondary students in Castro Verde, through readings and sharing of the text. When we found the right adaptation of the text – one in which we liked the story – it was a celebration for everyone.

Then, as we drafted the show, experimenting and making mistakes, we reached out to other young people from another city, in the Quinta do Mocho neighbourhood. We shared where we came from. We experimented together to refine the show. When our *Tempestade* finally came to life, it reflected the topography of affection we had been developing. Shows are family portraits. Families, if they are honest spaces, can be the heart of a poetic democracy. We are not a family because we are alike in tastes or goals. Being a family is inexplicably in our blood – and perhaps theatre is too.

**Now that you're established in a different geographical context, in Portalegre, are the circumstances the same?**

They are by no means the same. Firstly, because we moved with an awareness of the difficulties we had previously encountered - we saw how oppressive local power can be, and how at a certain point, that oppression (even if unintentional) limits or hinders artistic work.

This biography and experience have made us face the move head-on: we needed to change territory because our vision of art requires not only freedom but also collaborative work with other local structures, including the local council. Unlike the project in Elvas, which unfolded without a sense of the future (because it was our experience in Elvas that made us realise the importance of thinking about cultural accessibility and democracy), here in Portalegre we arrived as a professional structure, with state support and seven more years of experience. It is incomparably more difficult to make it when you have more will than you have structure.

Now, with both will and structure - although the latter is still fragile - our entry card was also different. Perhaps that had an impact on the difference in circumstances we encountered. Portalegre has a council executive structure that is more functional and responsive, recognises the possibilities and potential of our work, inviting us as professionals to participate in the cultural life of the municipality and providing us with resources for the development of our project. These go beyond financial resources and include transportation assistance, technical support, support in production, and the promotion of our content. This support is crucial in creating bonds with the

community, reflecting a vision of culture that transcends the funding of events. The importance of UMCOLETIVO in the dynamics of the city has been recognised on multiple occasions, not only from an artistic and cultural perspective but also in education and even financial aspects. This explicit recognition is a novelty and a joy for us.

**How do you envision the future with regards to the dissemination of cultural democracy? What do you consider to be the main obstacles to this conception?**

We envision the future as a seed that is becoming visible. In that sense, we care for it rather than conceiving it. To sow the seeds of cultural democracy, it is essential to recognise centralities that go beyond economic and political power, inviting audiences to listen to other voices, accents, and silences. In this sense, we would like to bury the notion of a country that exists solely between Lisbon and Porto, applauding the vast world of villages, towns, and cities where aspirations sprout but, due to a lack of support, often wither long before they become more than just ideas.

One of the main obstacles to the sustainable cultivation of cultural practices is the cultural and artistic illiteracy in which we, as Portuguese citizens, are immersed. Until we recognise that squares and theatres can be revolutionary spaces par excellence, just as important as the realm of education (or the utopia we have of it). As long as we treat culture and art as mere extracurricular activities, cherries on top of the educational cake. As long as support for artistic practices remains vastly inferior to support for education, health, and justice. As long as the media only presents news about major urban areas being the producers and disseminators of culture.

As long as we lack the specific training to view cultural facilities as spaces - which are also immaterial - capable of radiating democracy and happiness among different communities within the same social or emotional geography. As long as artists look at each other without the willingness or ability to cooperate, alienated by grant applications. As long as we lack the courage to address the wounds of capitalism...

As long as all this is happening, the idea of community, which is vital for cultural democracy, will remain just an idea. Because people who work beyond the limits of their own bodies, denying their bodies, are constantly called upon to forget who they are. What leads to artistic projects easily drifting away from their essence and gravitating towards the possibility of entertainment (making us forge that we are alive, today and now) is still an act of servitude to money.



Tempestade © Vitor Paiva



Vitorica, A Salto's Chef © Susana Chicó

# **A conversation with Ben Evans, Head of Arts and Disability, British Council**

***There is a momentum!***

After training and working as a theater director, Ben Evans became Director-of-Theater at London's Oval House. Ben then became Creative Director of BeCreative, an independent producing company, working on a variety of international projects including setting up the Lagos Theater Festival in Nigeria.

Ben joined the British Council as Theater and Dance Advisor for Western Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. He was subsequently Head of Arts, Portugal, and now leads the British Council's Arts & Disability program across the EU, including bi-lateral artistic programs, a region-wide program with cultural policymakers, and Europe Beyond Access.

[www.britishcouncil.org/arts/europe/europe-beyond-access](http://www.britishcouncil.org/arts/europe/europe-beyond-access)

**Considering your extensive experience with artists and projects all over Europe and beyond, how do you see the “state of the art” in what concerns access and inclusion, both for cultural professionals (artists included) and audiences? Where do you see progress and which are the urgent things that still need to be done?**

*Something remarkable is happening in Europe. Increasingly, the arts sector is realising that the long-stated commitments to greater diversity in the arts need to be implemented: not just for the sake of society, but for the sake of the arts themselves. The mainstream cultural sector is finally noticing that some of the most radical and innovative cultural practices are emanating from those who have often been ignored.*

*At the same time, those communities long-marginalised by the mainstream cultural sector are finding new ways to gather political momentum in pursuit of their aim of equal cultural representation and access. Nowhere can this more clearly be seen than in the transnational movement demanding greater access to the arts for disabled people as artists, as arts professionals, and as audiences.*

This is a bold and encouraging statement to start with, and one that I have made elsewhere. But I have chosen to use italics because, as with all bold and simple statements, it masks a much more complex picture, including some quite contradictory indicators. But, in short, my feeling is there is momentum towards positive change in many countries and at a transnational level. Acesso Cultura has played its part in contributing to this change.



It has always seemed to me that we must judge arts organisations not by their fine words, their policies, or their education and outreach programmes, but by what artistic works they put on their main stages, in their festivals, and on the walls of their museums. Ignore the press releases, the statements at conferences, even the funding applications (if you ever see them). Look instead at their annual artistic programmes. These tell you the values of the organisation. And there is positive news.

A unique generation of disabled performing artists across Europe is being presented by leading venues, festivals and networks. I speak here particularly about the performing arts. Artists and companies such as Chiara Bersani, Claire Cunningham, Diana Niepce, Dan Daw, Teatr 21, Michael Turinsky, Per.Art, Annie Hanauer, and Noemi Lakmaier are becoming well-known and recognised in leading cultural networks. These artists join some of the more established companies such as Belgium's Theater Stap, the UK's Candoco, Australia's Back to Back, France's l'Oiseau-Mouche and others: long-standing companies that have trodden a path for disabled artists - creating and touring works around the world for years.

So, for example, in the last years Chiara Bersani from Italy was chosen as Aerowaves "Twenty Artist" in 2019; the Serbian company Per.Art were selected as part of TanzPlattform Deutschland 2020; in 2021 Claire Cunningham won the German Dance Awards; and Portugal's own Diana Niepce was awarded the 2022 Best Choreography at Authors Award.

But three key concerns stand out whilst we celebrate these achievements.

Firstly, as simply and effectively articulated by the Italian dancer and choreographer, Aristide Rontini: “What if we are just a fashion? In five years will people be interested in us?”. Aristide’s concern is not misguided. Although I am not a cultural historian, I think we need only to look at the popularity of Outsider Art in the 70s and 80s (work made by self-taught or supposedly naïve artists, sometimes including disabled artists) – a popularity which has largely declined today. A short-lived interest or curiosity which is no longer sustained, and which failed to fundamentally transform the cultural sector.

This concern also relates to the fact that so often in the last years we see artistic developments and the mainstreaming of excellent disabled artists as sitting with individuals – far-sighted artistic directors, programmer and chief executives – rather than in the institutions they lead. What happens when those people leave for new jobs, or retire? I have seen institutions which were international trailblazers in the support and promotion of the work of disabled artists suddenly stop all work with these artists due to the change in curator. Change must be embedded in our institutions.

And, of course, this leads us to ask about the lack of Deaf and disabled cultural leaders. If the gatekeepers remain relentlessly non-disabled – whether curators, artistic directors, jury panellists, chief executives or programmers, the choice of when to include disabled artists and when not to include disabled artists remains at the whim of non-disabled people. There is little progress here.

Secondly, it is concerning that for some arts organisations the invitation to one of the artists or companies I mention completes their commitment to the work of disabled

artists. This invitation, often to an overseas artist, somehow removes from them the responsibility to actively work in the local sector to remove barriers to career progression, to develop artistic opportunities, and to give early and much-needed opportunities to aspiring and early-career Deaf and disabled artists.

It is certainly the case that in many countries there is far less opportunity for Deaf and disabled artists to progress. Artistic directors are faced with little choice from the local sector. But it seems to me that in these cases the responsibility on the host organisation is even greater to be involved with artists further down the professional chain, rather than to admit defeat and simply host a one-off performance from another country. Where institutions do not avoid their responsibilities, the results are powerful. One need only look as far as the productive relationship between Terra Amarela and Teatro Nacional D. Maria II and their work with D/deaf actors, to see what can be achieved.

This challenge of pushing the local cultural ecosystem extends to arts funders and policymakers. The UK is well-regarded for having an amazing generation of disabled artists. We do, of course. But it would be arrogance to suggest that this is based on talent alone, and in fact has nothing to do with the decades-long commitment to greater equity in the arts by British arts funders and policymakers. The environment is less hostile. Those companies who make their work in sectors where there is much lower commitment to funds for accessible cultural activity, and lower commitment to barrier reduction in the sector (and here I would include Portuguese artists), do so at huge personal cost. The experience must be exhausting and demoralising.

Thirdly, and perhaps most pervasively, we have to recognise that in Europe, the post-World War Two and post-Cold War cultural settlement is a decades-long history of cultural marginalisation. Artists, promoters, institutions, funders and politicians have all been at least passively complicit. It is the history of the institutional removal of disabled people from cultural life. No small cohort of successful disabled artists will change this fact.

However, despite those caveats, I stand by my initial statement. Something remarkable is happening in Europe, and change is being led by artistic curiosity. Given that for decades the political and moral case for the equality of disabled people in the arts has failed to deliver – with good intentions proving inadequate, perhaps the fact that the cultural sector is acknowledging the “cultural” argument for barrier reduction, that the arts benefit from this work, may finally deliver change. I have to remain hopeful.

**On many occasions, access and inclusion are a “nice thing to talk about”, both in what concerns politicians and cultural professionals. It’s a “feel good” conversation and, sometimes, action, where it seems that we are doing a favour to people with disabilities. Is this mentality changing and how?**

Yes and no! Although I just said I need to remain hopeful, I am always brought back to earth remembering a panel discussion in which I took part in Germany in 2021. We were hosted by a major German Schauspielhaus in one of Germany’s biggest cities – a theatre with hundreds of employees, including an in-house theatre ensemble: one of the best funded organisations in Germany, a country with one of the best-funded cultural sectors in the world.

In discussion, the artistic director was asked whether he would consider reducing his extensive programme slightly, and to use resources to ensure access for audiences at each of his theatre's productions (sign language, audio description, etc). His answer, with a smile and a nod to the city's cultural councillor sitting next to him, was he would if they could be given more money for it.

This attitude, that the cultural sector does not have a responsibility to its community, to its audiences (of whom between 18-22% will have an impairment) is shocking to me. That disabled people might be considered only if and when a little extra money can be thrown at the institution by a public funder, is, frankly, offensive. That the artistic director still has a job after making such a public statement disturbs me.

Where I am more positive is where I see funders and politicians seeking to embed change in their cultural policies and funding programmes. Sometimes these changes just focus on audiences, for example the partnership between Poland's Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and the NGO PFRON to distribute five million euros to Polish organisations to improve access for audiences (alongside a new law requiring state funded institutions to employ an Access Coordinator); sometimes they are directly focused on supporting the work of disabled artists, for example the new project fund for disabled artists by Italy's Ministry of Culture; and sometimes aimed at mainstream arts organisations, for example the Programme for Inclusive Artistic Practice launched by the German Federal Cultural Foundation.

These actions show institutional commitment and structural change which, we hope, will ensure that equity in the arts for disabled people as artists, arts professionals, and as audiences is no longer a “feel good” or optional extra – but rather at the heart of our cultural ecosystem. Change has to happen at this structural level to be more than mere window-dressing.

**You know the work of Acesso Cultura well. Actually, the British Council was fundamental both in supporting our activity in Portugal and in putting us in touch with the world. How would you evaluate the work undertaken in these first 10 years? How do you perceive the impact of our organisation? Is there something that you consider unique in our association?**

I have to say this is a hard question to answer. Not because Acesso Cultura lacks achievements, but because I want to express myself with an enthusiasm which is uncharacteristic to my inherent Englishness! As you say, British Council has been a long-standing collaborator of Acesso Cultura, and we have made that commitment because we believe Acesso Cultura to be a remarkable organisation.

When I talk about Acesso Cultura’s work in other parts of Europe (and I do talk about it!), what I always note is that the organisation has somehow managed to be a champion and ally to disabled artists and audiences – actively critical of institutions which marginalise disabled people. And yet, at the same time, Acesso Cultura is trusted by institutions and by policymakers to be a critical friend – an advisor, a mentor and the convenor of important discussions.

This balance of critic and friend – speaking truth to power, but also understanding that even major organisations struggle to know how to proceed – feels quite unique.

I lived in Portugal from 2013 to 2015, arriving 10 years ago as Acesso Cultura was founded. Visiting now, it feels like seismic shifts have taken place in the cultural sector’s debate around arts & disability. Acesso Cultura has been at the heart of so much of that change.

Of course, even as an outsider it is clear that public debate in the Portuguese cultural sector needs to be backed up with institutional and structural change. Acesso Cultura’s work is needed now more than ever. However, on this, your 10th anniversary, you can be proud of your achievements. Congratulations!

\* “Art, aesthetics, cultural policy and disability”, in *Agents for Change*, to be published by Bloomsbury, London, 2023.

# 10+1

**Access, participation  
and cultural democracy:  
visions and experiences**



**Acesso Cultura, Cultural Association**