

## Las memorias del lugar en la palma de la mano. Prácticas artísticas y bienestar

### *The memories of the Place in the Palm of One's Hand. Arts Practices and Well-Being*

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### Resumen:

El texto describe el proceso de trabajo y los resultados de un proyecto de artes visuales desarrollado con un grupo de mujeres mayores de 65 años y titulado «Un mapa en la palma de la mano». Asumiendo la memoria de los lugares como tema central, el proyecto, desarrollado en el territorio de una ciudad del sur de Portugal (Santiago do Cacém), culminó en una intervención artística en el espacio público, en forma de instalación. En el proyecto participaron las autoras de este artículo, en calidad de artistas, profesoras e investigadoras; 13 mujeres mayores de 65 años y una artista residente que había trabajado con el grupo en un proyecto de promoción del envejecimiento activo y que permitió mediar entre el grupo y las responsables del proyecto. El proyecto, que se llevó a cabo en forma de taller y residencia artística, se centró en las prácticas contemporáneas en el ámbito de las artes visuales y se materializó en una instalación en un espacio público del centro de la ciudad.

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## Abstract:

This text describes the working process and the results of a visual arts project developed with a group of women over the age of 65, entitled 'A Map in the Palm of One's Hand'. Taking the memory of places as its central theme, the project, embedded in the territory of a city in southern Portugal (Santiago do Cacém), has culminated in an artistic intervention in a public space, in the form of an installation. Participating in the project were the authors of this article, all as artists, teachers, and researchers; 13 women over the age of 65 and a resident artist who had worked with the group on a project promoting active ageing and who acted as a mediator between the group and those responsible for the project. Carried out in the form of a workshop and artistic residency, the project focused on contemporary practices in the visual arts and resulted in an installation taking place in a public space in the city centre.

***Palabras Clave: Artes visuales, memoria del lugar, envejecimiento creativo, procesos creativos, prácticas artísticas colaborativas***

***Key words: Visual Arts, Memory of Place, Creative Ageing, Creative Processes, Collaborative Artistic Practices***

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## Introduction

This paper reports on a collaborative visual arts project, that was developed with a group of women over the age of 65, living in Santiago do Cacém, a town in the south of Portugal. Out of the work process an artistic intervention in a public space has grown, entitled “A Map in the Palm of One’s Hand”.

This project has been part of a line of action which has been developed in the scope of the Visual Arts and Technology B.A., at the Lisbon’s Polytechnic University School of Education, and which is predicated by arts-practice based research. Carried out by multidisciplinary and multigenerational research teams, comprising teachers and students, the research carried out since 2016 has provided the framework for various projects involving artistic practices *in* and *with* the community.

This practice, as part of the comprehensive vision of a critical pedagogy, not only enables the development of skills inherent to artistic and design practice, such as creativity or collaboration, but is also essentially a way of preparing students for social and cultural challenges, both now and in their future action (Petters & Barnett, 2024).

Alongside teams composed of elements linked to the academy, these projects have also involved people with links to outside contexts, thus providing contacts with different social realities and the development of participatory artistic processes with the community.

In this specific case, the project “A Map in the Palm of One’s Hand”, developed with the quoted women's group, has involved the joint participation of three visual artists: an artist who was already accompanying the group in other activities as part of the “Santiago do Cacém Ativo Séniors 65+” program; and the two authors of this text, who were responsible for designing the workshops, collecting and analysing the data. In this case, an approach should be highlighted that simultaneously places us as participants and allows us to collect contributions about our action (artistic, educational and investigative) developed from our reflection on the practical experience (Stock, 2000).

Assuming arts-practice based and community-based research as its methodological axis, this project has made it possible to strengthen collaboration between artists and community groups, as well as an approach developed from local social realities. This approach has made it possible to give shape to a shared experience and memory, which emerges from a common living space: the city's historic area known as *Senhora do Monte*.

## Arts Practices, Participation, Inclusion and Well-Being

The workshops series forming part of the artistic intervention “A Map in the Palm of One’s Hand” has been developed in association with an ongoing project in the city of Santiago do Cacém. This project, entitled “Santiago do Cacém Ativo Séniors 65+”, was part of the “Local Contracts for Social Development 4th Generation (CLDS4G)” program. The CLDS4G program is part of a European-funded project, aimed at promoting the inclusion of populations that, in a given territory, show signs of social fragility, also relying on the partnership of Santiago do Cacém’s City Council. This is, particularly, the case for territories with high levels of ageing population.

Increased longevity, while representing an undeniable social and public health achievement, is accompanied by a set of socio-economic challenges. (Lemos, 2020). In fact, according to statistical data collected on the PORDATA portal, the population ageing index in Portugal (people over 65 per 100 young people under 15) has been increasing continuously since the year 2000 (48.4) by around 10 points, to 58.7 in 2024. (PORDATA, 2025). However, in the territory where we were developing this project, the ageing index reached 74.1 points in 2024. Given this evidence of an ageing population, with Portugal ranking 7th among the 26 countries that constitute the European Community, it is necessary to consider the development of health, economic and social policies capable of addressing the impact of this process, ensuring quality of life for the elderly population.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines the concept of quality of life as “an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns” (WHO, 2012). Not being synonymous with standard of living, quality of life involves issues of health, both physical and psychological, the degree of independence, the relationship established with the environment and society, and includes a perception of the degree of satisfaction in the context of everyday life.

According to the Action Plan for Active and Healthy Ageing 2023-2026 (PAEAS), quality of life in the context of healthy and active ageing is based on six fundamental pillars: health and well-being, autonomy and independent living, lifelong development and learning, healthy working life throughout the life cycle, income and economics of ageing, and participation in society (Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 2024). Considering the interrelationship and cross-cutting nature of these various areas, the project paid particular attention to participation in social and cultural life as a means of promoting well-being. The perspective of active ageing has also been taken into account, as a way of breaking with stereotypes that associate older people with inactivity, passivity and dependence.

In fact, in this particular project, one of the main aims was to promote active ageing, resulting the artistic action in an urban intervention on the part of the elderly population, mobilizing the resources and agents available at local level. Associated with the concept of active and healthy ageing, emerges the concept of creative ageing, which calls for the mobilisation of artistic practices as ways of promoting physical, emotional and psychological well-being. Since the 1970s, and especially since the 1980s, programmes aimed at artistic practices with senior citizens have been created in Europe (Cutler, 2009). At the beginning of this century, the *Second World Assembly on Ageing* of the United Nations (UN), held in 2002 in Madrid, marks a turning point by taking on, as stated in the document produced, the *Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing*, the challenge of “building a society for all ages” (UN, 2002). Another turning point in international policy is the *Decade of Healthy Ageing* (2021–2030), a global initiative launched by the WHO of the UN, an initiative in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Officer & Hérick de Sá, 2023). The promotion of communities that are capable of valuing the skills, knowledge and experience of older people, is one of the lines of action for building age-friendly environments. Thus, when we refer to the creation of creative ageing programmes that integrate artistic practices as their main driving forces, we cannot limit them to a set of isolated activities or workshops, but they

must involve an intergenerational dimension of sharing memories and know-how. Understanding creative ageing as a paradigm that focuses on the potential of older people, rather than their frailties (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008; Klimczuk, 2016), enables the appreciation of human capital which, by promoting the transmission of a legacy of knowledge of various kinds, contributes to cultural and social sustainability.

Considering this concept of creative ageing, special attention has been paid to the role played by contact with artistic activity. In the areas of health, social inclusion and well-being, several studies highlight and recognize the contributions of artistic practices (Clift, 2012; Clift & Camic, 2016; All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2017; Cruz, 2019; Fancourt & Saoirse, 2019; Fancourt *et al.* 2020, Moriana, 2021; Balbin Castillo, 2024) to mitigate social fragility factors such as deteriorating mental health, loneliness, ageing, addictions, unemployment, among others. In the health sciences research field, interventions involving these populations, whether through artistic practices or through aesthetic enjoyment, are advised by entities such as the World Health Organization and considered to be part of a range of broader strategies to promote health and well-being, which are ultimately aimed at relieving pressure on national health services. Studies have shown such practices to make a number of contributions towards the maintenance of well-being throughout life, by particularly: reducing social isolation and loneliness; improving recovery from illness; promoting physical activity and independence for vulnerable and elderly people, as well as social cohesion, civic participation, fair and equal access to cultural goods, events and spaces for people at risk of social exclusion (All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2017).

In this sense, both participation in artistic practices and the experience of aesthetic fruition, are seen as individual and/or collective experiences capable of producing positive effects in terms of physical and mental health, contributing to an increase in quality of life, whether participants take a “passive” or an “active” role in the creative processes (Vasconcelos *et al.* 2024).

Once we begin to envisage art as an act, not as an object (Matarasso, 2019), that is, as an intentional process of creating and communicating meanings, a process that brings together both doing and thinking, we open up a space for participation. The term participation implies engagement and involvement, constituting, from Pablo Helguera's perspective (2011), a broad term capable of referring to everything from the contemplation of a work of art, which he calls “nominal participation”, to “collaborative participation” (Helguera, 2011, p.15), in which the participant is involved in the conception and materialization of the finished work. Ideologically, the term participatory art is based on a conception of cultural democratization, advocating access to art and culture for all (Matarasso, 2019) and envisaging the involvement of people who are not trained artists, but who integrate creative action in different ways. The joint work between professional and non-professional artists is assumed to be a key element in the definition of participatory art, aiming at the joint creation of an artistic work (Matarasso, 2019). The development of a joint creative process, aimed at the conception and final presentation of a finished work, although not without tensions and ambiguities that could lead to confusion between participatory art, art education or artistic mediation, assumes a porosity and hybridity that allows it to build bridges to other non-artistic fields, such as health or the social service.

According to Cruz (2019), participatory art includes eight dimensions that are crucial when it comes to understanding the different levels of transformation or change (individual and collective, institutional, etc.) brought about by artistic practices. These eight dimensions involve: i) the dynamics established between professionals and non-professionals; ii) the creation and presentation spaces; iii) the participation methods; iv) the links with the community; v) the conceptions of art involved; vi) the issues and themes developed; vii) the creative processes; and viii) the group's internal organisational dynamics.

It is in this sense that participatory art can be integrated into a broader spectrum of inclusion, which, more than a process or a set of actions, can be constituted as a broad movement, both social and political, in which various dimensions of life in society converge. It therefore envisages inclusion as a broad movement, a proposal in the direction of actions such as the creation of conditions capable of guaranteeing equal access for all individuals to economic, social, cultural, educational resources, etc.; active and citizen participation, acceptance, respect, and the ability to be and feel respected for differences.

As it can be understood, artistic practices that take inclusion as their main scope imply flexible processes, capable of ensuring and guaranteeing equity in the artistic act for everyone (marginalised groups, people with disabilities, mental health problems, among others). However, this is an equally dynamic process, since as part of the creative act, it involves recognising the contributions that come from the differences inherent in any individual, considering and potentialising the richness arising from a shared intersubjectivity. In the more specific case of the work carried out with senior groups, it is worth highlighting the knowledge derived from a universe of mundivities that articulates memory, spatiality, thought and know-how, among other dimensions.

In this sense, the links between memory and space have been widely debated (Halbwachs, 1990, Seeman 2013) connection which, by allowing multiple forms of (re)knowledge, tangibility and sensoriality, contribute to the construction of affective bonds with place, landscapes or territories (Seeman, 2013).

Although memory can be constituted as a phenomenon compartmentalised by a selection of events over time, to the extent that each individual or group has a different perspective on the past, the fact is that memory implies a spatial referentiality. According to Halbwachs, collective memory is in fact inscribed in a spatial framework that allows the reconstitution of a memory, emphasising the importance of the actual experienced space “that which we have occupied, through which we have always passed, to which we have access, and which, in any case, our imagination or our thought is, at every moment, capable of reconstructing” (Halbwachs, 1990, p.143).



## Our Aims and Objectives

The work process involved a group of thirteen women over the age of 65 with different professional backgrounds, ranging from domestic work to administrative work, rural work or teaching. In addition to the age range and the generational common bonds, this group of women have in common the fact that they all live, or have lived, in the Santiago do Cacém historic area, in a place of memory known as Senhora do Monte.

Considering a project of this nature involves a triple artistic, aesthetic, and social dimension, and taking the common belonging as a starting point, without, however, ignoring the diversity of experiences and the identity of each of the women in the group, the following main goals were defined:

- i. Contributing to the attenuation of social isolation and loneliness, through the promotion of group activities;
- ii. Sharing different perspectives, memories, experiences and representations, regarding the Senhora do Monte territory;
- iii. Mobilising the shared memory to the creation of an artistic object that can be expressive and identitarian of both the group and the place;
- iv. Developing creative processes *with* and *for* the group, involving them in the co-creation of an artistic installation in an urban space;

Enhancing value for the group's shared knowledge through artistic practices and their integration into the public space.

## Research Method

The work carried out with this women's group was drawn up within a qualitative paradigm, which made it possible to cross community-based art research, storytelling and the cartographic method.

Community-based art research involves, as mentioned above, a continued dialogue between artists and community groups, which is based on reciprocity of contributions and learning (Cohen-Cruz, 2010); on transparency, inclusion, trust, shared values (Victoria Health, 2013) and assumes a contingent nature, since it is aimed at achieving specific results, situated in a time and place (Jade *et al.*, 2020).

Storytelling is a qualitative research method based on the recognition of the central place occupied by narrative in human experience, more specifically in the signification of everyday life. According to Benjamin, the narrator weaves the story from his own experience or the experience of others, incorporating “the narrated things to the experience of their listeners” (Benjamin, 1987, p.201). Constituting an ‘artisanal form of communication,’ it preserves the traces and quality of the narrator's lived experience. Thus, as a data collection method, narrative allows us to approach the diversity of lived experiences and glimpse perceptions of social, historical and cultural contexts and their transformations through the intersubjective sharing of stories (Leavy, 2022).

Cartography was considered not only a key concept in this project; it was also a structuring process for the whole *praxis* - which incorporated a humanising and relational

dimension. Mapping or cartographising are on-going incomplete processes, considered to be actions in progress, changeable and characterised by no imposed direction (Abrams & Hall, 2006) in search for common ground, but which do not exclude the creative dimension. According to Corner, mapping constitutes a liberating and empowering activity, as it is based on an exploratory process, a process of discovery (Corner, 1999), a process that is able to reveal layers of meaning that could otherwise go unnoticed, or imagine others, enriching the living experience, diversifying perspectives and world views. Considering these methodological guidelines, a workshop has been drawn up, which has enabled the development of a collective process of artistic creation, comprising various moments of conceptualisation, materialisation and installation, organised into five stages:

- i. Auscultation;
- ii. Photographic session;
- iii. Sharing and recording the memory of the place;
- iv. Collaborative work session;
- v. Integration into the public space

### Auscultation

This moment has marked the first contact with the group of women and the resident artist and it took place at the Santiago do Cacém's Municipal Museum, the venue chosen for the workshop. Through an informal round table discussion, in which two technicians responsible for managing the 'Santiago do Cacém Ativo Séniors 65+' project also took part, some aspects of these women's different life journeys were shared. In this way, as points that characterise the diversity within the group, the differing levels of schooling and the variety of these women's professional activities should be highlighted. On the other hand, it turned out that all these women had a connection to the historic area of Santiago do Cacém's city, a place known as Senhora do Monte. This neighbourhood owes its name to the existence of a 16th century church, dedicated to Our Lady of the Nativity, which was demolished in 1923 after falling into an advanced state of decline. A primary school was later built in its place.

The Senhora do Monte neighbourhood, in the historic part of Santiago do Cacém's city, has thus emerged as an important aggregator of memories that would be part of the project, both in its physical and conceptual dimensions. Alongside the geographical location (physical and human), other aspects emerged following the conversation, such as school attendance and the working lives of these women. From the narrated stories, it also emerged the idea of the hand as another aggregating element of the group has thus emerged alongside the experiential space. Hands that make, that communicate and that hold individual maps in their palms.

### Recording

Following the first conversation, a second phase of image and memory recording took place, drawing from the two focal points that had previously emerged: the individual palm of the hand and the shared experiences associated with the Senhora do Monte territory. So, photographs were taken of the palms of the women who had formed the group (figure 1)



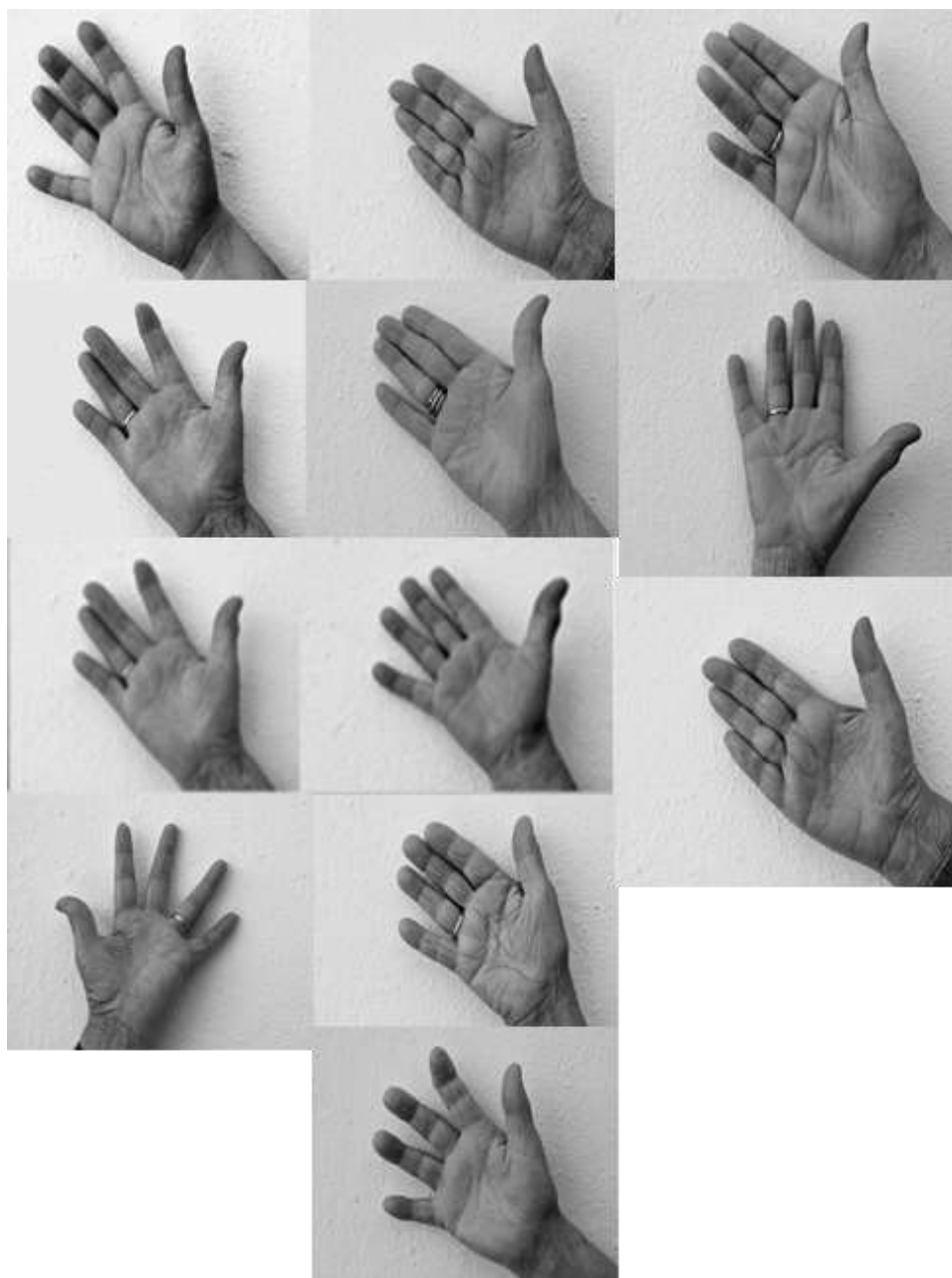


Figure 1. Photographic record of some participants' hands. Own source

After the first photographic session, a new round of talks was held, on the theme of sharing memories and experiences related to the Senhora do Monte's neighbourhood and territory. In this regard, the neighbourhood ties; the parties at the Philharmonic Recreational Society Artistic Union headquarters (known as "A Música"); writer Manuel da Fonseca's family home; the Monte fairground, among others, stand out.

After this recollection of memories, regarding the places in Senhora do Monte's historic centre, discussions took place to determine the nature of the intervention to be carried out. Out of this, a set of words, expressions and names have emerged, that poetically encapsulate the shared experiences of the place, making it possible to identify stories, past times and people meaningful to that group of women.

The techniques, materials, images and colours to be used were then discussed, leading to the decision to use photography and the textile moulding of letters, as the technical resources for the creation of an installation in a public space.

Considering that the memory of the place has took central stage in this project, it was consequently decided that the installation should occupy a space close to the historic neighbourhood. A wall was chosen for this purpose. A wall that stands next to a staircase which connects a high-traffic square in the city to the Senhora do Monte's silent territory, the staircase locally known as 'escadinhas da Senhora do Monte'.

This stage of the project was completed with the graphic inscription of the word on paper, assuming a suitable scale for it to be clearly legible from a distance (figure 2). By recording the words on paper on a real scale, they could then be moulded using metal wire as a structure for the textile intervention developed by the women.



Figure 2. Full-scale word inscription. Own source

### To collectively making it happen

The collective construction of the installation piece to be integrated into the urban space was carried out over several sessions. These sessions took place at both the Municipal Museum and the Philharmonic Recreational Society Artistic Union headquarters.

Throughout these sessions, mediated by the resident artist and the authors of this text, it was made possible to collaborate in the letter construction processes; to intervene on the photographs that had previously been printed in black and white and then pasted onto a cotton cloth, and to experiment with articulation solutions between the various elements of the composition (figures 3 and 4)

However, in addition to the development of the collective work, comprising a creative and technical nature, the work sessions have also been moments of conviviality, in which there was always a shared snack and, above all, the chance to talk about issues that marked these women's daily lives.

### To share in the public space

The work process has ended with the piece being integrated into the chosen wall, next to the Senhora do Monte's staircase. The assembly of the final piece has also called for the collaboration and involvement of some local council workers, and its presentation took part of "SSW - Santiago Style Weekend", an annual event linked to local commerce, which included other interventions in the city's urban spaces, both in the visual arts, music and dance.



Figure 3. Collective working sessions. Own source



Figure 4. Collective working sessions. Own source





Figure 5. Installation of the work in the public space. Own sour



Figure 5. The final instalation. Own source

## Results

As a result of the creative and collaborative process, the installation “A Map in the Palm of One's Hand” (Figure 5) stands out on the wall façade next to the Senhora do Monte staircase, considered by these women to be a symbolic landmark of the place.

The hands and words articulation was thought out according to the available space, in order to create a balanced visual composition, and, in the end, it took on the dimension of a site specific. In this sense, it's worth highlighting the option of creating, through the textile line, a network that connects the different elements of the composition, making it possible to introduce other ways of perceiving the piece.

It was in fact intentional the creation of that visual metaphor between the map linking the shared memories of life, the stories, the people and the meanings, derived from the places that are part of Senhora do Monte historic area, and the lines on the palms of the hands that made up this artistic piece. Both ‘maps’ are part of a life experience cartography, in which psychogeographies, knowledge and senses, developed in contact with reality over time, intersect. This visual metaphor opens up the reading horizon to a multiplicity of connections between time, space and memory, plastically amplified by the interchanging casting of shadows as the day unfolds.

## Discussion

The creative processes developed as part of this project took on different dimensions, both of an aesthetic-artistic and of a social and cultural nature. In this sense, it is worth highlighting the contact with contemporary artistic languages and practices in the visual arts sphere, which mobilise different media, assuming a collective dimension and integrating, in this case, the site-specific modality.

By invoking the memory of places, the site-specific concept establishes a multiplicity of links between community and territory. Beyond a purely aesthetic and plastic dimension, this artistic approach with the women's group has allowed us thus, to investigate social and cultural issues, inherent to the occupation of spaces and the experiencing of places. The use of the textile materials also emerges as a metaphor for the intertwining of different perspectives, memories, experiences and representations of the territory, all of which are embodied in an artistic object that is expressive and an object of identity for both the group and the place.

The organisation of the work sessions at the Municipal Museum has made it possible to take advantage of this cultural and memory space, expanding it into a convivial space in which cultural knowledge (material and immaterial) and the social/playful dimension were combined. In doing so, the undertaken commitment made to fulfil the installation has established a routine in the group's daily life, which has involved leaving the house in the afternoons; going to the museum; socialising and feeling a sense of belonging to a group, thereby contributing to attenuate the social isolation and loneliness that affect the daily lives of many senior citizens. Finally, the public visibility of the work carried out emphasises the value of the know-how shared by the group, as well as its contribution to triggering the collective memory of the places.



## Final note

This project, developed in 2023, two years after of the pandemic confinement, has been assumed as a safe return to common spaces, moments of sharing and rapprochement between people. The poetic inscription of memory in the urban landscape, through technical means such as the textile and the photographic image, has led to a clearer perception of the importance of valuing gestures that sometimes tend to go unnoticed and, above all, the practical and conceptual contributions derived from the shared knowledge of a group of women, experienced in different labour activities throughout their lives. Through artistic action, the materialisation of a bodily mark of these senior women in a public mural, inscribed in the urban landscape, contains a questioning over social communication practices generally implemented in urban space, questioning, in a contribution to the educational city, the role of the image in the production of meaning and feeling in urban space. According to Vázquez, Gillanders & Garayo (2021), the presentation of an aesthetic experience in which older people were placed at the centre of the discourse to 're-educate our perspective of the elderly'. At the same time, we cannot ignore that the aesthetic experience also materialises within the creative process as pleasure in manual labour and in the conviviality provided by these moments of collaboration.

This is where the work processes take on a central dimension, when we look at the artistic practices from the physical and psychosocial well-being perspective, because these were not only moments capable of stimulating thought and the mind, but also a commitment to the creation of healthy routines. As active participants and mediators in this process, we highlight all the contributions coming from these collective processes with the community, as they lead us to reflect on our practices, our ways of doing things, communicating and being with the Other. These are, for us, learning moments that allow us to combine experimentation with the intersubjectivity of thinking and expressing knowledge, both in a practical way and through symbolic languages, of which the visual metaphor is an example.

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