"Entre Caminhos"

Understanding local history through digital fragments of feminist narratives

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents some of the results of fieldwork conducted during an artistic residency. It discusses the resultant video installation "Entre Caminhos: Escuta-Narrativa, Percursos e Temp(l)os de Memórias Vivas" ("Between Paths: Narrative-Listening, Routes, and Temporal Spaces of Living Memories"). The work explored the living memories of the first women who attended a primary girls' school in early 20th century Mamarrosa, Portugal. Through a detailed oral and gesture collection, the video installation captured testimonies and sounds of women who witnessed the transition and ruptures in education and teaching during that period. The first-person, intersectional narratives unveiled aspects of collective memory, enriching the understanding of intangible cultural heritage. Five main recurring topics were identified from the testimonies of the participants: Walking to School, Autonomy versus Violence in School, Break in the Educational Process, The Weight of the Female Condition and Living Memory. This process highlighted the power of video art in social representation and historic preservation from a female perspective, often underrepresented in historical narratives. It allows for a broader view of the community's history and a more inclusive and diverse representation of intangible cultural heritage and experimental procedures in image capture and editing. The paper reflects on the impact of women's digital narratives in the production of urban space. It proposes new modes of integrating plural narratives into the registry and collective memory of intangible cultural heritage. This work aims to contribute to the intersection of digital art and studies on intangible cultural heritage.

KEYWORDS

Digital storytelling, Feminine sonorities, Intangible cultural heritage, Video art

1 INTRODUCTION

Cultural tangible or intangible heritage is fundamental to understanding a community's history and identity. Its preservation requires recognizing its components and the intrinsic dynamics that connect these elements to the space they inhabit. For this, it is necessary to address and understand the distinct forms of their construction, transmission and experience and the role of social practices and norms in constructing local memory and cultural identity.

This paper explores this topic by analyzing the video installation "Entre Caminhos: Escuta-Narrativa, Percursos e Temp(l)os de Memórias Vivas" (Between Paths: Listening-Narrative, Paths and Times of Living Memories). The project resulted from a 90-hour international artistic residency conducted by the two co-authors. It involved eight women, all aged 80-90 years, who attended the first girls' primary school in Mamarrosa, Anadia, Portugal. This school, considered a representative reference of an era and a community, is crucial for understanding local history and constructing cultural identity. Their testimonies were representative of the sociocultural dynamics that shaped and were shaped by them and addressed the complexities and challenges faced by women during the social and political transition.

By combining digital artistic experimentation with feminist urban studies, this research aims to understand the potential of digital narratives for revisiting, representing and recontextualizing women's stories and experiences in the rural/urban educational scene of early 20th-century Portugal. In this sense, we explore and shed light on the potential of digital storytelling and video art as forms of preserving and transmitting intangible heritage. Based on the unique experiences of these participants, this study reveals not only the individual stories of these women but also the broader social, political and cultural context of the time. Despite being in ruins, Figure 1, its recovery plan and transformation into an art school with associated cultural events are under development.

The first-person narrative that emerges from these interviews emphasizes the importance of autobiography as a primary source of information, especially from an anthropological point of view [1] [2]. Personal stories provide a unique and enriched perspective on associated events. Therefore, women's autobiography offers an alternative to the historical narrative often dominated by male and institutional perspectives, allowing for a more accurate and

Figure 1: Mamarrosa's first elementary school for girls.

inclusive representation of the experiences. This discussion highlights the importance of disrupting the dominant historical narrative with frequently underrepresented perspectives and recounting the history of spaces and moments marked by often silenced or marginalized women's experiences and voices [3].

Another significant element in the production of this work is grounded in historical-geographical debates, bringing the notion of territory into the discussion. The concept of territory has been enlarging its understanding and currently incorporates theoretical principles from indigenous peoples, in which the body is included as a part of it [4].

In this research, digital narratives identify women's bodies as integral parts of local memory, even if not always identified or historicized. The purpose is to further study procedures that assist in processes of digital artistic practices, in this case, video art inclusive of autobiographical narratives. It aims to contribute to the production of more inclusive urban spaces and offer insights into how gender narratives, which have often been ignored in dominant historical characteristics, can contribute to the understanding and appreciation of intangible cultural heritage.

The association of the ruin of an important local historical space with memories and narratives never before told or recorded is no coincidence. Understanding materiality and immateriality as integral and inseparable parts of the processes of historical documentation in socio-spatial narratives allows us to register facts and phenomenons in time and space that have remained hidden and invisibilized [5].

We address how female sonorities and gestures in digital storytelling included in video installations can contribute to the understanding and preservation of intangible cultural heritage, as well as the contribution of digital art in reconfiguring historically institutionalized narratives. The importance of the first primary girls' school in Mamarrosa as an element of local cultural heritage, the impact of the living memories of the girls' experiences who attended it on the construction of local memory and cultural identity, and how the video installation contributes to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage will also be addressed.

2 METHODOLOGY

This research explored the intangible heritage of the first girls' primary school in Mamarrosa village, developing a combination of Participatory Action Research and Artistic Ethnography. We identified and contacted women who, being residents of Mamarrosa, attended that school. We then established an open dialogue with the participants, allowing them to explore the direction and focus of semi-structured and semi-exploratory interviews. The resultant procedure can be understood as experimentation aimed at intersecting theoretical-practical methodological approaches to create an artistically sensitive work with historical and sociocultural relevance, intertwining memory and digital technologies.

The interviews focused on individual and collective memories about the school and the socioeconomic and spatial context. These memories were recorded using smartphones, ensuring a more relaxed and intimate environment for the collected testimonies. Subsequently, an analysis of the audiovisual records was conducted, which allowed us to identify five recurring themes in the testimonies. These themes constituted the basis for the subsequent artistic creation of the video installation. We adopted an artistic ethnographic approach, incorporating the collected memories, narratives, and sounds into two exhibitions.

From a practical point of view, the methodological experimentation also included editing software and debates on artistic and communicative languages that brought the question of thread gestures from Ana Clara Torres Ribeiro's urban sociology [6].

The editing work included the participation of a student on an artistic initiation scholarship (PROEX/ UFSJ) who contributed and experimented with editing tools to explore images and body gestures from narrative moments in which the body plays a fundamental role in significant expressions of certain issues dealt with in the video, such as educational and behavioural conditions or conditioning.

Another fundamental methodological issue, from the point of view of computational issues and approaches, was the premise of using recording and editing tools that were easily accessible and free to use. Thus, the smartphones used and editing tools and software available free online, such as Davinci and Adobe Rush, were essential to developing the work, especially in a context like that of a Brazilian University.

Some edited clippings emphasize gestures and body movements that emphasize visual narratives. Experimenting with editing resources for aesthetic and political purposes helps to reinforce recent historical debates, such as the feminist conquests of less than a century ago. What are these gestures, and what sonorities are highlighted? It's not only about the origin but also the meaning of gestures and actions.

3 INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE, SOCIO-SPATIAL MEMORIES, AND FEMININE NARRATIVE DIGITAL FRAGMENTS IN VIDEO ART

UNESCO [7] highlights the importance of preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage, which, by its nature, lies in memories, practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills transmitted generationally. It also considers instruments, objects, and cultural

spaces associated with them as crucial in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of increasing globalization, which might put the most vulnerable heritage at risk [8]. Recognizing this heritage also allows the community to (re)identify, playing a crucial role in shaping its identity and promoting social cohesion.

We address the notion of female gestures and sonority as an expression of corporal movements articulated with voice and sound, tones, and inflexions that reveal emotions and resonate from women's experiences and perspectives. The contribution of the study of female gestures and sonorities is fundamental for constructing inclusive and representative narratives of various perspectives and experiences regarding tangible and/or intangible heritage, allowing a multifaceted understanding of cultural inheritance. Video art allows for preserving and managing audiovisual resources and exploring different heritage dimensions in an impactful and informative way [9].

Furthermore, it enables the transfer of cultural practices to other generations, incorporating fragments of digital narratives related to localized female experiences to obtain and preserve intangible cultural heritage, resulting in rich and multidimensional accounts.

The inclusion of autobiographical narratives can contribute in various ways to video art. Firstly, autobiographical narratives can constitute a rich source of emotionally charged memories of personal experiences and emotions that can contribute to video art and be translated into forms of visual art. Secondly, autobiographical narratives can share experiences, challenge dominant narratives, and create new perspectives [10] and discourses.

Exploring female gestures and sonorities in autobiographical narratives of video art is an important tool for understanding and preserving intangible cultural heritage. By making visible and audible the untold histories, video art emphasizes the meaning of interconnected experiences with sociocultural context and individual identities of those women, thus enriching our collective memory and cultural heritage.

Cultural heritage is strongly connected to socio-spatial memories. Therefore, the spatial relationship between cultural heritage sites and urban areas is important for understanding their impact processes [11].

Feng et al. [12] relate the value of oral and intangible heritage to its indissociable connection to material heritage, highlighting the potential of digital memory practice to construct the memory of cultural heritage with public participation and multiple perspectives, highlighting digital memories at the confluence of memory resources, cultural interpretation, and social interaction. In a similar vein, Ribeiro [6], when dealing with yarn gestures, discusses the relationship and differences between activity and action, drawing on Hannah Arendt's reflections for essential contributions on human conditions and conditioning oriented towards ways of life and socio-spatial production.

The preservation and revitalization of cultural heritage and related socio-spatial memories can help maintain and reinforce a community's collective memories.

4   ANALYSIS OF THE VIDEO INSTALLATION "ENTRE CAMINHOS: ESCUTA-NARRATIVA, PERCURSOS E TEMP(L)OS DE MEMÓRIAS VIVAS" ("BETWEEN PATHS: NARRATIVE LISTENING, ROUTES, AND TIMES OF LIVING MEMORIES")

The video installation stemmed from an artistic residency, with preparatory activities conducted in Porto and Mamarrosa, Portugal, between January 23rd and February 12th, 2023, resulting in 90 hours of dedicated work. In addition, interviews were conducted with eight women, aged between 80-90 years old, who attended the first female primary school in Mamarrosa, Anadia, Portugal, and were available at the time of the artistic residency. Ethical issues of consent and authorization were ensured and respected throughout the process.

The approved proposal for the residency relied on an experimental methodology, where the collected narratives contribute to the identification of memories and autobiographical processes that further the discourse on intangible heritage. This was achieved by examining individual and collective experiences within the school's territorial materiality and educational space. We consider the former primary school for girls in Mamarrosa as a representative reference point of an era and a community, important for understanding local history and identity. The building that once accommodated the school now lies in ruins, awaiting its scheduled rehabilitation as an art school with associated cultural events.

One can grasp the local history as part of collective identity and memory by connecting the significance of the school's material heritage, still in ruins, with the intangible heritage of associated memories. The tangible heritage, including the built environment and material culture, constitutes a physical manifestation of a community's history and cultural identity.

Intangible heritage, like traditions and social practices, offers a deeper understanding of community values and beliefs. In the case of the ruined school, its material heritage serves to recall the community's collective history and provide a tangible link to its past. This tangible heritage is complemented by the intangible heritage of memories and narratives, orally passed down through generations. Material and intangible heritage create a comprehensive understanding of local history and identity, crucial for preserving cultural diversity and fostering social cohesion. Preserving this heritage requires acknowledging tangible and intangible components in their territorial dynamics regarding the socio-spatial relationships experienced there. Therefore, it was essential to understand how these dynamics were experienced. As they are passed on, they emphasize the impact of social norms and practices on the construction of local memory and cultural identity.

The memories documented in the video are about the first practices of including girls/women in the formal educational process. They highlight the difficulties this first generation faces in accessing fundamental rights. These memories should be underscored as a process of gaining more egalitarian human rights, which, by identifying territorial facts and phenomena, facilitates the merging of elements from cultural transformations, socio-spatial, and identity transformations in an unprecedented way in local history.

Figure 2: Images of an active listening exercise.

It is important to say that what we aim to preserve are the transformation processes of cultural practices, which, as they expand and become more inclusive, particularly for women in socio-spatial practices [13], guarantee rights and access that are still not allowed for everyone, especially women, in different contexts today. It aimed to disrupt the historical narrative, normalized and trivialized by the male/institutional perspective.

Active listening exercises, Figure 2, were carried out on the experience of girls' education at the beginning of the 20th century, on the stories of these women, their journeys and the relationship between that place and their experiences.

The testimonies identified five significant recurring topics: Walking to School, Autonomy Vs Violence, Educational Process Disruption, The Weight of the Feminine Condition, and Living Memory.

Walking to School - Testimonies provide examples of daily resistance, the act of walking, even when faced with numerous difficulties. The journey to school is seen as an expression of resistance. Whether it is the determination to walk 6 km, trudge through snow without appropriate shoes, or endure wounds on the feet from walking barefoot. Each journey is, in itself, an act of determination and resilience.

Autonomy Vs Violence - Testimonies recurrently revealed harsh realities of violence and limitations on female independence. However, they were often accompanied by a discourse of resistance and a desire for autonomy and self-determination - whether through seeking financial independence by selling milk or bread or aspiring to have a profession.

Educational Process Disruption - Gender and socioeconomic inequality were decisive in interrupting the education of all participants. The barriers faced by the participants, whether due to a lack of financial resources or to the domestic responsibilities assigned to women, demonstrate the extent of the systemic inequalities these women face. However, their desire to learn and aspiration for a better life motivated them and can today be considered examples of resistance and resilience.

The Weight of the Feminine Condition - The testimonies under this theme reveal several ways in which gender norms and inequality manifested themselves in the daily lives of these women from an early age. Given the difficult economic circumstances in which they grew up, many girls were often overlooked for educational
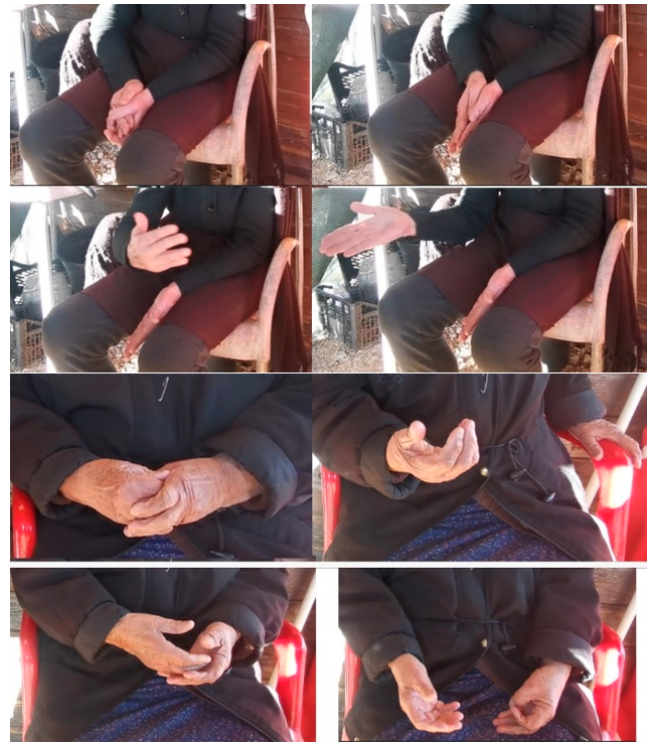

Figure 3: Sequence of video installation images.

opportunities while their male siblings took priority over them. As a result, they were often relegated to domestic roles and duties and learned feminine skills such as sewing, which became an important activity.

Living Memory - The testimonies under this topic are accompanied by emotions, gestures, and sonorities, loaded with personal experiences of pain and sacrifice, narratives of struggle and resistance, expressing a resigned acceptance of life's hardness with few opportunities, Figure 3. Translated into pragmatic memories of facing adversities caused by norms and customs that restricted and denied their personal and professional journey as they desired.

These living memories of seeming resigned acceptance of life's circumstances are living testimonies of the fight for human rights that form part of the community's intangible heritage.

The artist residency resulted in two exhibitions, the first as the closing event of the research project at Olga Santos Galeria, in the city of Porto, Figure 4, and the second at the Festival Sementes: exhibition raízes/memórias from March 17th to 19, 2023.

5 FINAL NOTES

Throughout this paper, we have reflected on the intersection between intangible heritage and the female experience through the living memories of women who attended the first primary girls' school in Mamarrosa, Portugal, at the beginning of the 20th century.

The artistic research employed a combined methodology of participatory action research and artistic ethnography, leveraging active listening and interpretation techniques to capture and understand the complexity of the narratives.
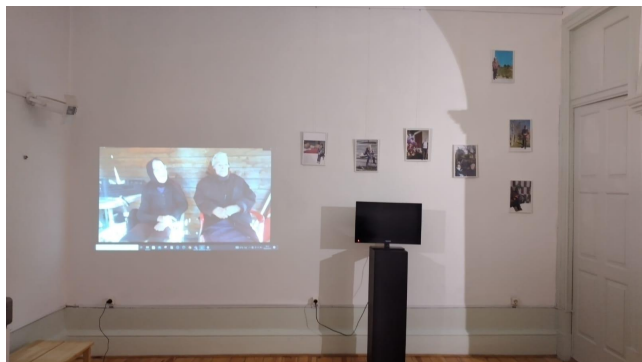
Figure 4: Exhibition at Olga Santos Galeria.

The tool for the recording of the interviews was the smartphone. A ubiquitous device that, being an everyday device, was neither noticed nor felt as an external object in the environment of the interviewees. This unnoticeability promoted a relaxed and natural atmosphere, providing more intimate and genuine interactions with the participants. In this way, we intended to highlight the nuances of daily habits and practices - those routine actions and commonplace behaviours that we do without thinking, which often go unnoticed but are full of profound knowledge.

Digital storytelling offers several ways to document, interpret and disseminate cultural heritage. Incorporating personal narratives and living memories told in the first person allows for a broader and multilinear understanding of social, political, and cultural phenomena, especially from underrepresented perspectives. The female narratives preserved in the artistic work, which took the form of a video installation, highlight the importance of incorporating intangible cultural heritage for understanding collective memory and identity. This approach allows for exploring the dynamics and multiplicity of experiences and perspectives within intangible cultural heritage. Participating and sharing perspectives and experiences made it possible to combine several versions of the past with themes shared unconsciously, creating opportunities for collecting memories and co-creating cultural heritage [14]. This recognition also values and preserves the female contribution to collective memory, fostering a more representative and inclusive space.

The recorded memories were analyzed and categorized into five recurrent themes: Walking to School, Autonomy Vs Violence at School, Disruption in the Educational Process, The Weight of Femininity and Living Memories. The themes listed reflect these women's historical and socio-spatial resilience and resistance, whether on the way to school, in the struggle for autonomy or perseverance against gender and socioeconomic inequalities.

Methodologically, experimentation along the creative process was crucial for exploring practices of recording, documenting, selecting, editing and post-production intangible memories, which, brought to life through narrative, provide a critical substrate for issues still present in contemporary life.

Regarding the technological and computational resources, accessibility is emphasized in terms of the range of free tools that can be used on a daily basis, as well as experimental practices in image editing. This experimentation allowed for the reinterpretation and recontextualization of audio and visual experiences, making it possible to establish a more intimate connection with the experiences and narratives being told. The question of sounds and gestures were crucial understandings, some of which were recognized and understood after the images were captured. The contributions of authors such as Ana Clara Torres Ribeiro [6] and Gayatri Spivak [3] on embodied and subaltern subjects, gestures, and temporalities contributed significantly to the understanding and structuring of the work.

The installation "Entre Caminhos" has demonstrated an increased awareness of gender abuse, allowing for critical reflection on gender equality issues and women's rights. It also showed the potential to instigate public debate, inspire social action, and serve as a tool for preserving and representing intangible cultural heritage.

From a feminist urban studies perspective, this project reiterates the importance of revisiting and redefining urban spaces through the lens of gender. The testimonies collected illustrate the impact of gender norms on access to education and autonomy, providing valuable evidence on the evolution of social and cultural dynamics over time. Through the combination of digital art and feminist urban studies, there have been new ways to challenge conventional and often patriarchal narratives, opening up opportunities for further studies in different urban contexts. The stories captured and represented in this research are rich and deep. By integrating an interdisciplinary approach, we can territorially reinterpret spaces and society through the diversity of stories and collective memories, contributing to understanding local history and constructing cultural identity. It highlights the need to ensure proper representation in these processes, achieving a balance between what is referenced and its significance. Therefore, we reinforce the need for more participatory art projects and the identification of best practices in actions exploring the interrelationship between different heritage dimensions.

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