

ON THE EDGE OF CRISES: IMPACTS ON PORTUGUESE PERFORMING ARTISTS

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Background

- COLLECTITUDE project - Building the collective at times of precarity: precarious labour and its countermovements (2020-2022)
(MSCA/ 841164)
- PROWORK project - Projectifying work: network organisation models in contemporary capitalist societies (2023-2025)
(FCT/ 2022.04212.PTDC)

Research objectives

- Analysing **Project work** as a social-economic condition within contemporary capitalist societies: the case of artistic work
- Situating artistic project work in a political economy context, examining how particular moments of crisis may lead to variations in the **organisational landscape**
- Exploring **modes of projectification** (Lundin et al. 2015; Kuura 2011) and the way in which they are part of renewed modalities for the organisation of contemporary capitalist societies

Research object

- (Cultural) Projectariat - workers whose employment is contingent on assembling sequences of discrete, time-limited funded (cultural) projects, access to which may be highly competitive (Greer et al., 2019; Umney & Symon, 2019)
- Focus on Art workers and collectives in Portugal

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews

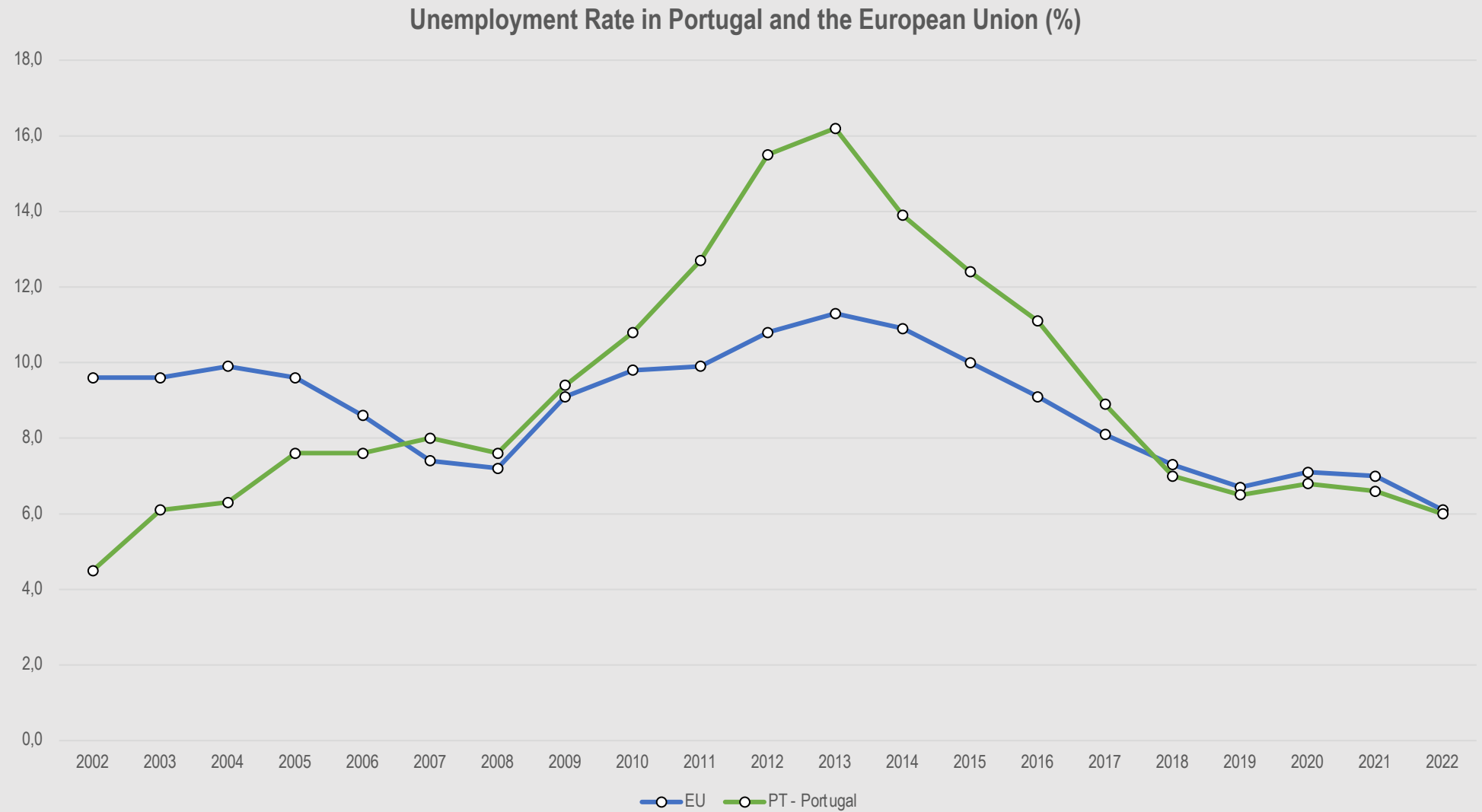
- Key Informants
- Workers' collectives
- Movements
- Unions

Analysis of secondary datasets

Digital Ethnography

- Participant observation of online meetings of workers' movements
- Online interactions in social media
- Online protests, press releases and campaigns

The Contexts of Crisis



Source: Eurostat, INE, PORDATA

Table 1. Working population, total and in the cultural sector, according to employment status (1000 people, percentage) (2001, 2011, 2021)

Employment status	TOTAL						CULTURAL SECTOR					
	2001		2011		2021		2001		2011		2021	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Employer	478 804	10.3	459 123	10.5	467418	11	1 819	12.3	3 102	25.4	1144	8.1
Employed	3 793 992	81.6	3 540 336	81.2	3435002	78	10 797	73.1	5 126	41.9	4621	33.0
Freelancer	294 103	6.3	286 090	6.6	420179	9,5	1 768	12.0	3 134	25.6	7501	53.0
Other situations	84 948	1.0	75 638	1.1	103862	2,3	381	2.2	871	7.1	878	6.2
Total	4 650 947	100.0	4 361 187	100.0	4 426 461	100.0	14 765	100.0	12 233	100.0	14 144	100.0

Source: Institute of Statistics Portugal (INE), 2001, 2011 and 2021 Census.

*“**2008 is very violent!** Because it aggravated and **indebted many art workers** till today. It exacerbated the situation of **precariousness** in the sector, it made the sector very fragile. The “green receipt” and the normalization of so-called **independent work** in culture, I think is the **great element of destruction** and then the **successive devaluation of the Ministry of Culture**, which sometimes wasn't even a Ministry over the last 30-40 years. There is a great distance between what should be one of the pillars of our society and the dimension it should have in governments and the reality, which has been increasingly distant, weak and fragile. If, on the one hand, we have a great moment that changes the shape of our culture, which is the **April Revolution**, with all it brings, and the **Constitution**, which is fundamental for putting it out there and for drawing up the values on which we have built our society, which has many weaknesses but which has this beautiful thing that is our Constitution; on the other hand, we have, from a certain moment on, a **downward curve** that reveals itself in details such as the way cultural policy is carried out, the **lack of perception of the importance of cultural policy** for enjoyment, for access to creation, so that someone in Bragança, or in Madeira, or in the Azores, or in Lisbon or Porto can dream of being an artist, of working in culture. And that's something the government isn't doing (...) 2008 was the peak of this continuity and now **with the pandemic the fragility was already here**, the relationships were the same, the **poverty of culture** was the same, the difference is that people were able to do many things and there was work that allowed us to disguise the low pay, the low salaries, the precarious relationship, the lack of notion and awareness of rights, the lack of awareness even of our transversality...” (interview with union, 2021)*

Artistic Project Work in-between crises

- **Collective A**

From 2009 to 2012, they had their first Project approved for public funding and decided to move to a larger space and to employ permanent staff for the first time. However, this situation held for just two years, since the economic recession in 2011 and the implementation of the austerity policy lead to large cuts to public funding for the arts. The group realized the situation would only deteriorate and was forced to dismiss its employees and return to the condition of 'independent' artists:

*“Then we had to make big changes: **we all dismissed each other**, we had to let our secretary and the technician go because we could not pay them...”*

Artistic Project Work in-between crises

- **Collective K**

*“[With the pandemic, without shows] we began to look more and more for cultural projects, and educational projects. (...) we only work in this logic of **educational projects, community projects**, to really **sustain the jobs** that we have created”*

- **Collective Z** (who had sustained funding during the pandemic)

*“During the pandemic we **created a grant** with DGArtes funds (...) because it was at a time when everyone was suddenly at home and no one could work because we are not essential workers, everyone wanted us to do things online – which is an idea completely out of what the performing arts should be – there was no money to compensate for the lack of work, whether from Social Security or through all other resources. So, we had some money that we thought it suddenly made sense to use it. We’ve received support from the State, that is, we’ve received support money that belongs to everyone, which is a **collective good that needs to be redistributed...**”*

Intensification of labour struggles in the last decades

- Exposure of the sector **structural precarity**
- **Protest and collective action** through union, professional structures and informal movements, which challenge the bogus self-employment in the sector and claim social & labour rights (access to labour contract) and a public policy for culture
- Affirmation of the **artists subjectivity as workers**



*“One thing we did from the beginning was not to use the term “artist” and **use the term “worker”, “cultural worker”,** that can be from the technician, front of house/ushers, to the artist. And this designation is very important so that we can think of our needs and specificities as **needs and specificities of a class, a working class,** because that's what we're fighting for, for that statute. We are all workers... I work, we work a lot!”*

(interview with social movement, 2021)

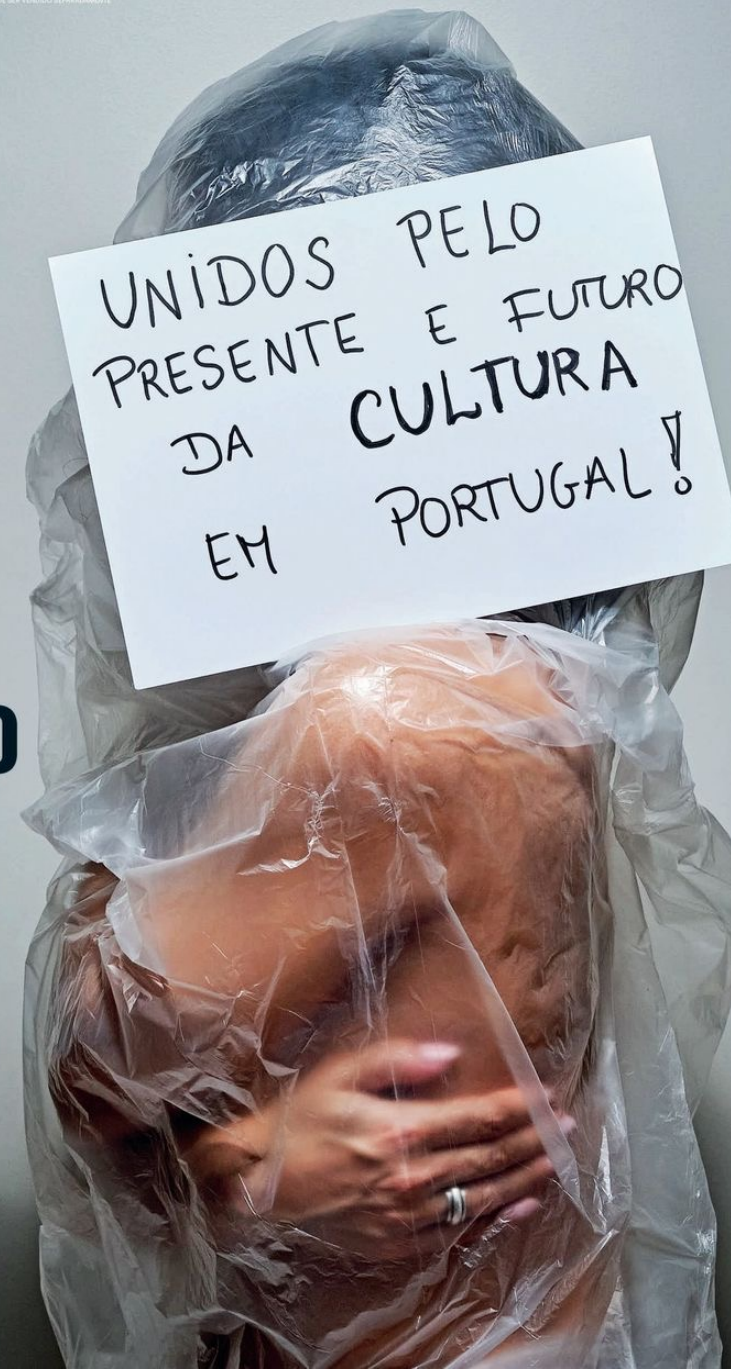
Intensification of labour struggles in the last decades

- **Mutual support systems** between organizations and workers to address basic survival needs
 - Grants created by more consolidated organizations to aid other workers in the field at times of crisis
 - Inter-organizational collaboration - Sharing space and other resources between organizations
- Different forms of cooperation and struggle that go beyond the arts field, through the collective organizing of precarious workers as a whole (e.g. 'Inflexible Precarious').



*“In the last year and a half, **[the union]** has grown **immensely, unfortunately!** We would like to grow through the recognition of the union as an important tool for workers to see their rights recognized and protected, but it was due to the **calamity and the inability of people to react** that many people came to the union... And it was also because **we've had a voice**. It's a fact that we've had a voice for the last year and a half...”*

(interview with union, 2021)



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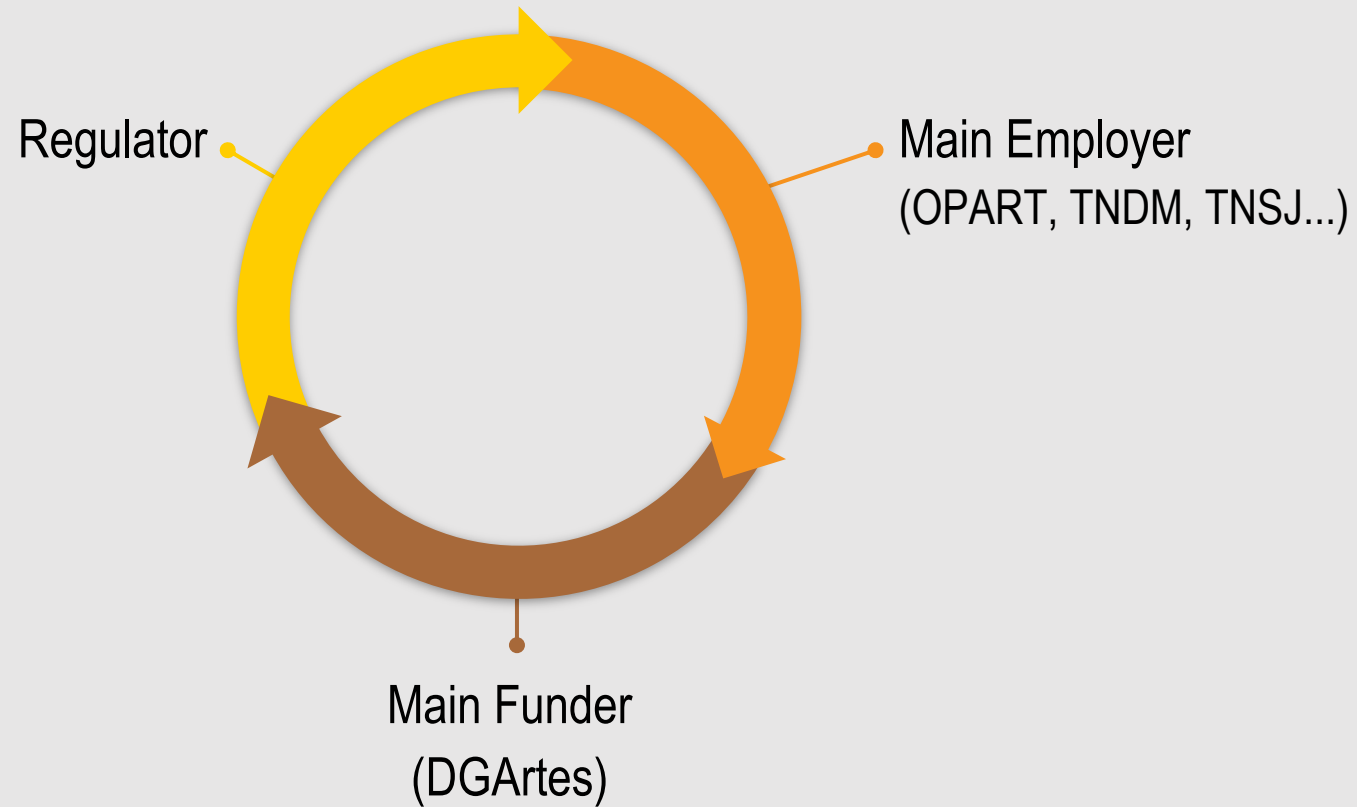
O sufoco e a luta

A paralisación da cultura pôs anu a precariedade dos trabalhadores das artes em Portugal

Public Policy

Cultural public policy as a “**weak policy**” (Ferrão, 2023): in case of financial strain, cultural policies are considered secondary and among the first to be dismissed, as it has happened during 2008 crisis.

The role of the State in performing arts



Final Thoughts

- Projects that could be the time & space for piloting, experimenting, become the norm
- Without sufficient stable integral funding to turn project work into permanent programmes, the **insecurity** of the Project workers is likely to increase.
- Extensive **unpaid work** that goes into preparing proposals for funding
- *Social turn* in the arts field, as **social projects** become one of many ways in which artists can build careers (Lingo & Tepper, 2013)
- “Soft social engineering”, whereby arts projects are used to make social policy within the framework of a **neoliberal agenda** (Jackson, 2011; Bishop, 2012)

Final Thoughts

- The situation and precarity of **project workers** remains to large extent on the **margins of political discourse and labour movements**
- These trends deserve **further and in-depth investigation of project work**, and particularly network organisation models:
 - a) Division of labour
 - b) Employment relations
 - c) Forms of coordination, communication and the role of ICT
 - d) Mechanisms of labour control
 - e) Expertise and project as a competence
 - f) Work-life balance
 - g) Impacts on health
 - h) Funding mechanisms
 - i) Workspaces

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