

NOTES FROM ATOPIA

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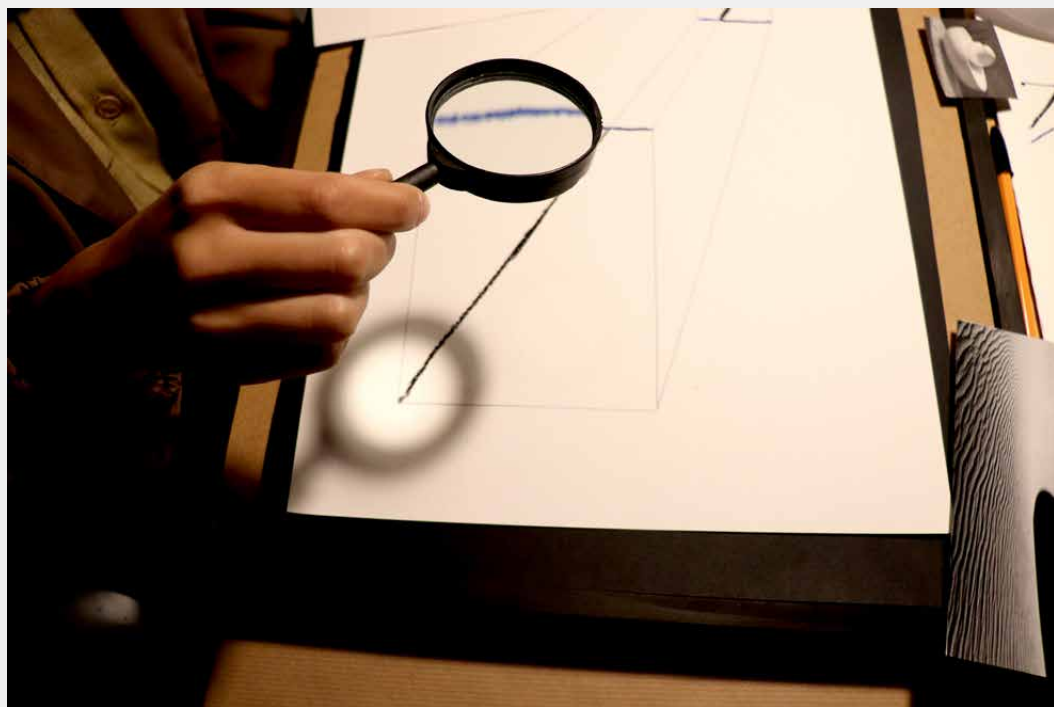
Overview

Notes from Atopia was an interactive three-day workshop querying the ways of altered meaning-making that emerged during the conditions of COVID19 restrictions in Lisbon in March, 2020.

Framing this period of time as one of concentrated *atopos*, or *atopia*, referring to the Greek word for 'no place' or 'placelessness', the title of the workshop alludes to the effect of the pandemic in dislocating our sense of geographical and narrative belonging. In one sense, the realities of confinement displaced people from their places of social connection and restricted them to the interiors of their home for such an extended duration that the *place* of home became a non-distinct *space* in which all aspects of life unfolded. Compounding this phenomena was the global dysfunction and seeming threat of structural collapse ensuing from the spread of the pandemic, which cast doubt upon the reliability of social and economic systems and the integrity of dominant narratives espoused by political leaders. *Atopia* is used, therefore, with regard to the existential, civilisational and ideological crises ushered in by COVID19.



Representation, Miguel Mesquita



Representation, Máira Botelho

Theoretical Framing

Atopia and the Dismantling of Neoliberal Capitalist Utopia

The application of the term *atopia* to the specificities of the COVID19 pandemic condition frames the individualised experiential impacts of this phenomena within a wider context of systemic collapse and impending societal change. As people endured and integrated the particularities of their confinement, they simultaneously reconciled the stark reality of civilisational dysfunction. This was represented not only in the failure of various governments to act equitably and humanely to protect citizens against the virus, but also in the persistent allegiance demonstrated by both politicians and citizens towards enforcing economic systems that were evidently failing the needs of society.

In the work of Helmut Willke (2001), the term *atopia* is thus applied to the contemporary citizen who has become dislocated by the utopian promises of free market economics - a system that anonymises localised citizens into placeless consumers and ultimately prioritises private gains against public needs. Through the lens of COVID19, this dynamic actualised as 'non-essential' low-wage workers, the unemployed, the elderly, minority communities, the homeless, and otherwise marginalised communities, were systematically excluded or underprivileged in

their access to economic, medical and social support, whilst regulatory mechanisms to buoy corporate viability and protect economic gains became the focus of governmental policy.

Under COVID19, the social contract of neoliberal capitalism revealed its fractures and citizens globally grew skeptical of the narratives espoused by their leaders. Ultimately the exacerbating disparities conflated by the pressures of social confinement resulted in agitations by civil society that, directly or indirectly, called for the dismantling of predominantly Western-Eurocentric patriarchal and colonialist modes of organising economy, labour and society. Such sentiments were witnessed with global visibility in the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States of America, whilst comparable movements against government corruption, systemic racial prejudice and wealth disparity echoed across the world - the End SARS protests in Nigeria, the French protests against the police security bill, or the marches in Brazil against Jair Bolsonaro's management of the crisis, for example.

Such movements and the 'new normal' of pandemic conditions threw contemporary civil society and the ideological foundations upon which it rests into flux, portraying what feminist philosophers such as Elizabeth Grosz (2001), Luce Irigaray (1993), Margaret Whitford (1991) and Michelle Le Doeuff (1989) have argued is the innate paradox of the conception of utopia that we have inherited by the likes of Plato and Thomas More (*Le Doeuff 1989*). This legacy conception of utopia, which asserts that ideal models of social organisation can be accomplished and implemented based on fixed hierarchies of moral and political order, now reveals itself as "perpetually verging on the dystopic" (*Grosz 2001, 135*).

Amidst this 'verging', how can we realign our personal and collective narratives towards alternate visions? How can we meaningfully locate ourselves and our values whilst the frictions of societal transition confront us? How can we access our intuitive capacities for meaning making whilst critically reflecting on patriarchal, colonialist, and capitalist utopias?



Representation, Alisha Budkie



Representation, Anca Usurelu

Towards a Utopia of Process; Devising Atopian Modalities

In her analysis of the work of Luce Irigaray, Margaret Whitford denotes the contribution of feminism to utopian discourse as one which distinguishes “between two sorts of utopian vision; between the kind that sees utopia as a moment of static perfection, in which any change can only be for the worse, and the other kind which is a utopia of process” (*Whitford 1991, 19*). This process is asserted as one that necessarily works with uncertainty and unpredictability as a means to imagine unimaginable futures through a creative practice capable of harnessing change and interaction with alien forces (*Whitford 1991*). In this conception of utopia, the focus is on the means of acting in the present, speaking to Irigaray’s framing that “we cannot programme the future, we can only begin here and now to construct it and create it” (*Whitford 1991, 17*).

For Michelle Le Doeuff, the tension of utopia regards its dualism between that which ‘ought-to-be’ and that ‘which is possible’. She asserts that this tension necessitates a polysemy - “where no one immediate meaning prevails” and a multitude of possible meanings become possible (*Le Doeuff 1989, 54*) - rendering all utopias as atopian.

These framings by Irigiray and Le Doeuff find resonance in Roland Barthes' assertion of atopia not as a model but as a plurality of concurrent, possible perspectives on the present world (*Millet 2013*). Yves Millet expands on this notion, writing "[f]rom an atopic perspective, 'place' (*topos*) has neither a positive nor a negative determination. Instead, it can be thought of as a common "polycentric" ground where we are led toward another conceptualization in which our relation to the world has a modal nature rather than a disjunctive nature, such as the subject-object relation" (*Millet, 2013; 1*).

It is precisely such a modality of thinking that was attempted to be harnessed within the space of *Notes from Atopia*. The existential uncertainty of COVID19 was framed as a vital site of dysfunction from which to respond to the invitation of Grosz, Irigiray, Whitford, Le Doeuff and Barthes - that is, to work from within uncertainty and unpredictability to re-envision and re-imagine through our uninhibited creative abilities, whilst understanding a multiplicity of meanings and a plurality of being fostering ambiguity as a methodological practice rather than a failure of course.

Methodology

Starting from personal, intimate and familiar artefacts as an access point to the existential terrain of COVID19 confinement, the methodology employed in *Notes from Atopia* leveraged the potentialities of artistic investigation and arts-based research as a key means to disrupt dysfunctional orthodoxies and hierarchies traditionally present in the space of inquiry.

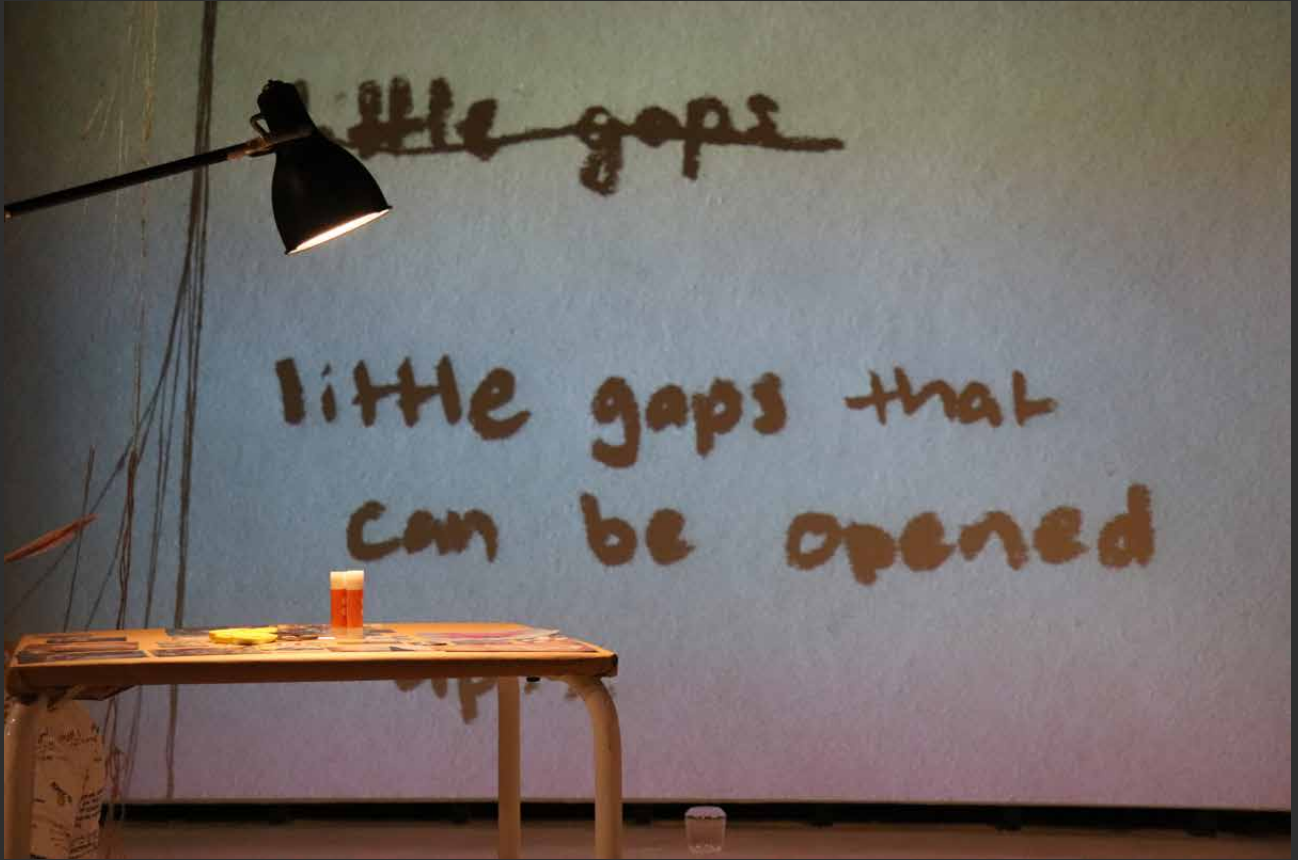
It aimed to do so firstly through the use of the Form of Inquiry (Fol), devised by the Melbourne Institute of Experiential and Creative Art Therapy, Melbourne - Australia. These procedures, which couple art-making processes with rigorous scientific method and analysis, have been constructed in alignment with the precepts of phenomenology as applied by Edmund Husserl (1913) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945). With an emphasis on Emergent sense-making, Multi-modal expression, Intersubjective response, Active listening and Dialoguing with materials, these procedures aim to highlight and explore the possibilities of arts-based inquiry in devising alternate knowledge-making systems that can complement - or challenge - normative frameworks of understanding employed in institutional, academic, political and community contexts.

Such exercises were a provocation to act outside the confines of logical positivism and technical rationalism that govern mainstream academic perspectives, and to “acknowledge the multiple dimensions that constitute and form the human condition - physical, emotional, spiritual, social, cultural - and the myriad ways of engaging in the world - oral, literal, visual,

embodied" (*Cole and Knowles 2001, 60*) as a means to arrive at previously unknown understandings. By engaging iterative, reflexive processes alongside visual, textual and gestural provocations, *Notes from Atopia* created a record of meanings and knowledges embedded into the body during the existential flux of COVID19 confinement.

Additionally, bracketing in the prioritisation of decoloniality in the current context of global discourse, the research methods used in the workshop consciously regarded Suely Rolnik's (*Rolnik 2015*) following eight suggestions to decolonise the unconscious:

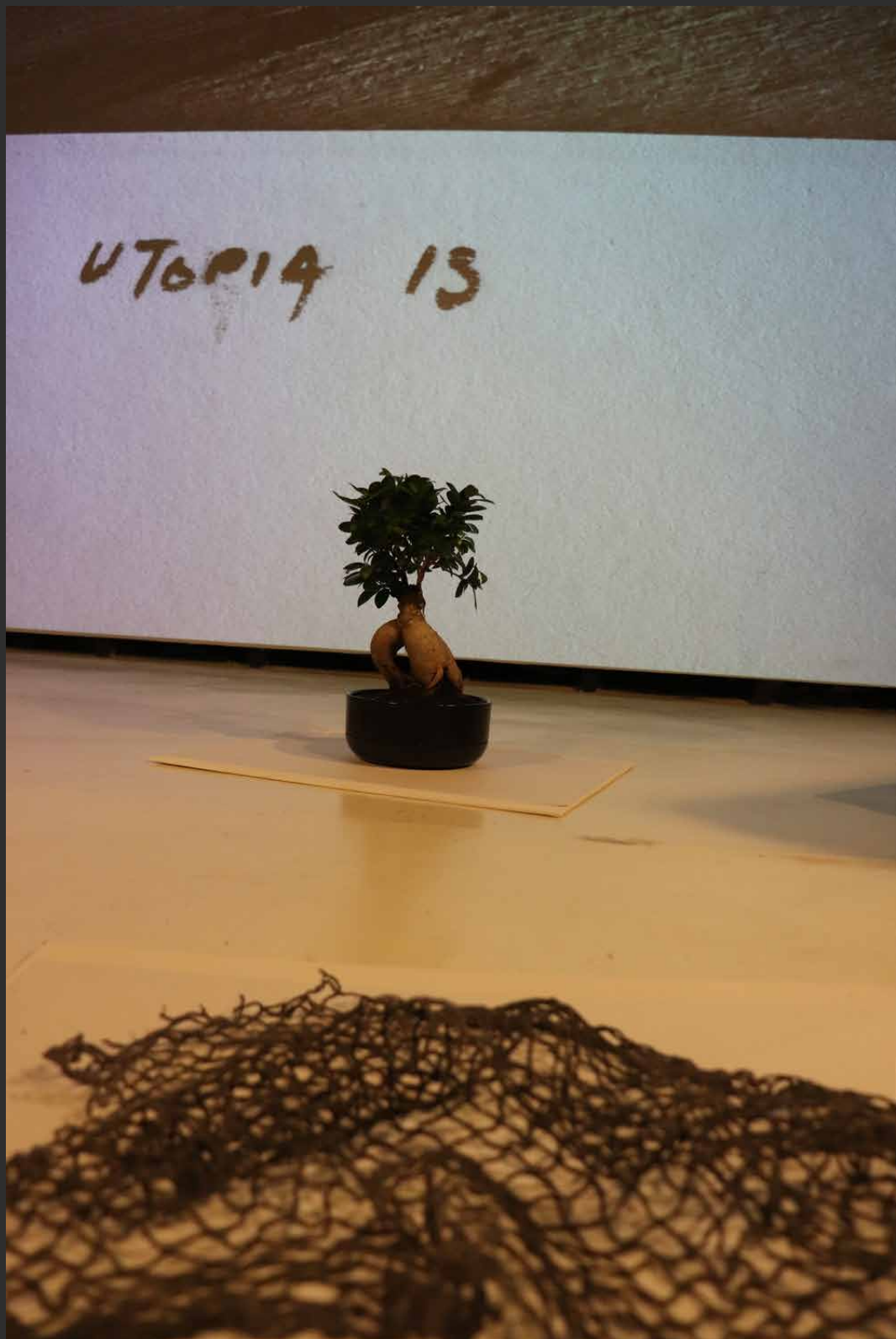
1. De-anesthetizing the vulnerability to the forces
2. Reactivating the knowing-body
3. Unobstructing the access to sensations
4. Keeping oneself within the tension of the uncanny until an utterance capable of actualising it, bearing its pulsation, is created
5. Holding on to the temporality of the creative process
6. Holding on to desire
7. Not negotiating the unnegotiable
8. Exercising thought in its ethical, political and clinical function



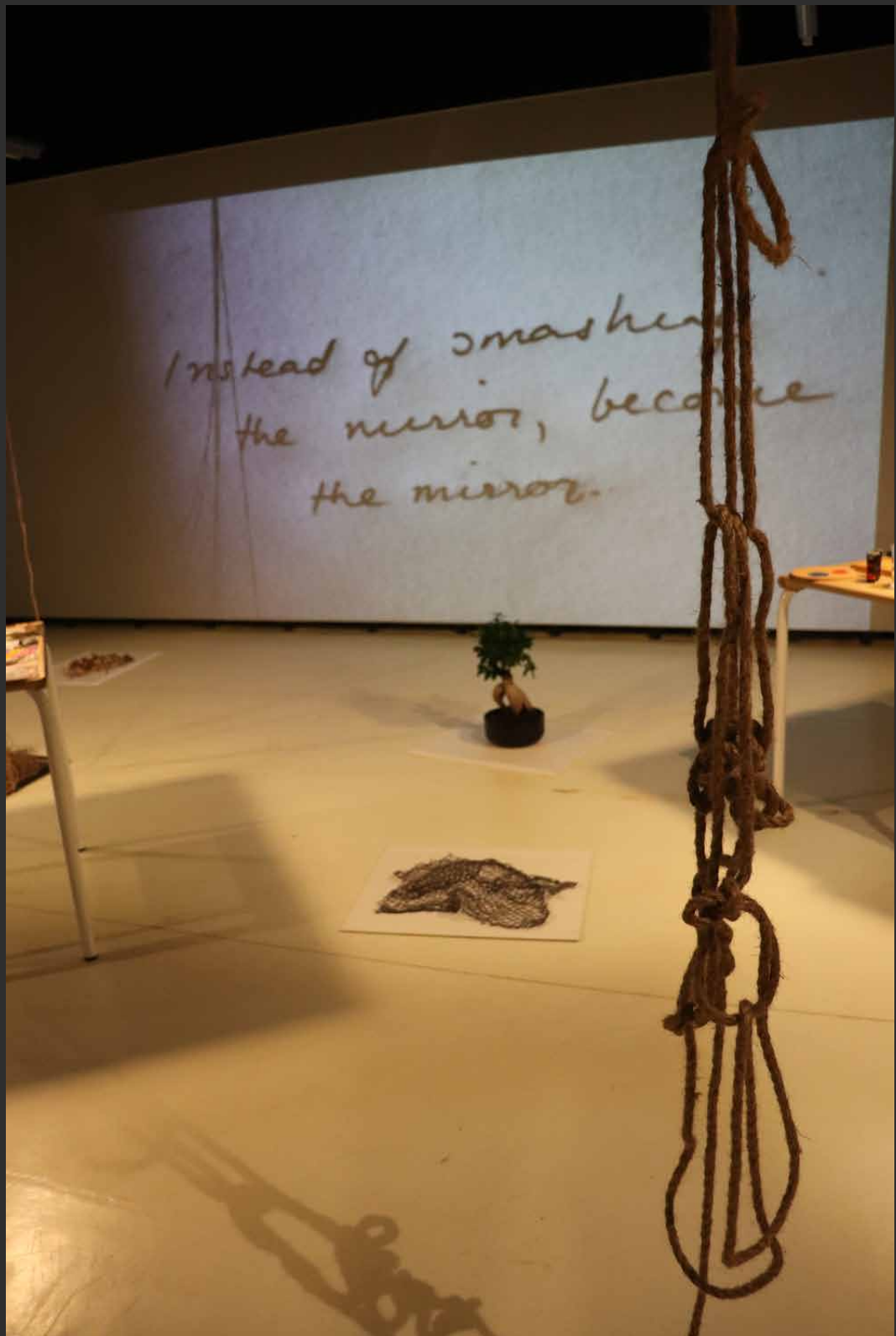
Workshop Site #1



Workshop Site #2



Workshop Site #3



Workshop Site #4

Reflections on Outcomes

Over the three days of the workshop, 16 participants attended in person and a further nine via the digital portal. As part of the workshop, participants were provided with an audio guide inviting them to locate an object, memory or image from their home that held some significance regarding their experience of COVID19 restrictions. Importantly, the audio guide asked participants to identify those artefacts that felt *alive* or curious *in that moment*, rather than to choose objects that may have been logically connected to their experience. In this way, phenomenological processes commenced prior to the workshop itself.

Artefacts brought in by participants ranged from the practical and rudimentary - shoes, hand sanitiser, a phone clip - through to the perishable and ephemeral - a memory, a wilting flower, an apple. Many participants noted that it was difficult to re-enter the space of quarantine and, understandably, had a strong resistance to it. Feelings of grief, fear, or a more general dissonance associated with the time and revisiting its quality were common. However, others came in with a sense of urgency and openness, a desire to know more about something that felt palpable but difficult to articulate, which had transpired in those months.

The procedures yielded a range of insights from the participants and it became quickly apparent that many had come to not only dialogue with their own experience of this time, but to impress more widely the sense they had of what was occurring on a broader societal level. The sessions quickly expanded to deep and discursive conversations about what had occurred in light of the pandemic, individually and collectively.

In this sense, the artistic processes acted as a means to soften or open the personal boundaries that suppressed the memories of the confinement period from the rest of routine life, allowing participants to access and discuss the ambiguity, uncertainty and unpredictability of the state of the world - socially and politically - in an environment that was mediated to suspend fixed judgments and predetermined ideas by focussing instead on curiosity and active listening. Working relationally with the visual, object-based and textual representations that were created, participants entered into devising multi-modal frameworks that allowed for reconciling personal experiences to broader existential complexities. This space also became a territory of open discussion regarding the possibilities of the post-COVID19 world.

Most participants agreed that the world was in a transitional state and the experience of pandemic restrictions magnified a sense of liminality between one world and the next. This was commonly reflected in visual and textual representations that regarded changing perspectives, or beckoned a shift to reprioritise relationships to ecology and kinship as a vital and necessary change in personal, public and political spheres. The idea of atopia was also reframed to refer to the state of internal and external placelessness; of being simultaneously dislocated from the outside world through confinement and deep solitude, whilst feeling a magnified sense of hope and solidarity with people in various geographic locations through digital connection. Such existential dualities were common features of representations made by participants; tensions between time moving endlessly and standing still; between actions suspended in anticipation and those that could never occur; between deep fear and deep love; between passive idleness and active silence. The space of the workshop became a laboratory of emergent sense-making, allowing participants to arrive at knowings embedded in their memories or experiences, which had otherwise been stifled or suppressed alongside the experience of confinement.

During the discussions, a number of participants came to regard the notion of utopia as one related to hope and survival; a means through which individuals in society became inspired and motivated to work for a better world. Utopia was often

reinterpreted into simple and achievable actions that could act as harbingers for broader change - not as a fixed place but the potentiality of progress within certain spheres that are necessarily transient. For example: the capacity for spaces of free discussion mediated to avoid conflict; the potential for small groups of individuals to gather and make agentic decisions; platforms and public spaces in which communities could meet and engage in rituals of grieving, celebration and imagination; the development of economic systems capable of prioritising human-ecological relationships.

In engaging in these discussions, the time and means for artistic investigation and the physical environment provided and facilitated by the workshop revealed itself as a primary site for such reframings - an idea that many participants also acknowledged. The value of such environments and their potential development into critical spaces of research, community practice, artistic investigation and interpersonal development was evident through the course of the various inquiries.

However, ways that such environments could be strengthened include:

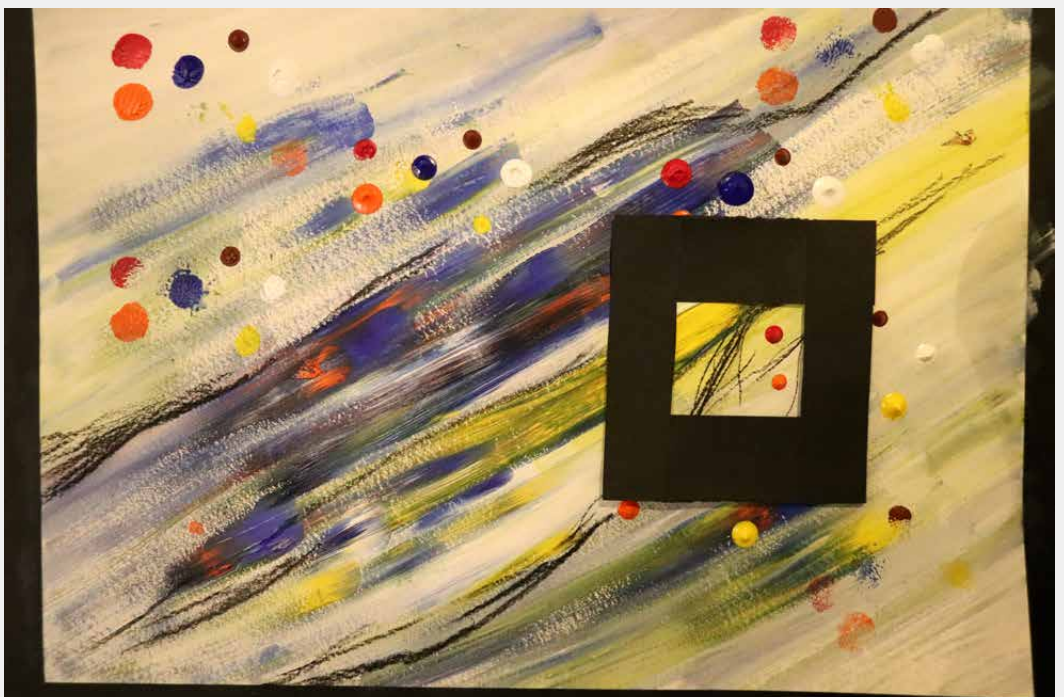
- Connection to multilingual, multi-institutional and community-based networks to enhance access for people from a variety of demographics and communities, including those outside of artistic and academic institutions;
- Means through which knowledges, insights and artefacts uncovered in the space can be connected to resonant areas of research across institutional, academic and community spheres;
- Opportunities for participants to engage in the methodological development of practices of investigation and imagining through feedback loops and discursive practice; and
- Ongoing availability of time and resources for experimentation with multidisciplinary approaches to alternate forms of investigation, both in terms of modalities and frameworks of analysis.

The digital archive of *Notes from Atopia* now exists as a collection of reflections and insights provoked from the occurrence of COVID19 in Lisbon, Portugal. Its existence acts as a modest synthesis of the encounters created by this workshop, representing important possibilities for the future of artistic, academic and community approaches to mediation, particularly in the aftermath of conflictual phenomena which are becoming increasingly commonplace in Europe and the rest of the world.



Process Image, Nina Fraser

Reduction, Sílvia Escórcio



From the archive

“Standing still in movement, moving in stillness. A permanence of process, of change of dreams and reality. A self without world and world without self. A space without place and a place without space. All utopias of each mind that’ve ever existed within one blob of safety, placelessness and timelessness.”

ANCA USURELU

“When you talk about utopia it makes me think of the definition of hope being that today can be different from yesterday and holding that for yourself and collectively can be a way to recognise the move toward utopia. The question: what is needed to make tomorrow different from today?”

ALISHA BUDKIE

“Atingir um ponto de reflexão interior é perceber as impossibilidades das ações não tomadas. Aceitar a rutura e os constrangimentos. O tempo tem que ser possível de acolher as opções pessoais e colectivas. A pandemia coloca-nos no espaço /campo da eminência; a impressão da impossibilidade ou de todas as possibilidades.”

MIGUEL MESQUITA

“Can we still feel our very beginning in our bones? Did we ever feel it – the massive force of the big bang in our calcium, the very same of the stars and the seashells? Is it imprinted in our essence, like a secret memory, hiding in our unconscious? Or are we simply alone, behind our doors, collecting pointless actions?”

ANDREIA CÉSAR

“A liberdade conquistada através do medo. Freedom through fear.”

SÍLVIA ESCÓRCIO

“Utopia is a radical form of construction.

We must develop the qualities to develop disruptive possibilities.

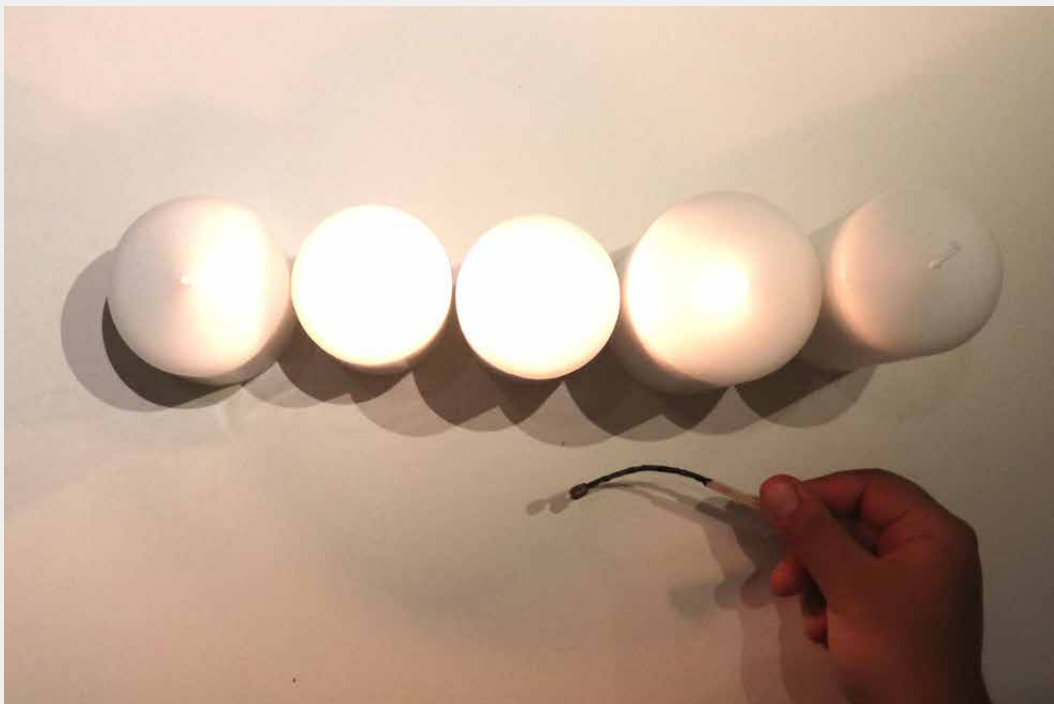
I don’t think, however, that we can achieve it. It is always a state of constant delusion and inadequacy.

Being able to spread these delusions, in order to be shared and built with others, is what favors approaches to these achievements.”

ANONYMOUS

“The pandemic experience feels like a spiritual initiation of the first order. I feel like this has permanently compromised human interaction. I don’t feel anything about the concept of utopia to be honest. I am very fatalistic we won’t survive too long, I think it is a commercial idea that has been sold to us. But we are now experiencing a limit to our most meaningful activity. Going forward we will have to play around it. We need a new semiotics of being disgustingly alive.”

FEDERICO CASTOLDI



Process Image, Anca Usurelu

Reflection & Dialogue, Jeanne Pasquet and Andreia César



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NOTES FROM ATOPIA

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