

Slow Pace Communication: An Approach for Community Building

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GriArCE - APECV Research Centre in Arts Education and Community

Biography

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PhD in art education. Visual Artist; teacher in secondary education; and researcher. Coordinates APECV Research Centre in Arts Education and Community and collaborates with the CIAC -Research Center in Arts and Communication /University of Algarve in Portugal. Was President of the International Society for Education Through Art – InSEA between 2014 -2019, and is President of the Portuguese Visual Communication teachers APECV since 2008. Her interests are focused on participatory action research; social engaged arts; transcultural educational projects; eco-citizenship and art education activism. Currently, she is the Principal Editor of INVISIBILIDADES: Ibero-American research journal on Education; culture and arts. She organized several E- books and articles about art education. Have done several exhibitions and conducts

activist art and education international projects with C3 collective of artist educators.

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is a Portuguese designer. She was integrated in several companies, co-founded one, collaborates with GriArCE, C3 and ID +. Dedicates herself to community and participatory projects such as "Circle" or "AMASS" with APECV; "EU no musEU"; "Jóias que nos unem"; "Talho o Mimo"; "Criação de uma Marca na ASSOL"; "Horta de Deméter"; "Abraçadores (de árvores)"; "Talho O Mimo" or "Pedais - ANEIS Viseu". Email: design@raquelbalsa.com

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Abstract

This visual essay portrays the first phase of a communication experience via postcards with participants from Portugal of the project "AMASS: Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture", under the social distance restrictions of the Covid19 pandemic situation, between January and June 2021. The experience is described and discussed in terms of the dynamics created, the methodologies of the research group and possibilities of the strategy to overcome the limitations of digital communication in disadvantaged communities and arts based projects.

Keywords

**Communication, participatory research, socially engaged arts,
arts based projects**



Figure 1: Postcard, Photograph by Raquel Balsa, 2021.

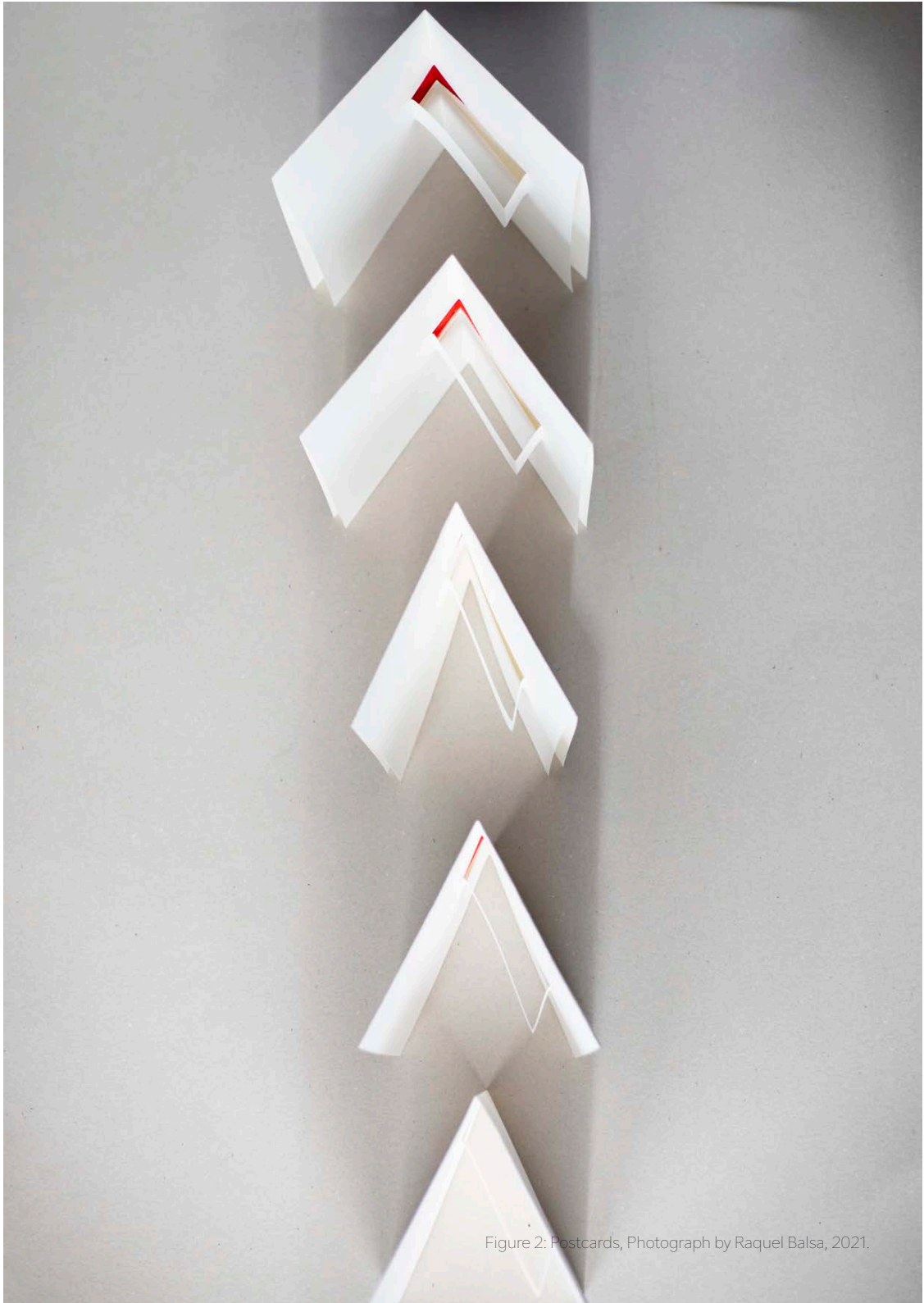


Figure 2: Postcards, Photograph by Raquel Balsa, 2021.



Figure 3: Postcard, Photograph by Teresa Eça, 2021.

Introduction

The need to overcome the difficulties of contact, due to the COVID 19 pandemic, with the groups participating in the AMASS project lead the GrIArCe research group to look for strategies to get in touch with all the participants: caregivers; artists; designers; researchers; people with multiple disabilities, aged between 18 and 60 years and a Roma community located in Viseu, where it is difficult to enter without prior consent, with children aged between 5 and 12 and adults.

The images that we can see throughout the essay are the result of the exchange carried out between the researchers and the participating groups.

GrIArCE - who we are?

We are members of an independent action research group, called GrIArCE, Research Group on Arts Community and Education, working under the umbrella of the Portuguese Association of Visual Expression and Communication APECV. We are engaged in transformative practices through art education activism and strategies based on pedagogy of hope (Freire, 1992). Normally we work with transdisciplinary teams including educators; teacher artists and artists; social workers and other volunteers interested in bringing art activities to communities from disadvantaged groups. We create the art activities in collaboration with the stakeholders in the communities, and participants from the groups trying to reply to their leisure and educational requests. For us this process is the core of the art education activism.

We don't bring elaborated plans or art programs to the communities, we offer our services to learn with the members of the group through artistic activities aiming mutual understanding, dialogue and civic participation.

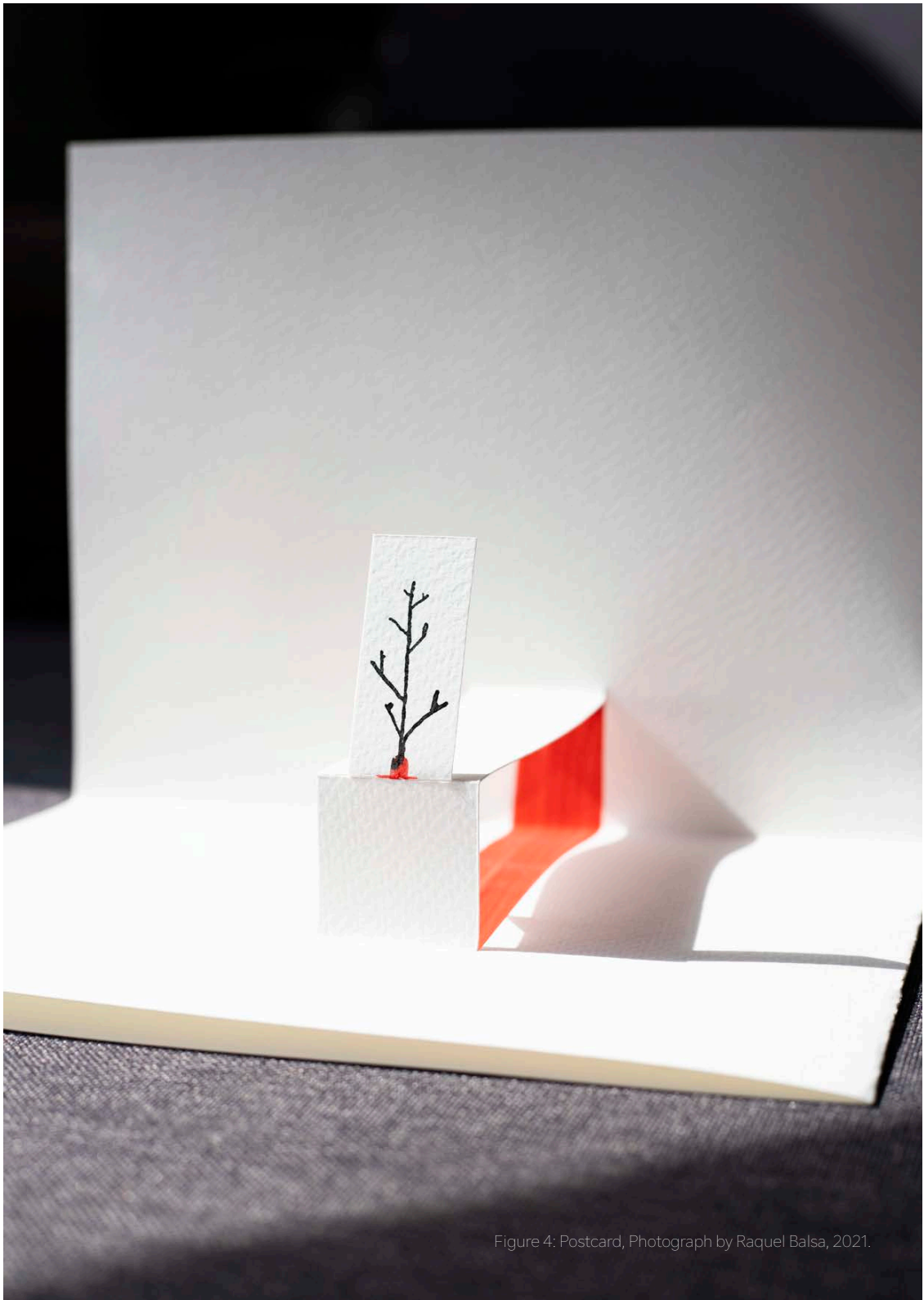


Figure 4: Postcard, Photograph by Raquel Balsa, 2021.

AMASS - what are the project goals?

Within the scope of the AMASS International Project "AMASS: Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture", funded by the European Union's research and innovation program Horizon 2020 (agreement no. 870621), APECV research group initiated conversations to make collaborative art education activities with five different groups of people including adults and children socially disadvantaged from three regions in Portugal during the Pandemic Covid-19 social distance restrictions. We will describe here the beginning of our work with three of these groups: volunteer adults from two day care centre for people with mental disabilities and another group of volunteer children and adolescents from a Roma community.

AMASS research project is coordinated by the University of Lapland (Finland) and has partners with Karlova University (Czech Republic), University of Malta, Hogskolan i Boras University (Sweden), Corvinus Egyetem University (Hungary), PACO Design (Italy) and Leeds University (England) and APECV. This project seeks to investigate the role of the arts in society's challenges, especially from places located on the margins and aims to promote and investigate transformative actions from the arts with minority or disadvantaged groups from marginalized places in Europe.

Our volunteers were involved in the project by a call launched by us and our collaborators working in social institutions where people living in marginalized situations use to spend leisure time in educational activities. To initiate the conversation processes with our groups, we had to think in alternative communication strategies, avoiding internet communication for two main reasons:

1. the first one- **Equity**- Some participants were able to use cellphones and have access to internet, some others didn't have access to that technology.
2. the second reason- **Trust**, this was related to our vision of communication, a shared relationship between people, where more than passing a message, we can transmit feelings, emotions and care.

In that period caring was crucial for all the groups involved, they were feeling even more marginalized with the lockdown of social institutions where they normally used to have leisure and educational activities, which were closed for visitors. For the APECV team, it was also crucial to start the conversations with the participants by giving and receiving precious things to establish the necessary trust between APECV team, and the other participants.

So we thought to propose to make postcards designed to be sent by post services overcoming barriers of isolation and dematerialization. We discussed the ideas with caregivers from the solidarity institutions, with whom we use to work. They said it could be a good idea, even for those who couldn't write, they would love to receive a postcard or a letter, and they could reply with the help of the caregivers.



Figure 5: Postcards in progress, Photograph by Raquel Balsa, 2021.

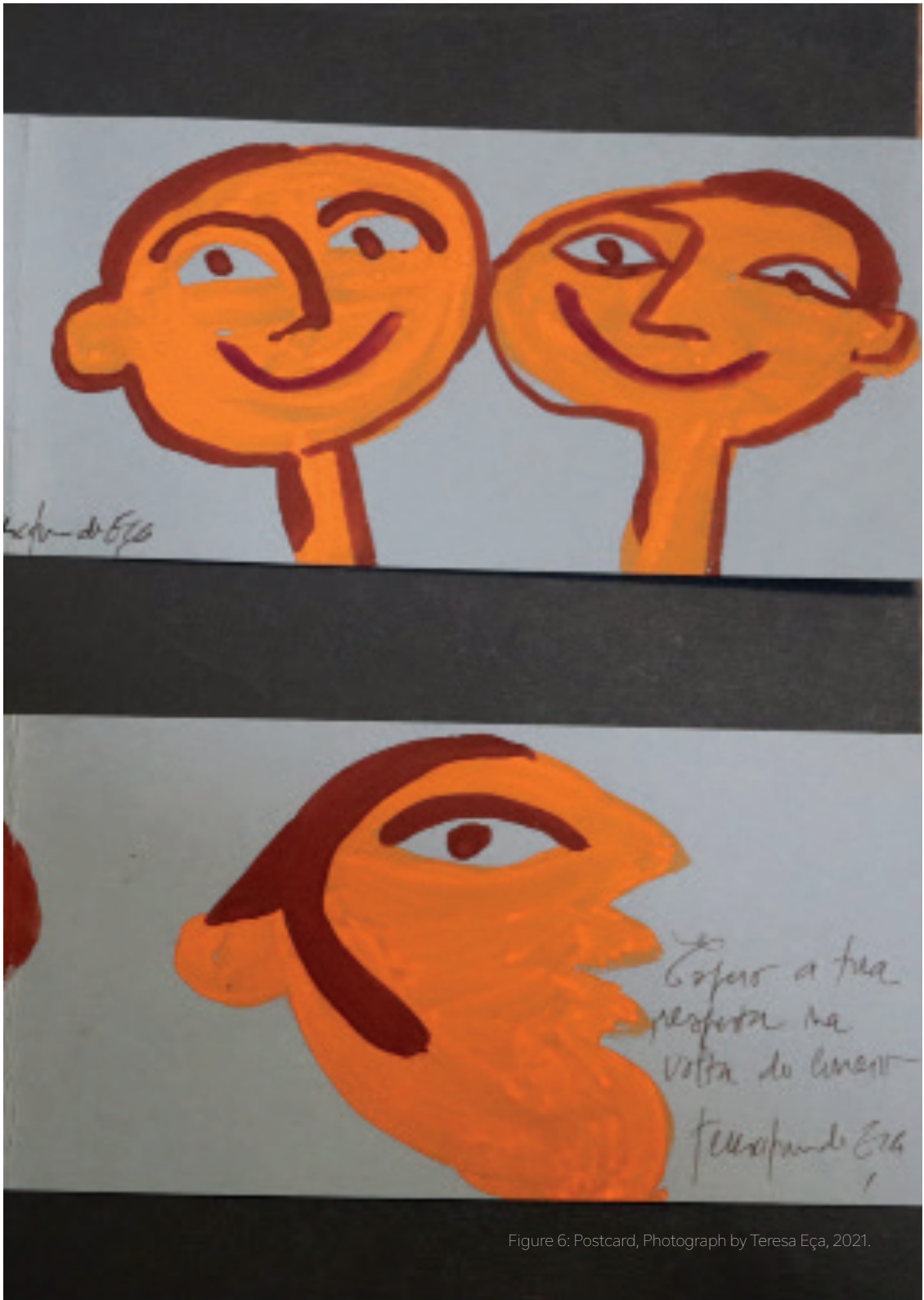


Figure 6: Postcard, Photograph by Teresa Eça, 2021.

Our methodology

We usually work on a basis of collaborative construction, with methodologies related to walking pedagogy and pedagogy of hope (Freire, 1992). Through arts based methods we relate places and look for the potential of everyday life' psycho geographical situations (Sansi, 2015; Coverly, 2010). Inspired in the situationists' ideas -to make people recover the control of their own lives, to produce knowledge through aesthetic relationships (Bourriaud, 2019), to create collaboration through artistic tools to question, to dialogue, "to live among" we usually combine different bodies of Action (outside and inside) and different media rich in metaphors such as images, texts and sounds –in practices of drift, deambulation and detour (Visconti, 2014: p.VIII). We borrowed these artistic practices from contemporary art, that were largely conceptualized by artists and collectives in the second half of the twenty century as for example Joseph Beuys, John Cage or the Fluxus Movement (Bishop, 2012).

But in the lockdown situation it was impossible to use such practices in our project. Nevertheless, we kept the idea of travelling and distance to connect to the "other", as a social transformation regaining alternative forms of communication. In our activism ethos it was not only a matter of social activity but also a symbolic one claiming for a slow pace of life and alternative ways of living together.

Our group is also inspired in the artistic action within an interdisciplinary character, linked to the possibilities of education through arts as a possibility for social change as a gift, for a common good, among all stakeholders, in a democratic participation, without power hierarchies and where the "I" learns from the "You" in action for an "Other" who can trigger other actions.

"The art-community correlation is a way of looking, it's a way of understanding, it's a way of problematizing. (...) The art-community correlation, however, goes far beyond a simple channel with a transmitter and receiver. We are in the domain of interaction, game, project, collective manifestation, commitment, enthusiasm, risk, delivery, mutual growth" (Xavier, in Cruz, 2016: Opening Note)

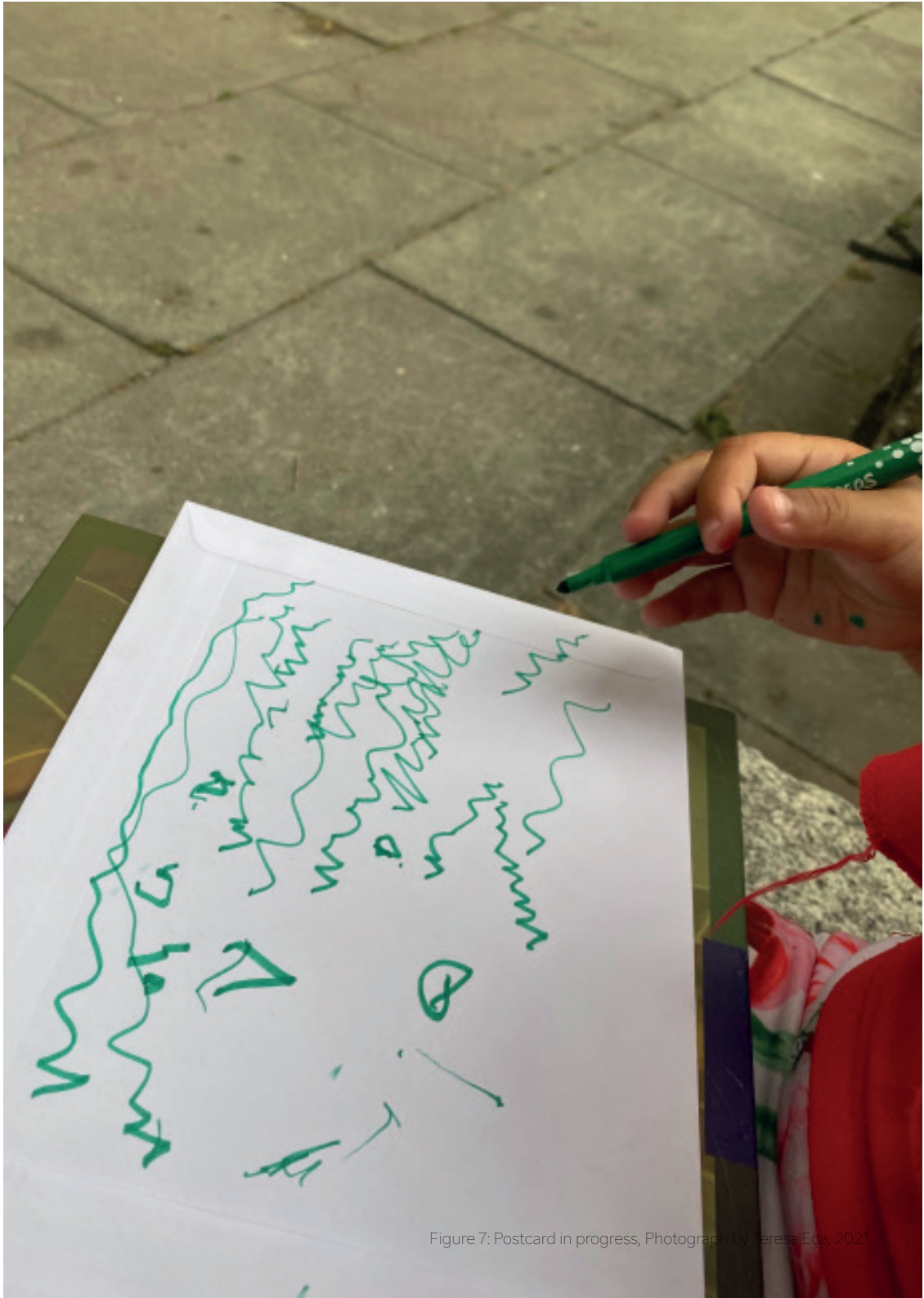
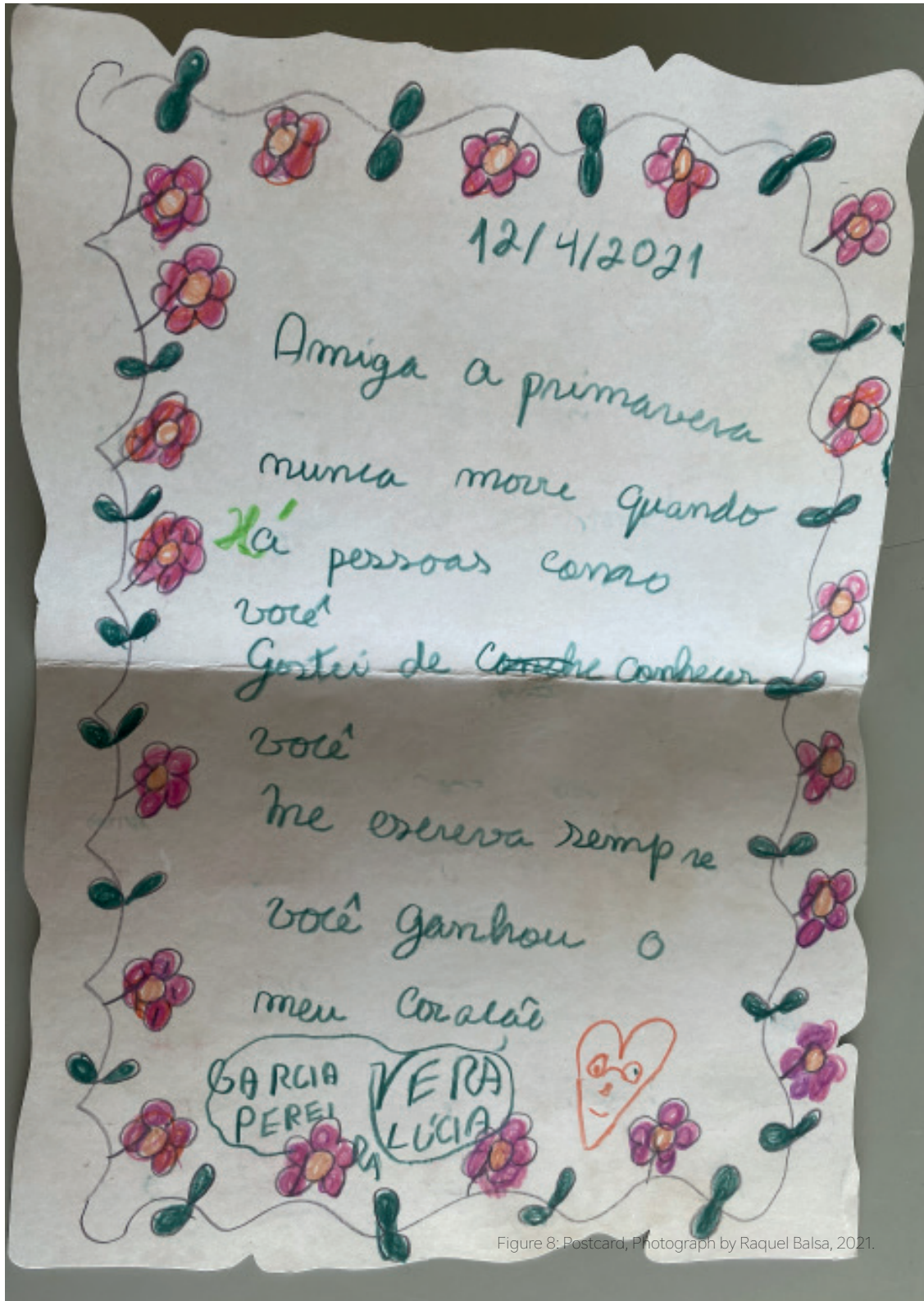


Figure 7: Postcard in progress, Photograph by Teresa Eça, 2021.



12/4/2021

Amiga a primavera

nunca move quando

há pessoas como

voce

Gostei de ~~conhe~~ conhecê-la

voce

me escreva sempre

voce ganhou o

meu coração

GARCIA
PEREIRA

VERA
LUCIA



Figure 8: Postcard, Photograph by Raquel Balsa, 2021.

Handwriting letters and postcards: slow pace is important to construct relationships

In our group (GriArCE) we discussed the issue of handwritten words. Returning to calligraphy, to tell that time and slow pace are important to construct relationships. For us, artists, designers, teachers-artists it was an artistic action. The time to pick the paper, to feel its texture, the time to pick the pen, feel its shape, the ink flowing, enjoy the lines before the words; contemplate the words after the lines (figures 1-8). The written text may not be the most important in the action, but the process of handwriting in itself, in that sense we see the handwriting as a tool for action in the real world shifting the focus from what art says to what art does.

“If we look at artworks as devices for action, we can take a different perspective; we are not just interested in the origin of the artwork, but also in its effects – in particular, how they constitute social relations and agents.” (Sansi, 2015, p.65)



Figure 9: Postcards, Photograph by Ângela Saldanha, 2021.

The Action: Analog contact in times of physical distance

Materiality assumes an affective importance of anchoring in periods of isolation - a time when sensory stimuli are less diverse and the virtualization of days contributes to fragmentation and disorientation - valuing this fantastic medium that is the body, through it we have the perception of things, we communicate and express what goes on in our mind.

In a time of absence of physical contact, we embraced embodied messages of past communication technologies. Instead of the instantaneous digital communication, we chose the difficulties of writing by hand, drawing, putting in an envelope, add a stamp, a physical address, and going to the post office, evoking the physical distances of the travelling, handing it over to the other for the trip that takes us to the other's home: so, he or she can hold us in hands and read and feel the texture and messages of each stroke of the pen. A message with a body! (figures 9-12)

Thus, we tried to explore ways to discover the person, the others, the spaces, the places and the relationships between them through the ritual of emotional writing of a letter or a postcard, made with love by drawing; collage or photography. The postcard designed to be exchanged with the group and with each person: telling to the other the particularities of our day, our preferred places and food; , positive memories, and a last sentence for our dreams of a possible encounter in person as soon as the situation would permit it.

This communication media would be equitable, without leaving anyone behind.



Figure 10: Postcard, Photograph by Raquel Balsa, 2021

Considerations and future

For us, all, this experience has been a transformative educational strategy: celebrating the time to feel the great small things that make our connections so beautiful and valuable!

Although these letters and postcards action experimented with participants from these groups of Portuguese participants in the AMASS project may seem a mail art action, we understand it not solely as mail art, but something else. Mail Art, in the world of visual art, was a procedure used by artists such as Ray Johnson and members of the Fluxus movement, it was very popular in the art galleries in the sixties and seventies of the twenty century, as a subversive way of exposing art works¹. As in the series of drawings of letters over envelopes by Portuguese artist Manuel Alvess², which has been inspirational for our work in this action. Currently there are still calls for mail art exhibitions³. In our experiment, our goal was far away from exposing or trading artworks, we just wanted to use a communication technology that could encapsulate the concept of sharing and caring, giving our precious time to the others to ask them if they wanted to collaborate with us in artistic actions.

¹ As described in <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/mail-art-renaissance-1850670>

² See here Envoi postal by Manuel Alvess, 1969: https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/envoi-postal-alvess-manuel/MwGLNWg3IH9Q_g

³ For exemple: <https://mailart.pt>

Conclusions

Inviting participants to integrate artistic actions, is not always a straightforward process; in our experience, of working with disadvantaged groups, people will enroll, if they want to collaborate, and if they feel they are loved or if they feel that during that action there is a possibility to learn something new; to spend a playful time and to make new friends. This encounter with others, is also one of the main objectives of AMASS project to challenge the margins and the visibility of the voices of people in the margins.

The materiality of epistolary means, despite the absence of the body, conjures the other, intimately. Evoked in the calligraphy, strokes and in the ritual gestures of addressing and sending the postcard. We can see and feel the other when we reveal the message, we physically open it and it unfolds for us in a present moment. The message happens, to me, at that moment. What is handmade imbues the artifact of us. What is done for the other is fulfilled with him. This correspondence places us at the center of the ritual, in the space between one body and another —material and evoked— between one space and another, physical and performative.

The experiment is not closed and will continue now with participants of AMASS project from the other countries, we will explore it also as a connecting artistic communication tool between partners, ensuring the ethical issues and respecting intercultural dialogues. May be it will be useful also for the variety of different types of supporting documentation, return and dissemination of the AMASS international research project.

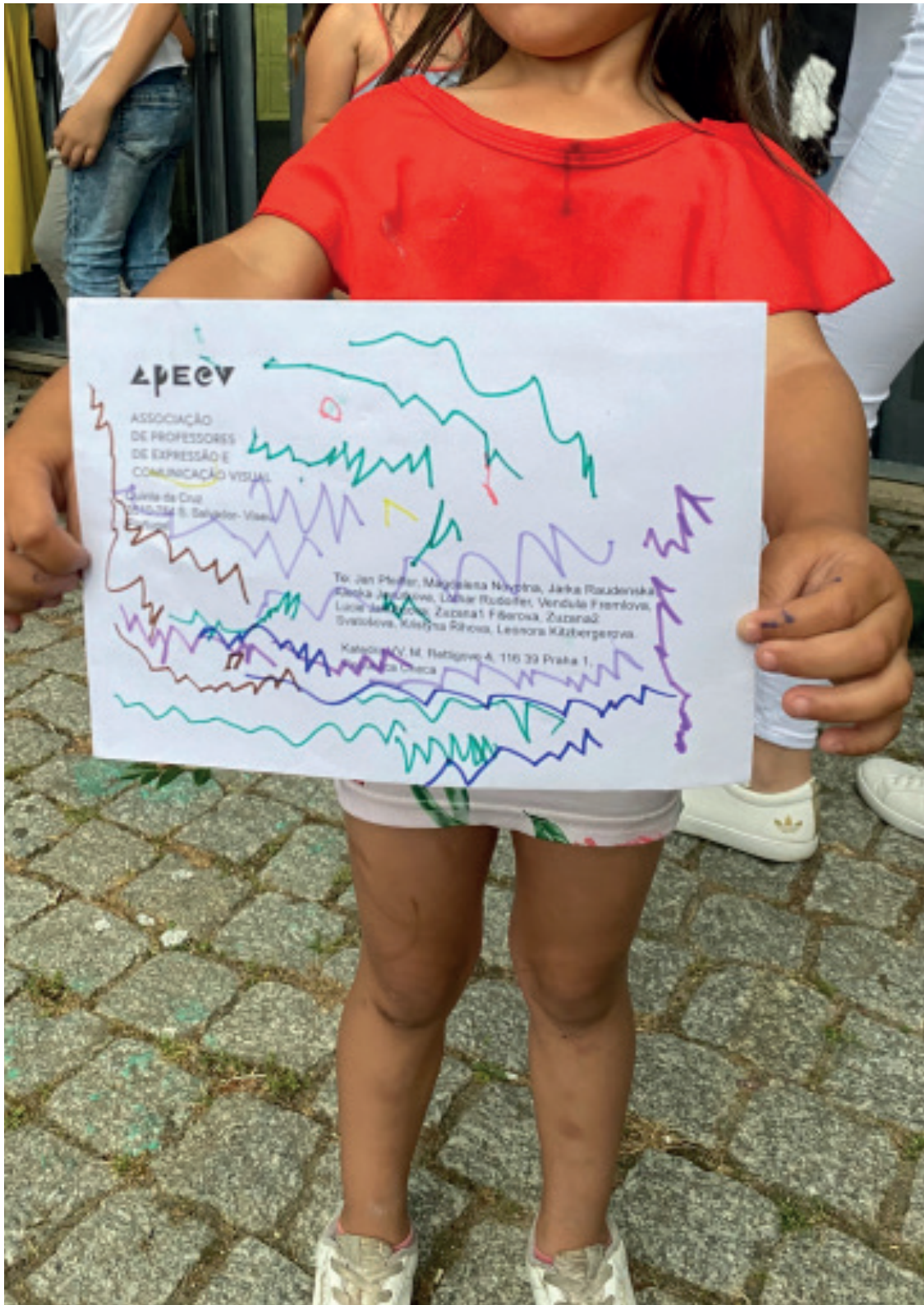
In this first stage, we can conclude that the action in Portugal enabled

- communication between participants from APECV and the participants from the groups.
- use of tools, techniques, methodologies and strategies of contemporary art to achieve knowledge about the participants life experiences and expectations.

Acknowledgements

AMASS project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 870621.

Figure 11: Postcard with the author; Photograph by Teresa Eça, 2021.



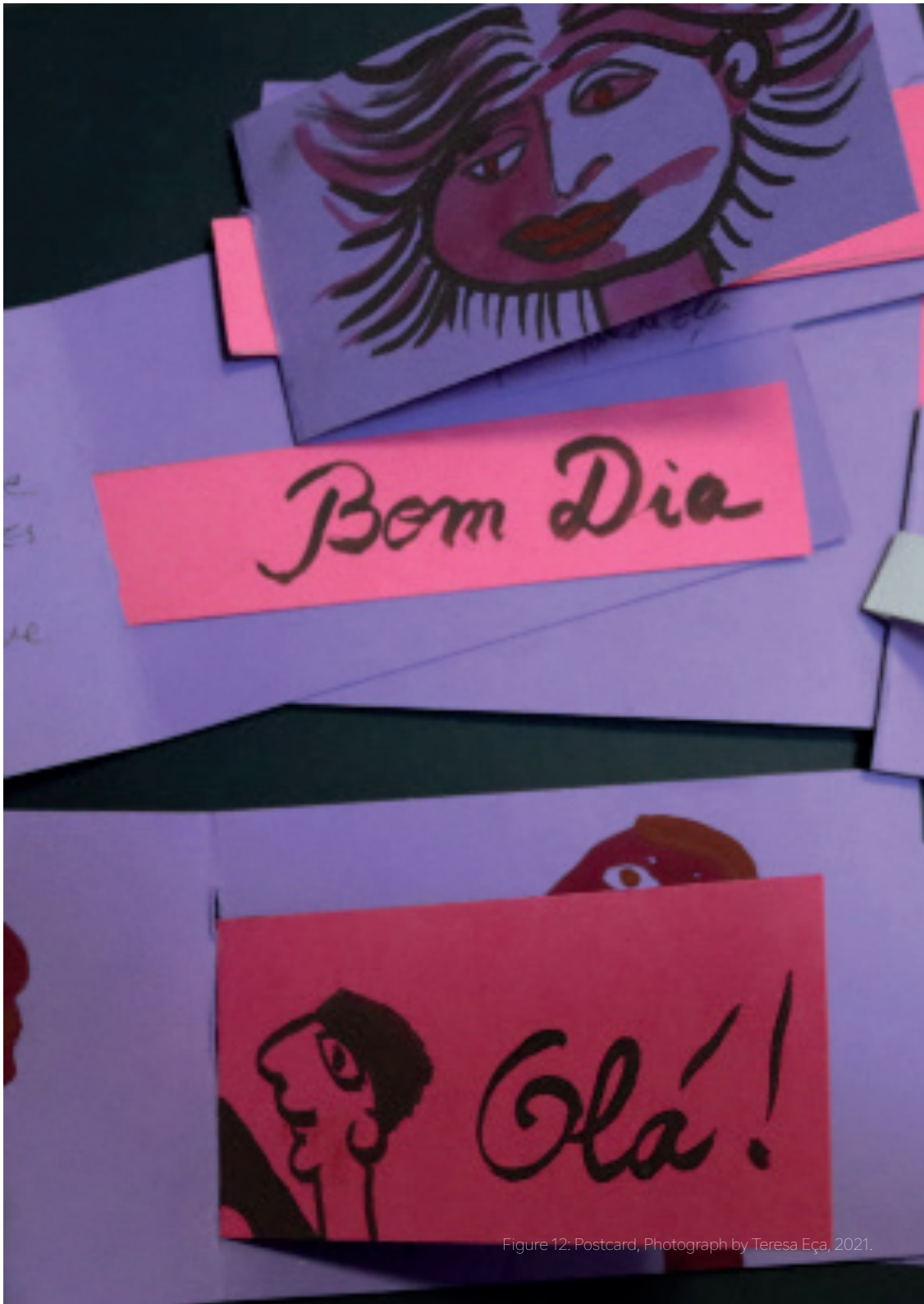


Figure 12: Postcard, Photograph by Teresa Eça, 2021.

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