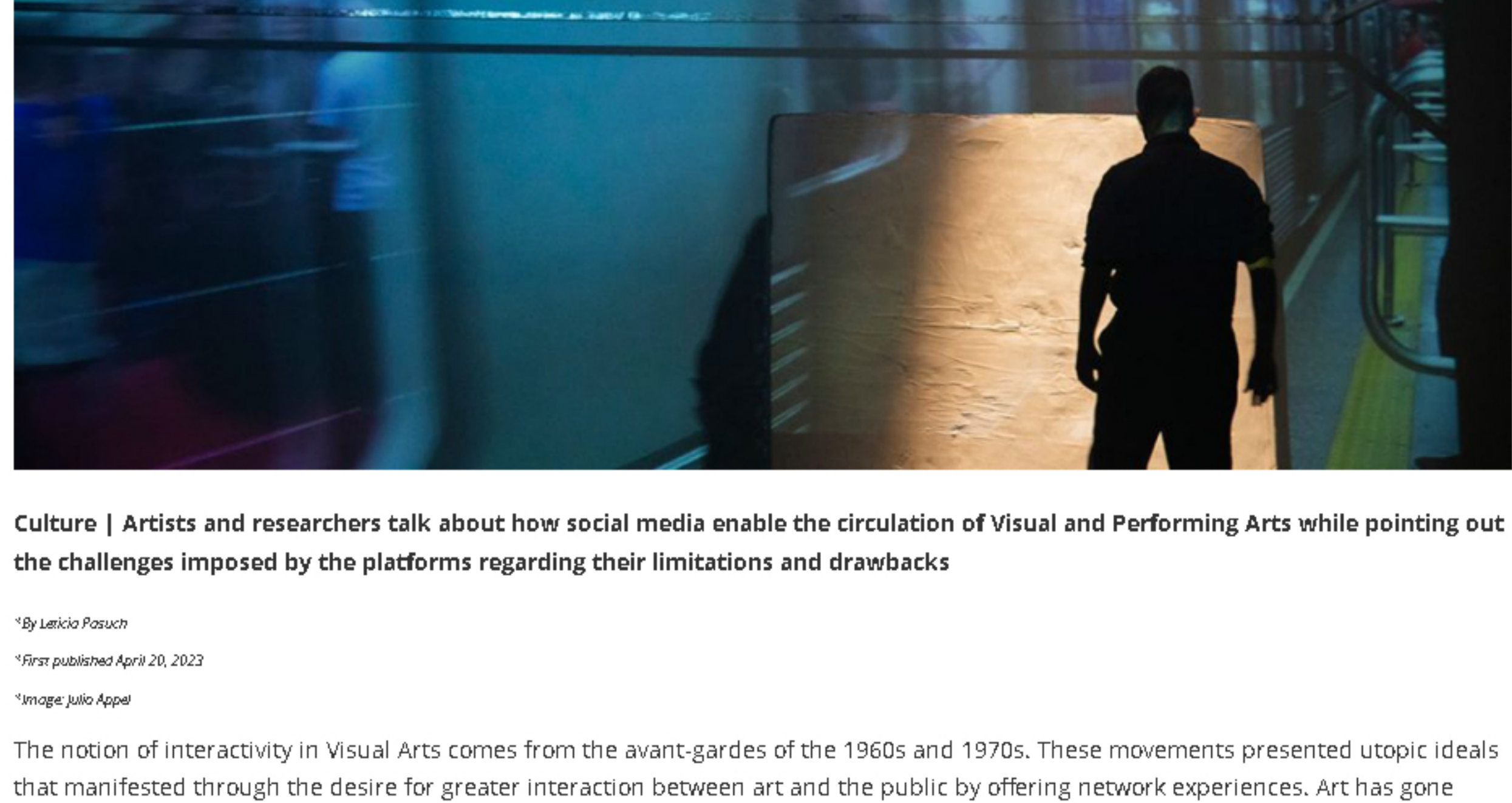


# Social Media strengthen work Dynamics in the Arts

Letícia Pascho / 19 de novembro de 2023 / In English



**Culture | Artists and researchers talk about how social media enable the circulation of Visual and Performing Arts while pointing out the challenges imposed by the platforms regarding their limitations and drawbacks**

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\*\*\*Image: João Aguiar

The notion of interactivity in Visual Arts comes from the avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s. These movements presented utopic ideals that manifested through the desire for greater interaction between art and the public by offering network experiences. Art has gone hand in hand with technological advances, and today social media plays a significant role in influencing the connection processes of artistic production. According to researchers, however, it is impossible to disassociate the impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on the artistic sphere. The new reality called for alternative interventions for artists to remain active.

"A large part of the art production concerns assimilating and incorporating digital tools in the poetics of the works," analyses Bruna Fetter, faculty and researcher of "Art Systemics" at the Institute of Arts (IARFCS). "I see a great impact, even in the artistic circuit, regarding both work and production of art that such close contact with the digital environment provides," Fetter says. "It enables access to information and the expansion of the artists' network. In addition, the digital reality multiplies exponentially the possibilities for reaching the public".

Maria Amélia Bulhões, art critic and full professor (*professora titular*) at the Department of Visual Arts of UFRGS, investigates contemporary art relationships in the digital environment, and has recently released the book *Desafios: Arte e internet no Brasil* [Challenges: Art and Internet in Brazil] (2022). In her recent research concerning the use of social media in the artistic field, Bulhões has discovered that the artists who hadn't been making use of social media to promote their work began to do so and have been able to connect with people not even related to their respective fields. "There was a kind of democratization of access to many contents, which was very important," Bulhões says. During her research, she also mapped a scenario in which many galleries and museums achieved more presence on social media, increasing the audience that follows artistic production.

## A new language for Performing Arts

Artist, researcher, and faculty at the Department of Visual Arts of UFRGS, Lillian Maus highlights that the most affected artistic area during the pandemic was the Theater, due to its need for audience presence and the fact that it is not as replicable as other artistic fields. In this sense, theater groups began to adapt their work to virtual environments, developing a creative process oriented to digital networks. **GRUPOJOGO**, from Porto Alegre, was one of these collectives that ventured into this format of artistic production during the pandemic. "We felt the need to digitalize all of our productions and make them accessible to people," explains Alexandre Dill, the group's director.

The group was already investigating digitality as a creative process within the scene through cameras, live transmissions, and other audiovisual technologies. When faced with the impossibility of meeting the public face to face on stage, they created parallel projects, such as 1-minute-videos to post on Instagram. "We didn't consider it possible to just take the recording of the presentations and broadcast them. It wasn't appropriate for social media, which has a different, faster performance," says Dill. "It is difficult to keep up with a performance of 10-30min in social media".

Face-to-face presentations that had recently completed their shows were recreated on social media, as is the case with *Deus é um Dj* [God is Dj] - ironically, a narrative that criticizes self-exposure on the internet. On the other hand, *Prédios espelhados matam passarinhos* [Mirrored buildings kill birds] was exhibited in-person and online simultaneously. "We realized that this new approach began to work, we got more followers, more reach and we started to explore this potential of the internet," explains Dill.

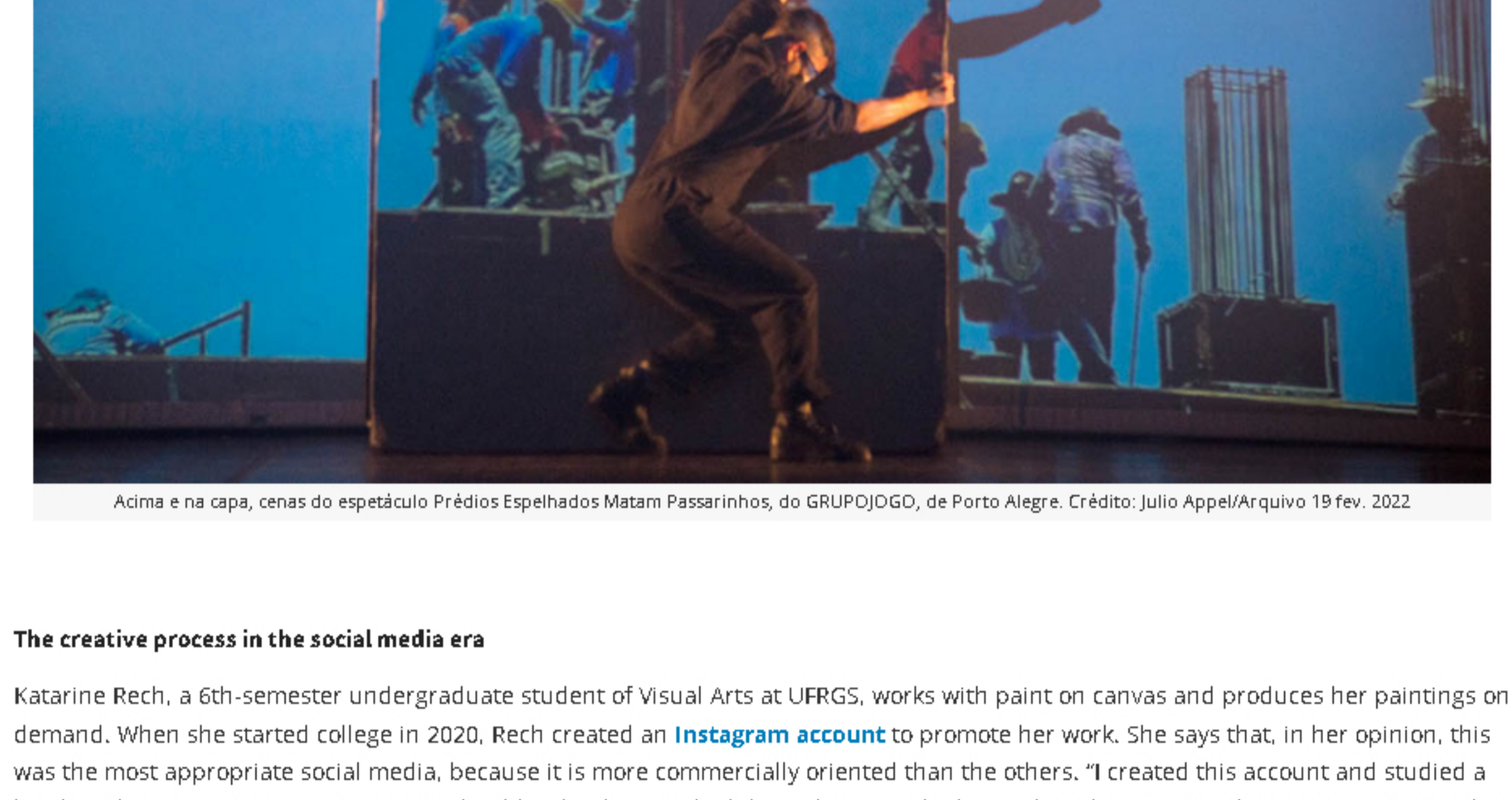
Determined to investigate and understand how virtual platforms work, a specialist joined the group, analyzed their Instagram and Facebook posts' paid traffic, and also did media management through distribution platforms. Today, GRUPOJOGO is a benchmark when it concerns the work on theater investigation of social media. In Dill's words, "we broke out the bubble for those who were only used to watching in-person presentations and we ended up reaching a new portion of audience who did not attend exhibitions or even knew the group".

Dill says that, during the pandemic, social media platforms did not make theater groups' jobs easy. Artists faced problems such as a lack of interest on the part of the networks, difficulties of access to quality equipment for productions, and the struggle to understand how social media works.

On the opposite way, some groups decided to create a *hiatus* from social media during the pandemic. That was the case of **Cia Rústica do Teatro**. The group's director, playwright Patrícia Fagundes, believes that performance and living art take place in the encounter - in person - between people who share the same space-time. "There is a link that we form through being together, eye to eye, being close to the public. That's why we didn't rediscover ourselves, didn't reinvent ourselves online," she explains. The group even performed a virtual version of the show *Desmedida Noite* (Unrestrained Night), which premiered in 2018. But, on social media, their reach was less successful.

Now, since the decrease in covid-19 cases and with the artistic activities in full swing, the **company's Instagram** profile was reactivated. There, their followers can find posts about their future performances, such as *Cabare da mulher braba* [The angry woman's cabaret], on display in March, and the premiere of *Cabare do amor rasgado* [Cabaret of the torn love] in April.

Fagundes experienced a totally different reality regarding the dissemination of artistic activities in a pre-social media environment. When she just started doing theater, at the end of the 1980s, she used to carry printed material to communications vehicles. "Today, the press has changed. There is less space in the newspaper for culture productions," Fagundes says. "It is really hard, nowadays, to ignore social media when working with Performing Arts. It is through them that we reach our audience".



Adina e na capa, cenas do espetáculo Prédios Espelhados Matam Passarinhos, do GRUPOJOGO, de Porto Alegre. Crédito: Julio Appel/Arquivo 19 Fev. 2022

## The creative process in the social media era

Katarine Rech, a 6th-semester undergraduate student of Visual Arts at UFRGS, works with paint on canvas and produces her paintings on demand. When she started college in 2020, Rech created an **instagram account** to promote her work. She says that, in her opinion, this was the most appropriate social media, because it is more commercially oriented than the others. "I created this account and studied a lot about how to grow on Instagram," Rech adds. She then applied the techniques she learned, such as constantly posting content on her profile. After 1 year since she created the account, her first video went viral, with 300 thousand hits. Her followers also gradually increased - today, she has over 230 thousand. "Now, my schedule is always filled for at least 4 months," Rech comments about the orders, which followed her online growth.

Most of her videos are a register of the artistic process rather than just showing the finished piece. In one of her **reels**, Rech produced her version of Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* in a Venetian landscape. Currently, the post has almost 3 million likes and 16 million views.

Reaching a positive balance while promoting art on social media involves not only mastering the platform tools but also a lot of attempts. "I tried using the trends tool, but it didn't work for me," reports Rech. "I realized that, when I was narrating a story - explaining the painting process and indicating the challenges I faced - people would engage more," she adds. Rech also uses audios that are trending on the platform, and prioritizes narrating the videos herself, instead of using the "Google voice". "It takes things to a more personal level," she explains.

The reach and interactions on her videos and posts vary but achieve over 100 thousand views. Lately, Rech has been posting three videos a week, focusing on what most resonates with her audience. She prefers videos to photos because videos reach more users. Recently, she also created **TikTok** and **YouTube** accounts. It is important to be active and post frequently, but Rech warns that "there is no point in posting poor quality videos every day because you will have less engagement. It's better to focus your time on making good videos".



Katarine Rech's work, who uses social media to promote her production

Pablo Aguiar is an illustrator and comics artist and has a degree in Design and Digital Communication. Aguiar started posting comics of the interviews he had conducted with residents of the city of Alvorada on his **Instagram account**. With each photo posted, more followers would come. Between Instagram, **Twitter**, and **Facebook**, he receives more feedback on the first, in which he has almost 20 thousand followers. His most accessed post depicts an interview he did with the graffiti artist Toniolo, from Porto Alegre, which reached 13 thousand likes e 36 thousand hits. According to him, the average number of interactions on his Instagram account is 2 thousand likes, and the reach is 10 thousand users.

Aguiar, however, points out that, due to the platform's algorithm ranking for prioritizing reels, his work does not reach all those who follow his profile. "I always post images. I feel that it ends up limiting my engagement because it is one of the main tools of my work," he says. On Instagram, his comics are designed especially for the platform: there are 10 images - the maximum number of images for the "carousel" format - cropped in the exact squared size it demands. "While it does help you, it also limits you. There's no way around it - either you accept it or think of alternatives to reach the public," he adds.

Yet, in general, Aguiar sees these platforms as democratic spaces for the work of comics artists such as himself, which was previously restricted to publishing houses. "Social media helped me to become better known and to receive job opportunities. I was able to reach more people in places outside my city, and very quickly," he explains.



Artwork from the series Alvorada em Quadrinhos [Alvorada in comics], by Pablo Aguiar

In addition to democratizing art, social media platforms also strengthen counter-hegemonic narratives. This is what the artist Miti Mendonça aims for through her trajectory with visual and textile art, which is registered on her **Instagram account**. Mendonça created her profile six years ago to share references of black feminist women and foster black poetics about ancestry and family memory. Over the years the account has become a space where she disseminates her productions in painting and embroidery, almost like a "virtual journal". Mendonça also uses her account as a source of income since she also receives job offers from other brands.

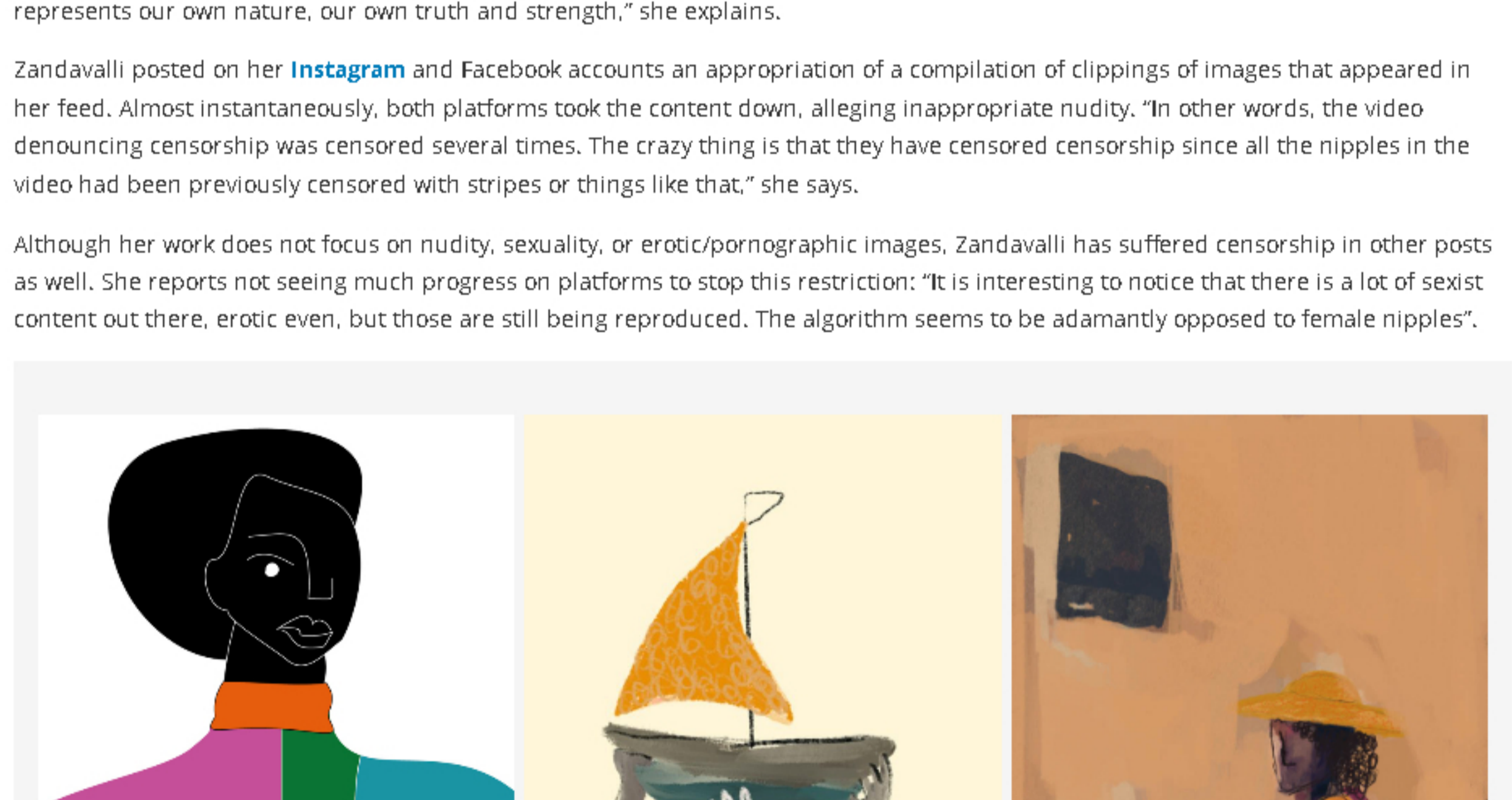
Mendonça has noticed that, recently, Instagram has not been delivering much of her content, even if it's strategically thought out. But this does not bother her. "Do I want to go viral? Is that my goal? Am I here for trending dances? This is not part of what I believe or want to create for others on social media. I pursue finding new creative paths," she says.

The artist also points out how social media algorithms still favor white artists and criticizes that "the people who design these algorithms are white people". Mendonça advises other artists to find healthy ways to use social media at their own pace: do not compare yourself to others, discover your own language to communicate with your audience, and have well-defined goals. "You can't get carried away by the numbers, because the algorithm wants us to boost our posts to reach more people by paying the platform," she adds.

Lillian Maus recalls that artists do not escape the censorship of social media platforms and that many posts are restricted when considered controversial. In 2018, the artist, researcher, and art curator Rochele Zandavalli joined the worldwide movement **#FREETHENIPPLE**, which aims to unlink objectification, obscenity, and pornography from the representation of the female body by criticizing the censorship imposed on social media, whose tools detect and block images containing female nipples, for example. "The body is constantly violated in this flow, and the nipple is necessarily associated with pornography. However, most of the time it represents our own nature, our own truth and strength," she explains.

Zandavalli posted on her **Instagram** and Facebook accounts an appropriation of a compilation of clippings of images that appeared in her feed. Almost instantaneously, both platforms took the content down, alleging inappropriate nudity. "In other words, the video denouncing censorship was censored several times. The crazy thing is that they have censored censorship since all the nipples in the video had been previously censored with stripes or things like that," she says.

Although her work does not focus on nudity, sexuality, or erotic/pornographic images, Zandavalli has suffered censorship in other posts as well. She reports not seeing much progress on platforms to stop this restriction: "It is interesting to notice that there is a lot of sexist content out there, erotic even, but those are still being reproduced. The algorithm seems to be adamantly opposed to female nipples".



Images from the series Abayomi and part of the work concerning ancestry, both published on the account @mao.negra, by the artist Miti Mendonça

## The artist's "second job"

Being adaptive is crucial in this ever-changing world. However, Lillian Maus states that producing content for social media can be "overwhelming" for the artist, and that it is necessary to have discipline when using these platforms for work-related purposes. "No matter how consolidated your career may be or where you are professionally, social media can be of little help, especially when you already know the people on the circuit and the institutions," she says. Maus adds that artists should ask themselves if their work on social media is being converted into profit or just taking up personal time.

Patrícia Fagundes, director of the Cia Rústica, evaluates her own experience: "Sometimes, I find it amusing that producing video series involves a creative aspect that is related to the work of the scene, a dimension that involves another creative process. But other times it can be heavy because you need to keep marketing, marketing, marketing". For her, this excessive workload becomes another capitalist "trap" in the sense it becomes a second job - and one that never ends. Another problem, in her opinion, is pressing competition to see who has more followers.

Zandavalli agrees: "It seems to me that the problem resides in the growing search for audience reach and work promoting, an achievement which is not organic in social media, but boosted via sponsorships and money". For the artist, platforms such as Instagram are gradually becoming a business, with algorithms programmed to distribute certain types of information. "What bothers me is that it is paid information, a network that works in a very restricted, capitalist way. And the power they have in their hands to trivialize the impact and understanding of images is obviously striking," Zandavalli points out.

"Sometimes I think to myself: I don't want to be an *Instagrammer*! I am a teacher and an artist. This [being an *Instagrammer*] is yet another job," Fagundes vents her frustration. At the same time, she recognizes that dealing with social media is already part of the artist's reality. "It has its advantages, and you can't say I don't log in. Some say that. Well, they are absent from a large part of the reality of the world," she says. Alexandre Dill, from his experience with GRUPOJOGO, feels hostage to networking: "it seems that if I'm not logged in them, I don't exist".

"I believe that these platforms can help us disseminate our work for a larger and more distant audience. But you must be wise and not measure yourself only by that. I know artists with incredible productions who barely receive likes or other forms of engagement, while others with very obvious and flippant works have thousands of followers."

— Rochele Zandavalli

Maria Amélia Bulhões stresses that due to restriction on benefits from social media. She, therefore, recommends taking a critical stance towards them, as they are not that democratic that any group circulates in terms of language, internet lines, and algorithms. Maus, for her part, emphasizes that the art circuit and its venues have well established virtues, which are different from those of Instagram, whose audience is broader and may have little understanding of an artists' work. Thus, she thinks that developing an artistic work on social media does not fit every artists' profile.

Zandavalli agrees with Maus: "Very often my works are tactile, small, fragile. In my case, where the work is very analog and delicate, direct experience cannot be replaced by virtual experience. I ache when people tell me they saw my exhibition through Instagram". Bruna Fetter, in turn, concludes: "Obviously the experience is not the same, attention is shared, direct contact with the work is lost, but interesting bridges are opened from these possibilities. I don't think we should put it in terms of face-to-face versus digital, but rather as an addition to the performance and the reach of the other".

Translated into English by **Isabel Chiele Cony Marques dos Santos**, undergraduate student enrolled in the course "Supervised Translation Training I (English)" of the Undergraduate Program in Language and Literature, under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Elizamari R. Becker (P.H.D.) - IUA/UFRGS.

## Read in Portuguese:

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