CARLA MALAFAIA

Mural art by Artez

The visual dimension of participation among climate activists in Portugal:
an ethnography with student strikers and civil disobedience groups

September 24, 2020
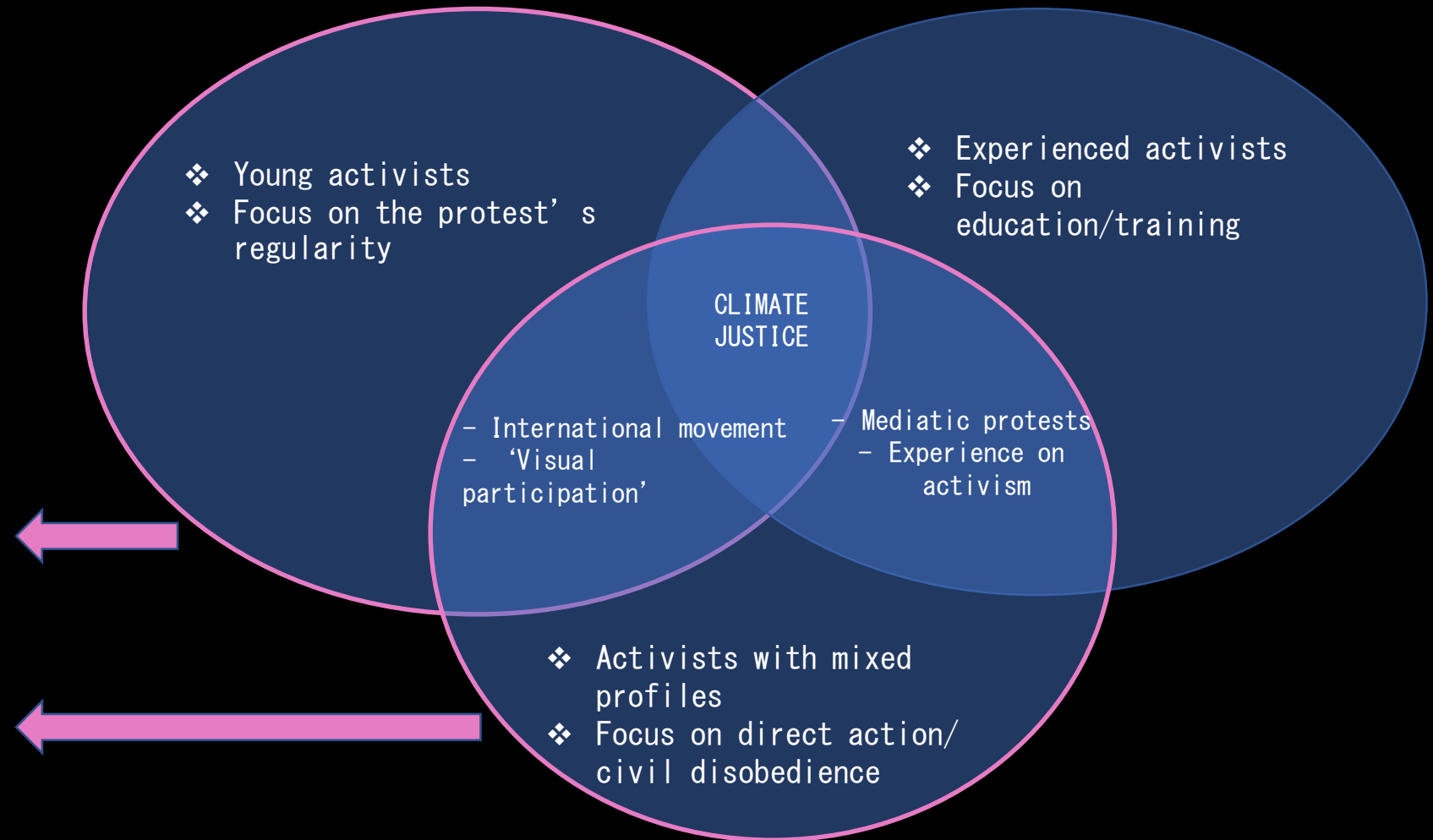
✓ Portuguese Ethnographic Study

(October 2019 –)

   ✓ Climate Activism

- Online and offline observation with a group of approx. 25 participants
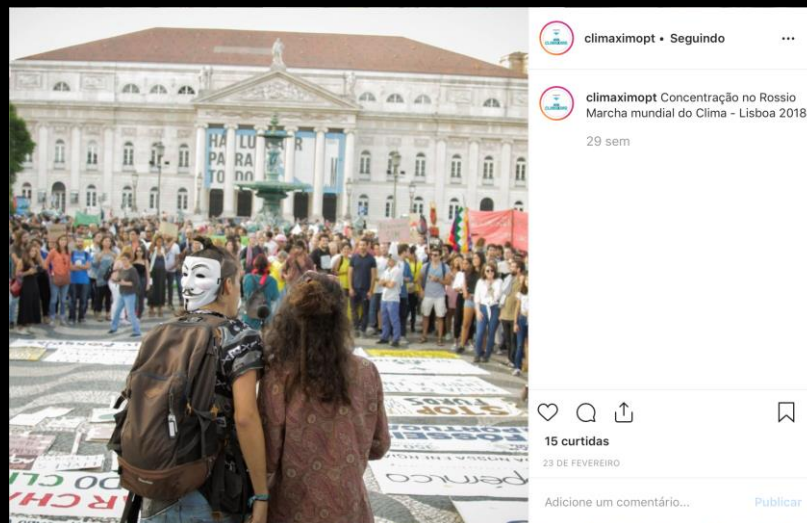- 10 interviews (so far)

THE STARTING POINT

➤ 3 activist groups(different profiles, goals and relationships)

✓ Age range between 18 and 35

✓ Mostly middle and upper class youngsters

✓ Mostly students (some with part-time jobs)
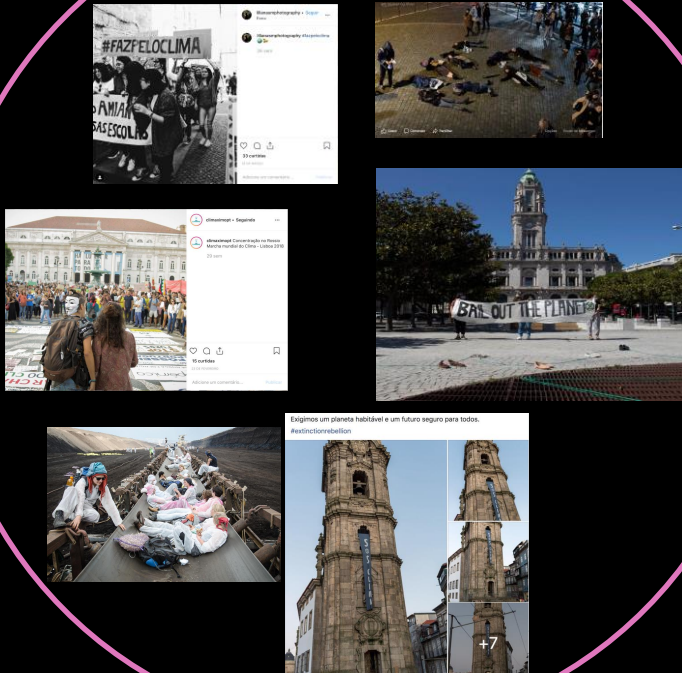
✓ Predominance of conservative family backgrounds

❖ Young activists
❖ Focus on the protest's regularity

❖ Experienced activists
❖ Focus on education/training

CLIMATE JUSTICE

– International movement
– 'Visual participation'

– Mediatic protests
– Experience on activism

❖ Activists with mixed profiles
❖ Focus on direct action/ civil disobedience

'What is going on here?'

'Ah, I see!'

But also,

- What collective negotiations lie behind public images?
- Which meanings are ascribed to them and produced by them?
- What purposes do they serve?
- How are they used and transformed?
- To which extent do their impacts transpire through different spheres?
- ...

Images as part of the repertoires of engagement

...AND, to show resistance
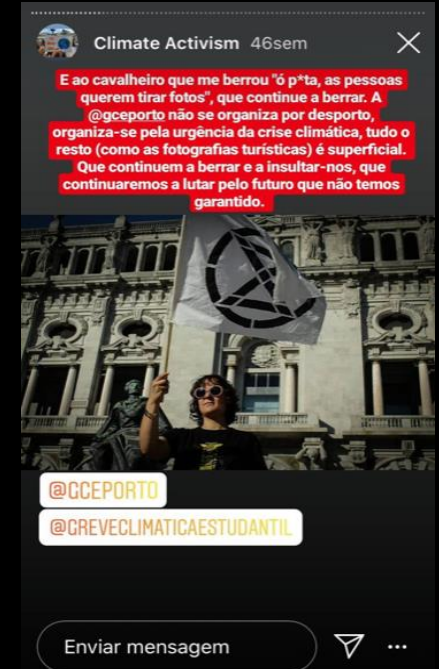## [the protests' backstage]

Images to depict forms of protest
[the protests' forefront]

'DISCOBEDIENCE' ACTION

"- **If we want to a take a picture we have to go and ignore the queue! C'mon! The city is ours**, it is not the tourists'!" – Aida said and everyone followed her, holding the posters and climbing the big letters "
(Fieldnote, November 2019)

caption:
"And to the gentleman who screamed at me 'you bitch, people want to take pictures': keep screaming. The climate strike does not organise for fun, it organizes for **urgency of the climate crisis** and everything else (touristic pictures) is superficial. Let them **insult** us, we'll keep **fighting for the future we do not have granted**"

Images to publicize events

[caption: "DIE OR LIVE
Join us!"]

gceporto 1h

Amanhã frente à torre do Santander do edifício fonte da moura às 13 horas! Protestamos o financiamento às indústrias dos combustíveis fosseis por parte do Santander!

Santander

Lucro Mata

[caption: "Tomorrow… We protest against the financing of fossil fuel industries by Santander"]

#WorldEconomicFailure
#FossilBanksNoThanks

…AND to convey associated narrative(s) (performances)

"(…) This image was printed in large size and glued on a cardboard background for a more **prominent effect** ("Lucro mata" means "**Profit kills**").

The **performative protest** involved the **representation of a confrontation between climate activists (in white t-shirts) and bank executives (in blazers and palms painted in red)**. These **contrasting visuals**, together with the expression of contrasting statements and postures (**bodily dynamic 'activists' VS static and robotic 'bankers')**."
(Fieldnote, February 2020)

Images to debate and to (re)politicize issues

For arguments, I need **pictures that can serve me as proof.** I use **images that are stripped of political content, that are objectives, but can serve a political point**, you know?"
(Paulo, interview)

[caption:
"**This is reality**"]

"I showed this image to my father, and he thought it was a scene from Mad Max. I said 'no, this is in Australia', and he was like ... **'this it's really happening**' "
(Luísa, interview)
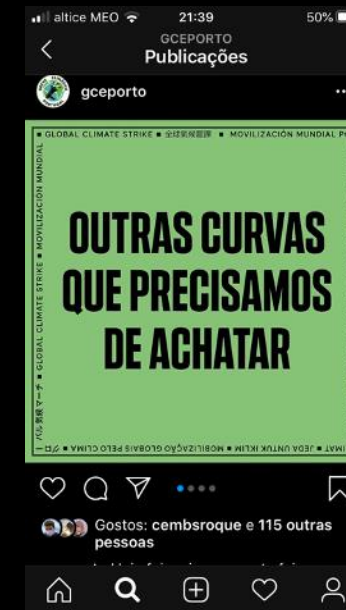
[caption:
"**Other curves that we need to flatten**";
"**Total of CO2 emissions per year**"]

Images to make international links

#letrussiastrikeforclimate
#freeArshak

and take political stands (within the movement)

"Remember when this image form the XR Scotland was discussed, in a meeting? – Raquel asks me – **For me this is a good synthesis that the climate struggle within the capitalist system is always limited. What happens, it happens for the privilege of a group of individuals**. (...) This is why I believe so much on **the climate movement potential of power transition** (...) This is a highly contentious topic within the climate movement in Portugal**. But in my opinion, to **be anti-capitalist** and framing the climate struggle accordingly is the only coherent thing to do. This is why** I have this image as my wallpaper picture on Facebook, because I want other activists to see**. "
(Fieldnote, January 2020)

Images to mobilize and engage

···also, to affirm immediacy and a certain way of being an activist

- "Activism is a lot of work, isn't it?" - I commented, as I see how exhausted he is.
- "Yes, **but it's also supposed to be hard-working, because we are fighting a system that is very well structured**. (...)." – Gabriel answered.
- "But it's also important that you don't harm your studies" – I said to Gabriel, as I felt his stress about the University.
- "**But if I'm not here, I'm doing myself more harm, in long term**" – He answered me. (Fieldnote, October 2019)
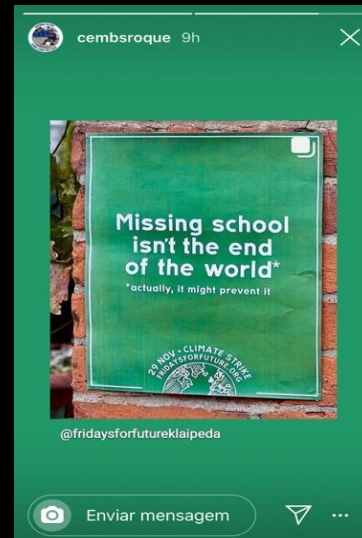
Images of informal, routine, ways

translation:
Sustainable city. Except in festive days.
Arrival at São Bento [Railway Station] at 01:30, 1st of January 2020

... of claim-making

translation:
CLIMATE CRIMINALS
CLIMATE CRIMES:
- Montijo Airport
- Lithium mining
- Sado dredging

"...the visual part (of our action) reaches everywhere by social media; it is through image that *change will be built*" (Francisca)

"[the image] is inevitably one of our biggest weapons " (Paulo)

"*For activism stuff I use Insta* " (Gabriel)

"*Instagram is a battlefield*" (Luísa)

Visual practices as political practices

Visual practices as being (unavoidably) about:

- Deciding 'which side are we on' (Walzer, 2002)

- Striving for making visible (and not visible) certain causes, groups, claims,…

- Shaping a collective consciousness

"When I am at a demonstration, photographing (…) there is this feeling of empowerment (…) I'm photographing my narrative of that moment. I choose a certain framing limit and I define where the limit starts and where it ends.
On the demo of April 25 I posted three images: slaves, crowd and fireworks. It was like a short story, so everything there has to be thought out; I want my audience to see the images the way I want them to see.
If I'm on the other side of the barricade or if I want to emphasize a certain kind of discourse, I'll share the picture of the stupid kid with the poster saying 'a good cop is a dead cop'.
I'm using image to build a certain way of thinking"
(Ernesto, interview)

The skilful visual storytelling

Facing social media standardization and normalization entails:

- "everyday negotiations with the individualist logic of social media" (Barassi, 2015)

- investing in highly curated publications

- discussing and framing (collectively) what gets public

- using hashtags for 'visual circulability' (Hansen 2011)

I *know that when I post [something political] people think* 'look there she is'*. So, I try to do it in a way that is more appealing... (...) For instance, when I make three Stories, they have to have a similar visual language (...)* the visual part is the storytelling part in the social media*, for me this is* the formula for being successful in getting messages visible *(...)*
My brand is yellow, for example.. (...) My Stories are all in yellow*. Or when I make gifs they are* gifs of people as a rule*. (...) I started doing this to make it a brand of my own and for at least* this message I am sure it will be more engaging"* (Marta, interview)

Visual contents are used and crafted by activists, taking different shapes and formats and requiring a skilful management of visuality

➢ Visual practices as ways of creating and contesting meanings, of mobilizing audiences, of politicising issues, of exposing inequalities.

➢ The strategic negotiations with social media affordances towards a politicised communication.

Challenging the 'image of power with the power of imagery' (Doerr & Teune, 2012)

THANK YOU!

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