

A liberdade é a coisa mais cara da vida (freedom is the most expensive thing in life)

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This is an invited Commentary

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Abstract: A short story that came to life through the observation of an artwork by Sara & André, this text is a personal viewpoint on being a mother, an academic and an independent curator, during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Resumo: Uma pequena história que nasceu através da observação de um trabalho da dupla de artistas Sara&André, este texto é um ponto de vista pessoal sobre ser, simultaneamente, mãe, investigadora, e curadora independente durante a pandemia global COVID-19.

Keywords: Mothering; Academia; Gender; Art; Family; COVID-19 Pandemic

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Disclaimer

For the International Network on Youth Integration (INYI)'s special issue, under the title "Mothering in the academia during a pandemic: Structural gender inequalities and family wellbeing", I thought I would contribute from my personal viewpoint - as a mother - rather than from my professional perspective - as an academic and an independent curator. There are many reasons for this decision but, ironically, the main one is the series of tasks that I have in my hands as a mother of three boys aged between 6 months and 4 years old. As such, I should tell you from the start that this is neither an academic essay nor an art critique. It is a short story that came to life through the observation of an artwork by Sara & André (Fig 1).

Bending without breaking

"A liberdade é a coisa mais cara da vida" (freedom is the most expensive thing in life) – or so Sara & André, an artists' duo from Portugal, say. This poster has been sitting in my living room since the second confinement, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Every time I look at Sara & André's poster, I think of my freedom. I live in a three-bedroom apartment in the center of Lisbon with my partner and my three children, one of them born in the second confinement, on February 9th 2021. It's not too small apartment but, at times, during the confinement, it felt like a prison cell. Looking at this print always made me feel I had an imaginary window to look through, an extra space.

Both my partner and I work in academia – I'm an academic and an independent art curator while he works in the management of large-scale European scientific projects. I can work at the University, at home, in a museum or wherever I feel like, while he works in an office. My working hours are flexible while his are fixed, from 9am to 5pm. Of course, there is no such thing as fixed. During the pandemic, all of a sudden, all that was fixed had to be adjusted and flexibility and ability to adapt quickly became great skills; during the confinement and up until now, we both work from home in so-called flexible working hours. Before the pandemic I understood my – apparent – freedom of choosing to work wherever I feel appropriate and of working in whatever schedule I need to finish my tasks, as something that would naturally come with a bag filled with extra tasks that cannot be accommodated when you have a 9am to 5pm job. These extra tasks include most of the prosaic needs of a family that can't be all left to do over the weekends or that can't be done after regular working hours, from buying groceries to preparing meals for the different needs of the family members (a 2 years-old child has different needs from a 6-month baby), to cleaning, to making sure that the kids have enough clean clothes to wear the next day, and so many other small things. When children get sick, they need to stay at home and it's usually my job, as someone with flexible working hours and nomad office, to stay at home with them while working in my roles as an



Figure 1. Sara & André (Lisbon, 1980; Lisbon, 1979). A liberdade é a coisa mais cara da vida (2018-21). Print.

academic and an independent curator. During the lockdowns, which, unlike a cold or a viral disease common in childhood, lasted for several months, our children had to stay at home every day while we worked from home. Luckily, they are too young for homeschooling. Not so luckily, they are not independent enough to play on their own for more than 10 minutes, to use the toilet (or change diapers), or to eat without assistance. Throughout the pandemic, the workload kept on increasing: zoom meetings allowed the possibility to meet more people in less time because with virtual meetings we don't have to count on the time needed to move from one place to another; assignments for students increased because it was assumed they were at home and could use the time to work in the same way that, presumably, we, as their supervisors and professors, had the time to evaluate their work and meet with them over zoom; fundraising applications for research became a crucial task under the current crisis and the predictable financial crisis to come.

During the lockdowns, both my partner and I had flexible working hours and worked from home. However, and regardless of both of us wanting to share tasks in an equal manner, some tasks tend to fall on the shoulders of mothers mainly because that's the way it has systematically and systemically been. Possibly, because both women and men assume that women are great at multitasking - in my last participation in a PhD defense, before my maternity leave, one of the jury members told me about a colleague who used to breastfeed in meetings, as something to be praised. Maybe because the mother's parental leave is (in Portugal) 120 days while the parental leave for the father is 25 days of which 10 are "optional" (meaning, for your employer, - you better don't use them). It's urgent to ask how is it possible to do a proper job between two demanding full-time ones? How to manage the daily never-ending but always urgent tasks with not-so-flexible working deadlines and needs? How do we stay flexible and calm, bending without breaking?

Freedom is (the most expensive) dearest thing in life

Sara & André are a Portuguese artist duo and couple with a child. Most Portuguese families have one to two children. Having three children, as my partner and I do,

is not very usual and is often seen as a privilege. I would say that we are lucky and free enough to make that choice. Sara & André's poster is inspired by – as all of their body of work – another artist's work, the “a alegria é a coisa mais séria da vida” (joy is the most serious thing in life), by Ernesto de Sousa. Conceived in 1971, under a dictatorship, which would fall three years later, this poster was a poignant reminder that humor is a powerful political tool. Four decades later, in a now democratic country that is assisting a worrying rise of racism and populism, Sara & André's work speaks about the freedom of not having a 9am to 5pm job and being an artist. With this freedom comes a price: living under precariousness, as if being free, they had to give (a possible) financial stability in exchange. However, it's – as the word “cara” in Portuguese implies (“cara” means expensive but also dear) – much more than money. The freedom of being artists, like Sara & André, or academics, like myself, relates more to the manifold of compromises and exercises that need to be done following the freedom of making whatever choice is dear to you, such as picking a job you love (or, in the case of parents, at least two jobs) than the money one has or doesn't have.

Being a white middle-class female academic with three children is a privilege that, to some extent, relates to my freedom: I was lucky enough to be free to choose my job and to be a mother of three, but I didn't choose my gender neither my race or having been born in a low-middle class family. And what I didn't choose frames my freedom as much as what I chose.

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