The Visual Storytelling as a Way to Create Knowledge and Empathy Between Generations in Academic Institutions

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Abstract
How can academic institutions value and promote the knowledge of retired professors and researchers in the field of design and art? The answer to this question induces a plurality of possibilities that share a common conclusion - Institutions could and should do more. This paper focuses on a pedagogical experience that explored the approach of a new generation of students to a group of retired professors and researchers from the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto (Portugal), through the construction of graphic narrative artefacts. We started working from an archive made by interviews, visual and sound documents that collect the pedagogical, scientific, artistic and biographical knowledge and legacy of each professor or researcher. It was from these materials that each student worked, first bringing together elements that enabled the construction of the universe and particularities of each interviewee and, finally, producing narratives that offer a critical vision of a retired generation. We used the visual storytelling, for its ability to combine different signs in the representation of the real and symbolic and for its creative and communicational potential. The final publications proved that the knowledge of the retired generation is dynamic and useful for the new generations. Its legacy is fundamental for the understanding of the future of academic institutions and must be worked, visible and celebrated.

Keywords: Visual Storytelling, Graphic Narratives, Wisdom Transfer, Institutional Memory, Individual and Collective Memory

Introduction

The result of the pedagogical practice that we will describe happened within the project *Wisdom Transfer / Transfer of Wisdom: Towards the scientific inscription of individual legacies in contexts of retirement from art and design higher education and research* (WT), under development at ID + – Research Institute for Design, Media and Culture, at the University of Porto (Portugal). This activity is one of several actions that materialized the aims of the WT project. The results obtained illustrate a practical example of the use of this legacy by a new generation of students of design and illustration within an academic institution of public higher education - The Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto (FBAUP).

The material produced identifies, rethinks and values a material and immaterial heritage of some of the retired teaching members and researchers at FBAUP, which the WT project intended to archive, optimize and streamline, once

"[…] stems from the evidence that there is insufficient inscription and use of individual knowledge and experience of ageing and retired art and design professors and researchers. It hypothesizes that the legitimization of practice-led wisdom in art and design research will greatly contribute to the scope and depth of the discipline, as well as inform its role as a multi-disciplinary interface" (Alvelos & Barreto, 2019).

A scientific, artistic and human knowledge constituted by different types of dispersed material such as pedagogical, scientific, artistic and graphic practices or stories of the interviewed, about the institution, city, country, among others, which, when brought together in an archive, enabled new exploratory approaches to the investigation of this legacy – which is intended to be dynamic.

It is from this living archive of knowledge that different possibilities have been built for the use of this heritage and in particular where the focus of this article is inscribed, which contextualizes and reflects on a set of graphic narratives that propose and materialize the dialogue between a new generation of students with this group of retired FBAUP professors and researchers. To this end, we use visual storytelling as a catalyst for the transfer of transgenerational knowledge and the enhancement of transversal skills between the different interlocutors.

From one image to a sequential graphic narrative

Visual and graphic storytelling was chosen as a medium both for the historical tradition of the illustrated narratives in the context of FBAUP, visible already in some of the legacy of the elements of this retired generation and continued in several curricular plans of the study cycles at FBAUP, as well as for the capacity that the graphic narratives offer in the translation of the diversity of material and immaterial information from the WT archive. We are interested in thinking that the characteristics of multimodality, narrative polygraphism and polyphony (Groensteen, 2013:410) that this new generation of students use in the production of images and texts are ideal to approach the plurality of contexts and materials in the archive, through the creation of new visual repertoires that are based on affinity, knowledge sharing, identity and heritage.

A territory of dialogue and intergenerational empathy that graphic narratives can offer, when used in the interpretation and representation of the real and symbolic world that exist on the archive interviews, which, being fed by the intersection between partial and particular memories of the universe of each of the interviewees and students, allows a creative act where translation processes, plural and multidirectional reinterpretation are favoured.

What we intend to obtain is not only a quote from the real world that is represented by the image and sound of the video interview but representations that oscillate between the image that each student/illustrator builds of that world and what he adds from his own. In this way, the final result is always a sum between the Self (author) and the Other (interviewee), which results in a fictionalized and informed narrative that is built by the interconnection of these two poles. In turn, the final message or its multiple meanings are dependent on the decoding process of those who observe and interpret the final graphic narrative. A process that gives rise to a new meaning for these images, since it happens through the interpretation and reconstruction of different worlds that are implicit in a narrative composed mostly by images. As Thierry Groensteen tells us, "The image was defined as utterable, describable, interpretable and, ultimately, appreciable—all adjectives that put the accent on the active participation of the reader in the construction of meaning and in the assessment of the work" (Groensteen, 2013:20).

A type of participation that can happen in a single image, but when combined in a book format that explores the sequencing of images in combination with text, – the basic structure of comics or graphic narratives – becomes fundamental for its decoding. It is, in reality, the juxtaposition, sequencing and the gaps generated between images (text and image) and the turn over the pages that creates the narrative and defines the medium nature of graphic narratives. A multimodality space where different narrative and semiotic mechanisms are related and interconnected, that brings together "different semantic systems (figural, textual, symbolic) into a crowded field where meaning is both collaborative and competitive – between images, between frames, and between reader and writer" (Gardner, 2012: xi).

A rich ecosystem in connections where different signs interact and create gaps between themselves, whose decoding is largely dependent on the reader's skills. "As a result, there are several kinds of gaps […]: texts and their elisions, images and their ellipses, and the divergence between the codes, all concurring in demanding active participation from the reader" (Ahmed & Crucifix, 2018:21).

It is important to point out other features of the graphic narratives that led to its choice as a form of communication and as a repository of the cultural memory of an institution, that is built by the confluence of individual and collective memories. The material produced, as mentioned, arises from a previous collection with clear objectives that went through to archive the legacy of a retired generation of FBAUP and its availability to the community inside and outside the institution. It is this cultural memory that the WT archive emanates that guided this pedagogical practice, that revisits, applies and reconstructs it in other contexts. In this case, we resort to the graphic narrative again for its singularities, namely the use of text, image and support - a space where reading the text and images happen at the same time and on the same surface.

Reading is an act that incorporates several socio-cultural and contextual dimensions that are conditioned to the cognitive, affective and visual skills of the reader. It is these dimensions that promoted the reading of the text as an essential competence of human evolution, a characteristic that educational systems have valued in detriment of the image. This promotion of the verbal dimension ends up influencing the way we deal with images which, although they are visual signs with narrative potential for description and communication, when we orient ourselves towards their understanding, this is mostly accomplished through verbalization. Although the text is a monosemic language - in which there is an articulation of specific and unambiguous meanings, according to a pattern of reading signs that are learned - it is not reduced to a simplified or mechanical translation process. But the text is also an aesthetic experience, they are also images, with a body, expression and a dimension on the page, they have a history, a distant and nuclear family that sometimes becomes visible. It is important to understand that words count, that there is a speech, an author, a register, a vocabulary, grammar, intertextuality, among others.

Unlike text monosemy, an image is polysemic. Therefore, achieving a single interpretation is difficult. The images are always ambiguous, with a wide range of possibilities for meaning, and are usually explicit in the way they approach the viewer. Reading images is a form of generative reading (Rose 2001), personal and collective, often according to empathic standards in its decoding with something that is not completely mastered, but which, in turn, does not stop us from continuing to seek a sense (Rogoff, 1998), since an image leads to other images in a form of intertextuality of the image that is built from the repertoire of previous individual and collective experiences and narratives. A form of storytelling that like Monika Schmitz-Emans says "[…] is rooted in a basic and transcultural human inclination to give narrative form to experiences and imaginations. In the course of human history, this inclination has manifested itself in changing medial forms and languages" (Schmitz-Emans, 2013: 385).

When looking at the graphic narratives we find the use of various signs, in different forms of combination in the construction of the narrative, in which the visual and the verbal are affirmed as a bimodal or hybrid text also characteristic of comics, picture books or graphic novels. In these contexts, each sign tends to be used according to its particularities and giving the other the information it best transmits, in an indirect transaction where both are limited, compete and interact in the same medium.

It is the exchanges between signs that best characterize the graphic narratives and the complexity in decoding them. In many of the examples developed by the students, the interanimation of the verbal and visual signs and the narrative sequencing are created not by the lived knowledge of what is expressed by the interviewed, but by information mediated through video, which adds complexity both in the act of creation and in decoding by the reader of the graphic narrative. In this way, they use visual and verbal intertextuality, where metaphors, analogies or paratexts offer other narrative possibilities to the legacy and story of each interviewee, which in turn contribute to making the final reader motivated to look at the text and image and start reading it. An invitation that gives to the reader a central role in determining the meaning of the content, a characteristic of graphic narratives that finds parallelism with the definition of transmedium and transmediatic proposed for W.J.T. Mitchell (2014), for the comics.

Transmedium because it´s " […] moving across all boundaries of performance, representation, reproduction, and inscription to find new audiences, new subjects, and new forms of expression." (Mitchell, 2014: 1476), a notion that is corroborated by Marie-Laure Ryan when she proposes the concept of the medium as a " channel of communication or material means of expression" (Ryan, 2014: 20). On the other hand, the graphic narrative is "transmediatic because it is translatable and transitional, mutating before our eyes into unexpected new forms. […] it opens audiences onto a deep history that goes back before mass media […] its openness to multiple alternative frameworks in terms of style, form, structure, material support and technical platform" (Mitchell, 2014: 1479).

We started by briefly identifying the differences between reading text and images apart so that we can better understand the graphic narrative possibilities when both signs are incorporated and coexist in the same medium, which originates a multiplicity of possibilities of combination. The relationships between text, image and support thus find in graphic narratives a perfect ecosystem to experience and communicate stories, for which we, as readers/observers, have a decisive role in their legitimation. In the particular case of these graphic narratives, it is up to us to manage and recognize the human and artistic heritage in the form of sequences made by text and image and created by a generation of young students (19 to 25 years old) from memories archived in the form of video and sound, where the retired interviewee builds a narrative path about his life as a teacher, researcher and individual. It is through a simple graphic narrative composed in most cases by only eight panels, that we are invited to relive moments of our collective and individual history as members of an academic community.

Cultural memory: Reshaping and revisualization of individual lives into graphic narratives

Before describing the objectives and methodology underlying the project of graphic narratives, it will be important to reaffirm their role in the construction of what we can call cultural memory on the form of a publication. We can think of a memory as a way to access our apprehended or previous experiences that are *reborn* in the present when they are remembered or reused. The archive created by the WT project is not just an archive of memories told in the first person or by the objects and *memorabilia* that illustrate the professional and private lives of these people, it is a dynamic and plural repository that amplifies others experiences and meanings that are reconstructed in living memories when remembered and shared.

The publications generated by the students are a result of the revival of these memories, in which the authors retrieve and recontextualize them in new narratives that although they start from real documents and present biographical elements of those portrayed in the final object, they are in reality metanarratives that deal with real information in which is attached different meanings that arise from mediation, empathy or affection between the author and the interviewee. A memory that "travel between disciplines, between historical periods and between geographically dispersed academic communities (Bal, *cit. by* Gibson, 2018:41).

A confluence of intergenerational signs that take place in an editorial artefact that welcomes these reconstructed memories, through creative processes that always

involve translation and construction and not the transparent and redundant duplication of reality or facts transcribed and recorded in the WT archive. The process of translation and reconstruction is an exercise that, triggered by factual information, by the individual's voice, but is also an exercise of fictionalized memory, "[…] It is rare, especially today, to read a memoir that does not also betray a fictive intent. Not only do memoirs openly adopt many recognizable authenticating strategies, but they also draw attention to gaps and omissions, to doubt and invention" (Pedri, 2013:128).

These processes indicate that memory and in particular cultural memory must be understood "as an effect of a variety of institutionalized discourses and cultural practices" (Plate & Smelik, 2013:3). An effect with multiple actors and where individual and collective factors give rise to different ways of processing and manifesting that are characterized by their plurality and complexity between a past that is reactivated in the present and that informs a future or as the authors tell us – a memory "is always a re-call and re-collection (the terms are frequently used as synonyms), and, consequently, it implies re-tur, re-vision, re-enactment, re-presentation: making experiences form the past present again in the form of narratives, images, sensations, performances " (Plate & Smelik, 2013:6).

A process in which the cultural memory is related at two levels, the individual biological memory (Erll, 2008) and the collective context. It´s in the interaction between these levels that is summarily constructed the cultural memory, that "refers to the symbolic order, the media, institutions, and practices by which social groups construct a shared past " (Erll, 2008:5).

In short, the "engagement with cultural memory is therefore not only what comes after the making and distribution of cultural texts [and images], it also now often precedes that making, or occurs at every step throughout the process of making. So many digital works begin as acts of memory, with a user remembering a loved (or hated) mass culture text [image] and isolating, then manipulating, revising, and reworking, specific elements of that text [image]" (de Kosnik, 2016:3). A *modus operandi* that we recognize in the graphic narratives carried out by the students.

Graphic narratives: Empathic processes

The pedagogical practice included a set of collective (workshops) and individual (archive analysis and creation) actions and was carried out during the school year 2019/2020, in different stages throughout the year, only the final phase which corresponded to the printing and production of publications in a week risograph workshop did not happen due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it was possible to implement the project, 27 graphic narratives were made, in three colours (blue, red and black), in A5 format, with 8 pages each (figure 1).

Figure 1: All graphic narratives covers

All actions were designed and carried out outside the context of a specific FBAUP course or study cycle. The extra-curricular option proved to be important since it made it possible to overcome the possible constraints of a curricular exercise, which could be subject to evaluation and also eliminated the potential demotivation of students without much interest in the practice of graphic narratives. The working model created a multidisciplinary and informal working group that in one year developed two projects and found specific meeting moments to discuss, produce and present final solutions with the different participants and researchers of the WT project.

As mentioned earlier, the focus of the project was to explore the possibilities of graphic narrative in transgenerational dialogue, taking as a starting point the archive of material collected by WT researchers. This project took place after a first one developed in the previous semester where the same group dedicated themselves to making illustrated portraits for each retired professor or researcher, an action that ended in a public presentation "You Look Familiar" (figure 2), at the FBAUP Cozinha gallery. This exhibition, in addition to presenting the WT project to the community, marks also the return of professors and researchers portrayed to FBAUP and the sharing of experiences and stories with current students.

Figure 2: Opening of "You Look Familiar" Exhibition at FBAUP Cozinha Gallery.
ph @claúdia Lima

The main group of participants in the illustrated portraits project and the coordinating professor at FBAUP (Rui Vitorino Santos) moved on to the graphic narratives project. The selection of students was based on the interest and skills demonstrated in the field of illustration and graphic narratives, both in previous courses of illustration and in extracurricular illustration work. It was sought that the participants were representative of the teaching of illustration in the different study cycles at FBAUP. In the end, the group was made up of 16 students from the Degree in Communication Design, the Specialization Course in Illustration and the Master in Graphic Design and Editorial Projects.

Since there was already empathy between the group and the students sense of belonging to a larger team of researchers from previous experience, it has facilitated the scheduling of tasks to be developed. At first, the audiovisual material produced by the WT team of researchers was distributed, namely the video interviews. The information collected by the students was mainly made of scientific, pedagogical and artistic experiences and knowledge (stories from the academy, former students, colleagues, among others) and revealed in the first person by the voice and image of the intervenient and the interviewer, and by the place of the interview (atelier, garden, college, among others) or the works displayed or cited.

The video-interviews proved to be crucial for the production of the graphic narratives, although there was a biographical concern in the message of each narrative, since each publication is dedicated to an individual, it was not intended to be a mere biographical record. Students were encouraged to explore and produce narratives for these individual stories, proposing other ways of thinking, recording and referencing their legacy, contributing to fixing it through new imagery and textual repertoires that emanate both from the experiences of each retiree and the students themselves. A discourse and ways of seeing in which past individual memory is reorganized and reconstructed in other ways that update these repertoires and contribute to the cultural

memory of FBAUP. The guiding lines that we explore in the methodology and objectives also intend to meet the expectations of the WT project archive, since this

"[…] reveals a potential for the recovery of (and a renewed interest in) skills and mechanics that, in particular instances, stem from decades or Centuries of practice and know-how. Filtered through past contextual application and value, they may find renewed viability and relevance at a time when analogue technologies and local/regional challenges act as a dynamic and constructive counterpoint to the pervasiveness of digital media and globalisation. "(Alvelos & Barreto, 2019).

Results

As we suspected and in continuity with the objectives proposed, the results were quite diverse and proved that despite the structure of the video interviews being common among interviewees, the way to reconstruct the information they transmit by the students was quite plural.

We chose not to analyse the graphic narratives individually, but we tried to find affinities in the different discourses. In this way, we started by mapping close narratives and we built three large groups, which although presented individually can be found in the same publication or even double-page:

1. *Individual and Collective Biographical Narratives*
Where the student's interest is in creating a sequence of images that communicate information from the interviewee's personal history using different degrees of representation.

2. *Metaphorical Narratives*
On these narratives, it's difficult to know exactly the starting point. The action and characters are metaphorically explored with verbal and visual features that offers possible connections with the interviewee.

3. *Visual References Narratives*
In these narratives, there is a clear interest in the artistic or graphic work and it is from there that the sequential images are made in which the pictorial referent, expressiveness of work or artistic production is quoted.

Starting from these three broad categories, we subdivided each category into specific narrative contents. It is in this more detailed reading that we find the dialogue between author and subject portrayed more visibly, whether in the personal choice of the story, metaphor worked or in the inclusion of the student's personal experiences in what was illustrated.

In the first category, we highlight the presence of what we can understand as the cultural memory of FBAUP, namely through direct citation or induction of the following narrative features:

1.   Individual and Collective Biographical Narratives

1.1.   FBAUP – Architecture and Gardens

The importance given to the architectural and landscape space is not a surprise, since one of the faculty's hallmarks is precisely its implementation in an old palace from the 19th century, surrounded by an extensive garden. The 1950s marked the beginning of the construction of different buildings to support classes and the reduction of the green area. As we can see in the image on the left (figure 3), the garden was and is remembered as an iconic place in the faculty experience. However, we also find multiple visual and verbal references to the interior and exterior of campus buildings.

Figure 3: Left: Maria José Valente by Cláudia Alves. Center: Leonilde Princepelina by Francisca Ramos. Right: Antero Ferreira by Joana Pintor

1.2.   FBAUP – Students, Professors, Pedagogies and other Academies

In this subcategory, the one most represented by students, we can find individual and collective episodes and stories reported by the interviewees, as students or professors. It is important to note that the majority of students ended up showing in these stories some references to pedagogical practices that they considered innovative at the time (in contrast to other academies) and that echo today in many of the faculty's workshops, namely teaching directed to the student interests and the appreciation of empathy between teacher and student in the learning processes.

1.3. FBAUP – Cross Biographies

This subcategory is related to cross stories between interviewees who remember the faculty, sometimes as the maturing of a relationship that still exists (e.g. Rodrigo and Isabel Cabral), or the reliving of certain affective episodes that were built and lasted until the present (figure 4).

Figure 4: Left: Helena Almeida Santos and Helena Abreu e Lima by Helena Luz.
Center: Rodrigo Cabral by Aurora Peixoto. Right: Isabel Cabral by Aurora Peixoto

1.4. FBAUP - Social and Political Activism

The generation interviewed experienced the end of the dictatorship in Portugal (April 25, 1974) and the beginning of democracy. Thus, it is not surprising that many students have worked on themes related to democracy, the *carnation revolution* or social issues, such as the artistic education democratization for the entire population, among others.

1.5. FBAUP - Women Against Patriarchy

Although related to political and social activism, we decided to highlight the feminist struggle against patriarchy, since its activism and presence is mentioned by all-female interviewees. On the other hand, we consider relevant to find issues that, although they start with reports from the 20th century, are updated by students, for example by accentuating the need for gender balance in the teaching community or the Art and Design world (figure 5).
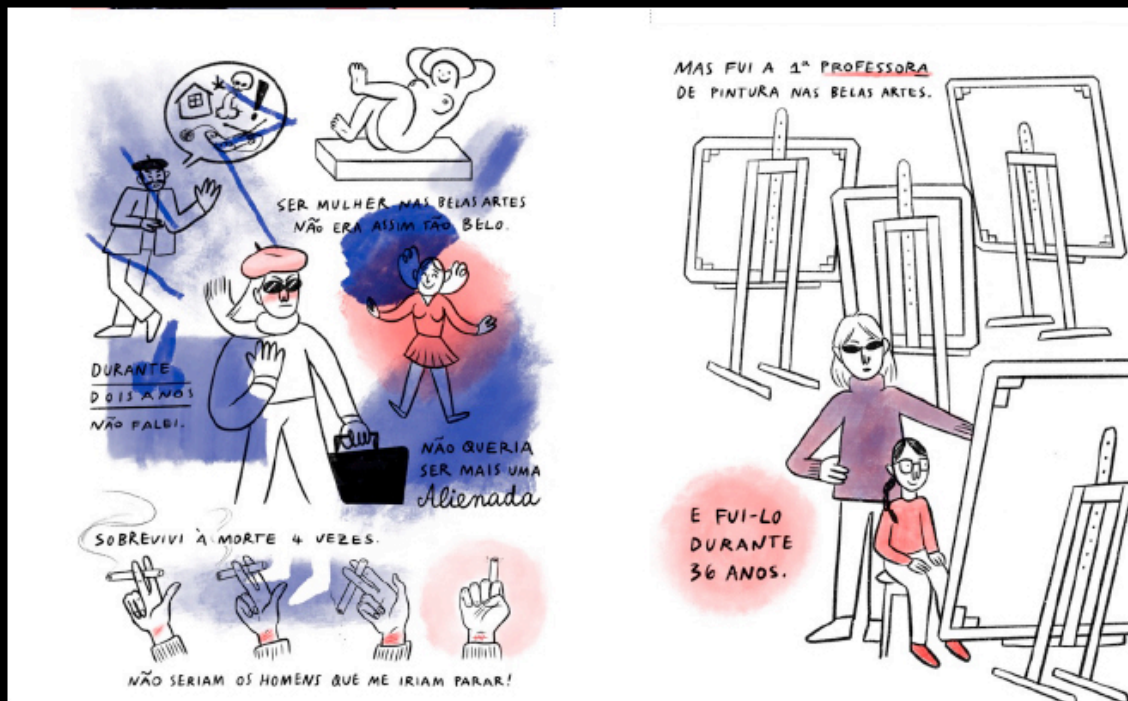
Figure 5: Maria José Aguiar by Biakosta

2.   Metaphorical Narratives
2.1. Freedom and Self-knowledge
In this category, we can find solutions that use metaphor or euphemisms to convey concepts that are not personalized, but collectives, such as the relationship between freedom and its promotion at FBAUP or experiences of self-knowledge that marked the interviewees.

3. Visual References Narratives
Finally, concerning this last category, we can see its subdivision into three groups that correspond to the historical courses offered at FBAUP: Painting, Sculpture and Communication Design. In these narratives, we see the student's interest in the interviewee's work. We find different forms of citation: the visual reference of the original work and in other examples, where we realize that the interest lies in the representation of the author's vocabulary or its artistic practice evolution. In both cases, the student tends to mimic and translate the language or narrative elements that characterize the artist's work (figure 6).
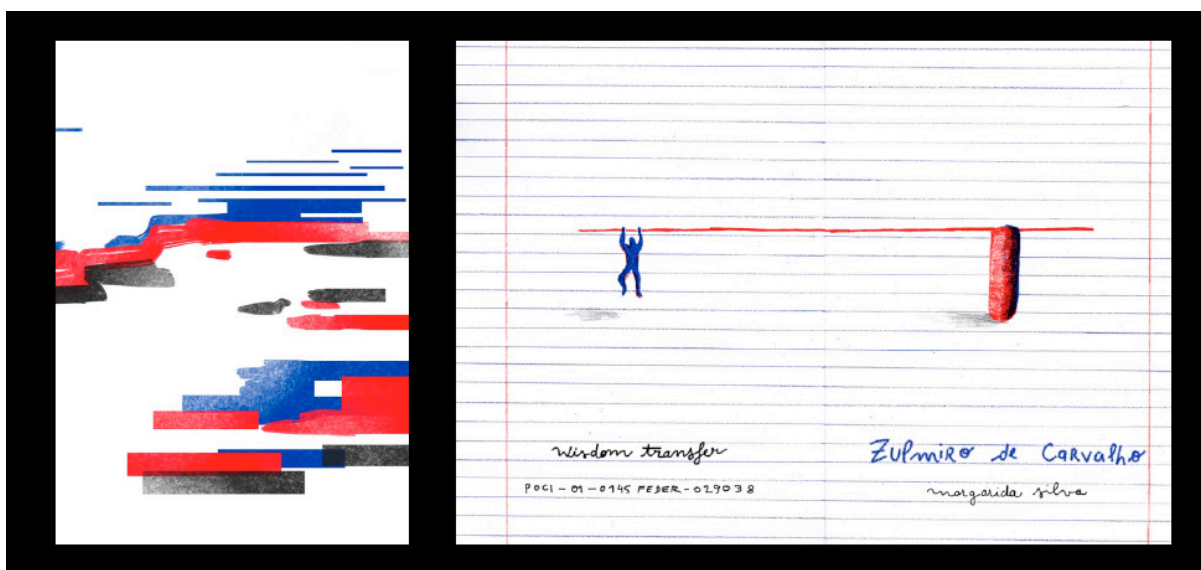
Figure 6: Left: António Quadros Ferreira by Cheila Mendes. Right: Zulmiro de Carvalho
by Margarida Ferreira

Although these subcategories were presented individually in reality, they can be found or parts in a single publication. In the same way, we believe that in an even more detailed reading we could still identify other features or intergenerational micro-narratives.

Conclusion

The proposed pedagogical practice, The visual storytelling and the graphic narratives as a way to create knowledge and empathy between generations in academic institutions, although it had an atypical ending, due to the COVID-19, not allowing the full return of professors and researchers to FBAUP or the collective production of publications in risograph, it confirmed, however, the pertinence and urgency of retaining and using in the universe of higher education the scientific, pedagogical, artistic and human capital of its reformed teaching and research community.

When analyzing the plurality of materials and information collected on the WT project, we easily understand that archiving - although fundamental - is only the first action to enhance this heritage. What we described in this pedagogical practice is evidence to the usefulness of this heritage. These graphic narratives reinforce our belief that sharing and exchanging knowledge between generations is fundamental for the future of academic institutions and for building a sense of belonging, identity and empathy.

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