ARTIVISM ZINE

VOL 5 ISSUE 10
OCTOBER 2026

A monthly newsletter highlighting and connecting initiatives/projects that transform society through the power of art

©Artivism4sharedhumanity

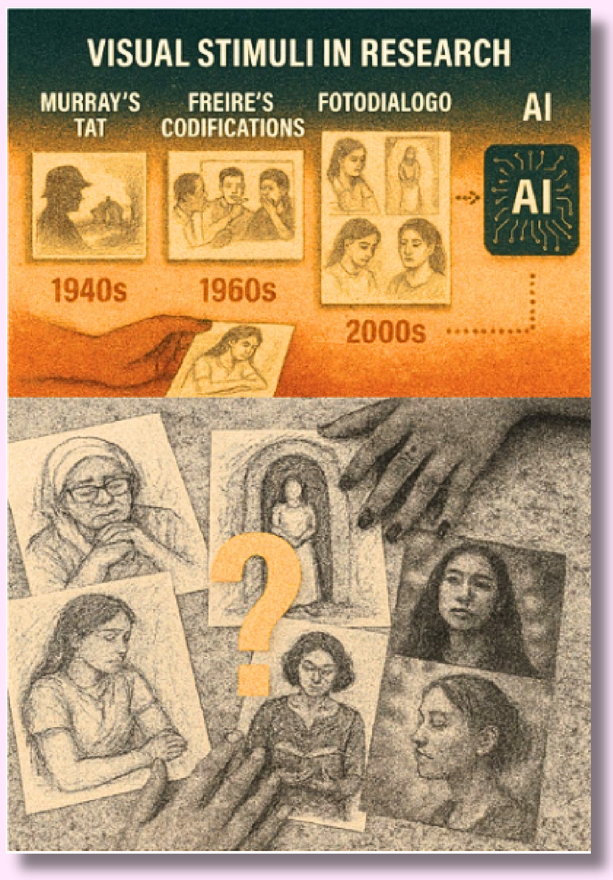
Flavia S. Ramos-Mattoussi

Art, Memory, and Dialogue for Social Transformation



Since 2025, arts funding in the United States has declined, especially for projects challenging the status quo. Still, I see arts-based research as activism— a way to make overlooked stories visible, nurture empathy, and inspire reflection and action. Through my work, I explore how images help us remember, question, and listen. Art is not just communication; it is a path to understanding and transformation. In uncertain times, art enables us to examine difficult experiences, helping people explore how public decisions affect private lives and identify shared concerns. This is my story.

My journey began in Brazil as a visual artist, writer, and art educator. After over 35 years, my professional journey has unfolded at the intersection of education, research, visual arts, and social transformation in International Education and Development across Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Working in more than 25 countries, I have learned to listen beyond words. I speak Portuguese, Spanish, and English, and yet, while working with community organizations in Rio de Janeiro's favelas and abroad, I learned the power of how images, gestures, and memories can surpass verbal languages in opening paths to true understanding. These experiences shaped my understanding of how culture, language, identity, and lived-experiences influence how we learn, communicate, and build communities.



While working on my doctoral research at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in the United States, I brought the ideas of educator Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and theater practitioner Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed from my Brazilian formative years and applied them to Participatory Action Research (PAR) with Latin American women at a community organization in Springfield, Massachusetts. From this work emerged FotoDialogo©, a method that connects visual art, storytelling, reflection, and participatory inquiry to support self-discovery and cross-cultural dialogue.

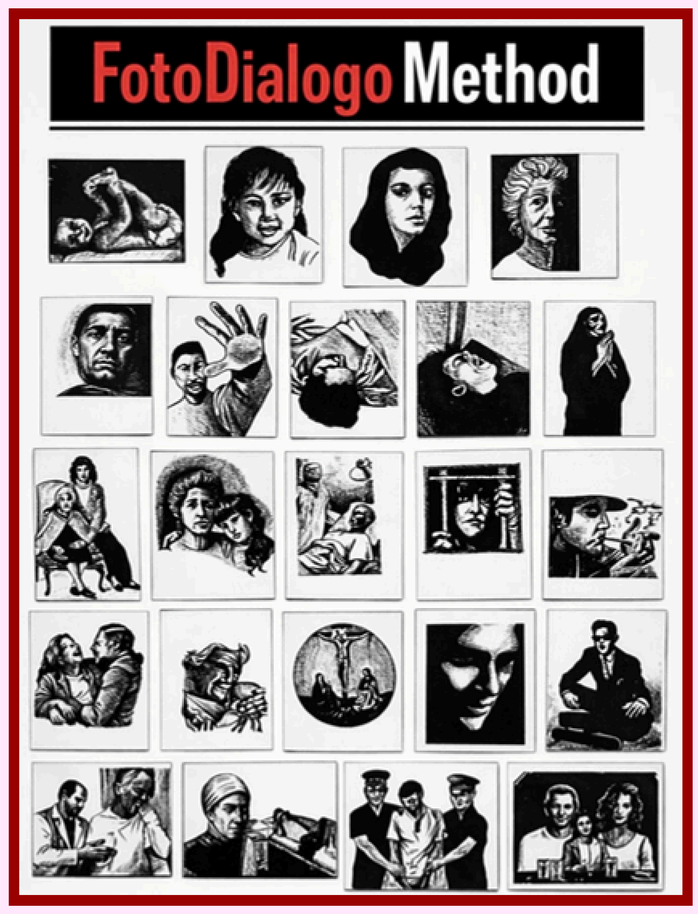
Despite its name, the original FotoDialogo© Method used drawings, not photographs: 30 black-and-white images based on themes in the women's accounts. They then selected and arranged the images into stories to explore what those stories revealed about their lives and social conditions. The women named the process "fotodialogo" when they recognized that they were creating a *fotonovela*—a picture-based story—of their own lives. This requires creating spaces where people feel valued, heard, and empowered to tell their own stories. Visual storytelling begins with an invitation to notice. What is happening in this picture? What might have happened before? What could happen next? Who is missing from the scene?

These questions encourage FotoDialogo© participants to move between observation, imagination, personal memory, and reflection on their communities. The image becomes a shared point of reference, but its meaning remains open. What one person sees as loneliness, another may understand as independence. Through this exchange, participants explore how individual memories connect with collective histories.

For students and practitioners working through the arts for social change, the starting point is participants' knowledge. make room for preferred languages and varied forms of expression and let community priorities guide action. Don't let limited funding, staffing, and childcare barriers be obstacles to your practice, rather build partnerships to cover these needs.

Today, I continue to explore arts-based research as a form of artivism. In a world marked by division, inequality, and the silencing of marginalized voices, I believe art can make overlooked stories visible, nurture empathy, and inspire collective reflection and action. For me, artivism begins with recognizing people as interpreters of their own lives. Through FotoDialogo©, I continue to explore how images can help us remember, question, and listen—and how the knowledge created through those encounters can inform what we do together. Art is not simply a tool for communication; it is a pathway to understanding, healing, and social transformation.





Scan here for full text and resources

FotoDialogo©

Dr. Flavia S. Ramos-Mattoussi is a Brazilian visual artist, art educator, international education researcher, and creator of the FotoDialogo© Method. She earned her doctorate at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her work brings together visual storytelling, participatory research, and intercultural learning to explore memory, identity, and community dialogue. Her faculty affiliations include Florida State University (2009–2026), American University (2002–2007), and the George Washington University (2000–2002). She has also served as consultant for agencies and organizations worldwide.

"Art can make overlooked stories visible, nurture empathy, and create spaces for collective reflection and social change."

Argie Agelarakis and Carolina Cambronero Varela, Content and Creative Editors