



EMPATHY FOR NATURE

Reflections on
socially engaged arts

Edited by Efi Kyprianidou and Danae Ioannou

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Introduction

Ever since Aristotle, the arts have been associated with the arousal of empathic responses towards the suffering of others and, consequently, with the development of a compassionate stance. In what ways can engagement with works of art affect people in emotional ways so as to become more compassionate towards nature and non-human beings and thus affected in morally positive ways? How can arts help us move beyond the mere recognition of climate change and the unprecedented current environmental challenges and actually act on it? Can the arts help us think like nature? Can we empathise with the burned forests of Southern Europe, with the plastic-polluted ocean and its creatures, with the drought land and the non-human animals harmed by human activity?

This is the overarching inquiry that framed the journey of the “Empathy and Sustainability: The Art of Thinking Like a Mountain (EMPACT)” Creative Europe funded project. This innovative endeavor, grounded in the belief that exploring the empathy-sustainability relationship through the arts can serve social justice and eudaimonia, embarked on a mission to leverage artistic cooperation and novel art projects for advocating the urgency of the climate crisis. Understanding the aesthetics of empathy and sustainability as powerful tools, EMPACT envisioned motivating artists and cultural influencers to champion environmental responsibility, bridging personal interests with the broader well-being of society.

In a nutshell, EMPACT developed the idea that empathic responses to nature and non-human beings may be the key to a game-changing move in communicating and acting upon environmental challenges. To address this issue with a fresh perspective, EMPACT brought together seven European partners with diversified experiences, expertises, missions, identities, and audiences that represent a balanced and targeted geographical spread: Cyprus University of Technology (Cyprus), Fondazione Lamberto Puggelli (Italy), Espacio Rojo (Spain), National Academy of Art (Bulgaria), the Maribor Art Gallery (Slovenia), Nature, Art & Habitat Residency ECO-Laboratory of Multidisciplinary Practice (Italy), and the Vorres Museum (Greece).

In the realm of contemporary artistic expression, socially engaged art interventions emerge as catalysts for transformative dialogue and societal reflection. Rooted in the belief that art possesses the power to initiate political and social change, this book presents a unique journey through five artistic interventions, each meticulously crafted with the purpose of fostering empathetic connections between humans and nature. Fondazione Lamberto Puggelli (Italy), Espacio Rojo (Spain), National Academy of Art (Sofia), Cyprus University of Technology (Cyprus), and Vorres Museum (Greece) initiated and supported the creation of these five socially engaged art interventions. Collaborating with artists, communities, and university students, the aim was to raise awareness on environmental issues such as climate change and sustainable development. Thus, each organization invited an established artist in the socially engaged art genre to collaborate with local communities, initiating and implementing interventions that transcend artistic and environmental boundaries. The collaborations were presented as individual events by each organisation and involved artists, communities, social groups and university and high-school students, with over 250 people actively participating in them. The reach of these interventions was extended through social media and printed media, amplifying their impact on a broader audience.

In a world where the climate-change crisis demands urgent attention, socially engaged art interventions stand as a testament to the artist’s commitment to not only capturing the value of our presence in the physical world but also actively participating in conversations that inspire environmental care. The interventions presented here transcend traditional artistic boundaries, compelling viewers to consider their relationship with nature in novel and thought-provoking ways. Together, these accomplishments underscore the transformative power of socially engaged art interventions, fostering community participation, and propelling critical discussions about the cultivation of an empathetic stance towards nature and non-human beings.

THE FUTURE IS ALREADY PRESENT

The project aims to engage local community and student participants by asking them to repurpose and re-contextualise the scrap metal and fabrics that they contribute to the project. Using her installation pieces as inspiration, artist Anna Lytridou will work with them to combine their items into communally created “framing devices”. The outdoor installation works combine the aesthetics of painting with the accessibility and approachability of public sculpture. Instead of the prescriptive relationship between viewer and art object in a gallery her works are intended to invite viewers to walk around and between her pieces, finding their own viewpoint and personal engagement with the work. In a landscape context the pieces therefore function as “framing devices”, again disrupting the conventional relationship between the art object and the environment. For the “The future is Already Present” project they work collaboratively on creating new “Framing devices” that encourage the participants to re-think their relationship to materials and their local environment.

An artistic collaboration between artists Anna Lytridou and Ben Deakin with the rural community of Ayios Ioannis Pitsilias

The project titled “The Future is Already Present” that took place on Ayios Ioannis village in the Cyprus mountains, between 26th of October and 28th 2023, successfully engaged the local community and student participants by asking them to repurpose and re-contextualise the scrap metal and fabrics that they contributed to the project. During the three days groups of students works closely with the artist to complete an painting installation. This involved developing constructions that they worked on in the workshop and integrating them in the natural environment of a local beauty spot, a wooded stretch of stream below the village.

Anna Lytridou’s work is strongly connected with shapes, colors and textures that we commonly find in nature and the physical environment. Her artworks are an expression of her immersion within the world; taking inspiration from her travels



Anna Lytridou working with CUT students ©Cyprus University of Technology



Anna Lytridou’s installation in Ayios Ioannis Pitsilias forest ©Cyprus University of Technology

across varied landscapes from urban to rural. The visual language in her work layers different sources of imagery taken from the real, the perceived and the imagined. The artworks offer a multitude of interpretations to find ways to map out our sensory perceptions, through a variety of mediums and styles. They are approached from many angles that can be read as aerial, cross-sectional or multidimensional. They encourage a new narrative, asking us to consider how we view, remember and record our surrounding landscapes. The artworks occur in a variety of forms; she works across drawing, painting and installation resisting any tangible structure for the perceived spaces in the resulting artworks. She activates these in-between spaces by combining oil paint, acrylics, ink, marker pens and onto paper, fabrics, canvas, wooden boards, metal sculptural interventions; to create a jarring of material characteristics. Her paintings and installations regularly use copper as a support and painting surface. She is drawn to the metal in part because of its link to her homeland Cyprus: the word derives from the name of the island, which is home to large deposits of copper and was famed for metalworking in antiquity. As a painting surface, the copper adds a warm sheen to my compositions, while the reverse casts soft reflections of the surrounding sculpture and environment they are placed in. Her installations often combine steel sculptural frames with organically shaped paintings on copper suspended within them. This sets up a tension between the two metals as the flowing organic forms of the cut-out copper vie with the rigid geometric steel frames. Neither abstract nor figurative her practice immerses the viewer in an unreal and ambient landscape. Her palette is one of raw earthy tones and contrasting vibrant colours that evoke sensations of being in the natural world. These are paired with sharp geometric lines that cut into the softer moments. These invented architectural structures move across and contain the more organic spaces in the works. The introduction of

these motifs avoids a sentimental interpretation of landscape, looking instead for a contemporary approach with which to acknowledge the human impact on the landscape. At the same time her works seeks to recreate the bodily experience of being immersed in environments, exploring the psychological effect of these experiences as a series of sensory combinations and transitions between time, location and space.

In preparation for the project, Anna Lytridou created three atmospheric freestanding structures using repurposed materials. These structures occupy a liminal threshold between painting and sculpture. At once both and neither of these labels, they exist in an equilibrium of opposites: absence and presence, solid and void, abstraction and representation. The steel frames break up the space and also delineate boundaries within it, their bold vertical lines contrasting with flat painted forms on copper that appear to be weightlessly suspended on them. The viewer makes their own journey around, through and between these works. The angular forms of the steel structures reference the process by which the celestial constellations generate narratives and myths whilst simultaneously representing the deep time of the cosmos. We too create constellations with our bodies whilst exploring these works. The use of copper as a base material for these sculptural paintings is chosen to emphasise the geological context of the area. The artist is considering the fact that the village of Ayios Ioannis is built on top of an old copper mine. The copper therefore functions firstly as a painting surface, adding a warm sheen to the composition on one side, while the reverse casts soft reflections of the surrounding landscape, highlighting this material's inherent relationship with the local environment.

Working collaboratively with the students, they carried the work she had prepared to different locations around the rural areas of the village to relocate and incorporate them with the nature environment. In this way creating new visual



Anna Lytridou's work in Ayios Ioannis Pitsilias ©Cyprus University of Technology



Artist Ben Deakin introduction to drawing ©CUTING EDGE



CUT students collaborating with Anna Lytridou ©CUTING EDGE



CUT students attending drawing masterclass by Benjamin Deakin ©CUTING EDGE

narratives in the space. In a landscape context the pieces therefore function as “framing devices”, again disrupting the conventional relationship between the art object and the environment. After this she conducted a workshop with the students in which they worked with smaller pre-prepared metal frames that she had created in dialogue with her larger pieces. Working in a range of recycled media on different surfaces including scrap copper, canvas and cardboard they students created intuitive images which they combined with my pre-prepared frames. This resulted in a completed series of seven new collaborative works made by the students. The following day she introduced participants from the local community to the project and the work made by the students. These seven artworks then used by the participant as a discussion point to think how they could be used to re-frame, re-emphasise and re-evaluate their home environment. After this they collectively took the works into the landscape in a procession, placing them and re-composing them in different locations. Each participant was encouraged to work either collaboratively or individually to explore the potential of these “framing devices”. Some participants began to add additional elements to the frames using natural materials found on location.

The Painting Workshops by Benjamin Deakin introduced students to a range of new painting materials and techniques that they were not previously aware of. Across two days they had the opportunity to try out these in a series of small participatory activities. A component of this was the relevance of the properties of particular pigments commonly used in artists’ paints, making the distinction between pigments and colours so that the students understood that the same hue could be made from different pigments and would behave differently on the canvas and in colour blending situations. They discussed the merits of transparency and opacity in artists colours and explored the different effects

of combining colours in transparent layers rather than blending in on the pallet prior to application. They also explored the range of textured mediums available to artists today. In addition to the workshops Benjamin did individual tutorials with the students and offered them advice on materials, techniques and other artist’s practices that could benefit their work.

Anna Lytridou

Anna Lytridou was born in Cyprus in 1986 and she currently lives and works in London. She studied fine arts in Athens School of Fine Arts (2004-2009) and MA Fine Arts at Central Saint Martins, London (2010-2011). She regularly exhibits in the UK and Cyprus and she has represented Cyprus in International Art exhibitions in South Korea and Egypt. She was awarded a residency in Iceland (2015), Spain (2017) and London (2019). Her work is based on her experience of being immersed in, exploring, travelling in the physical environment. Combining shapes and elements from landscapes and architecture, Lytridou creates new narratives.



Selected group and solo exhibitions:

Side Step, Set Gallery West Ealing, London, UK(2022),
Winter Salon, Glass Cloud, Camden Peoples Theatre, London, UK (2021), The Factory Project, Thameside Industrial Estate, London, UK (2021) Reflection, Cello Factory, London, UK (2021), Gangown Triennale 2021, South Korea (2021), KCAW London 2021, UK (2021), The Constellations We Make, Cyprus High Commission, UK (2021) Recreational Grounds: Off Site, Thames- Side Studios, London, UK (2021), Drawing Biennial 2021, Drawing Room, London, UK(2021), The Invitational I, Unit 1 Gallery Workshop, UK (2020), EXH 02, Floorr Magazine online (2020), Radical Residency IV, Unit 1 Gallery Workshop, UK (2019), Amalgamation, Cello Factory, London, UK (2019), Well Art Contemporary, Wells Cathedral, Wells, UK (2019), Material, Pada Gallery, Lisbon, Portugal (2018), Space 5thEdition Showcase, Space Gallery London, UK Summer Show (2018), The concept Space , London (2018),Recreational Grounds, Wendover House Ground Floor, Car Park, London (2018), Weaving, Attikon, Paphos, Cyprus(2017), Small is Beautiful More or Less, ASC Unit 3 Gallery, London (2017),Winter Pop-up, Footfall Art, London (2017), Pipe Dream, The Garage Studios, Worcester, UK (2016), 1st Installation Festival, Limassol, Cyprus (2016), As Wide as the Space Between Walls, Tannery Project Space, London (2016), Mid-summer Nights, Listhus Gallery, Iceland, (2015) and Sunless, Bermondsey Project Space (2014).

Benjamin Deakin

Benjamin Deakin lives and works in London, UK. Benjamin's work is often based on experiences from travels to remote parts of the world, but focuses on the familiar as much as the exotic. He is interested in the ideas we often take to places rather than from them. His recent solo exhibitions have featured paintings based on the interiors of modest tea lodges in the Himalayas. Featuring everyday looking domestic objects placed before the spectacular backdrop of the mountains they upend the Romantic archetypes often attributed to mountain scenery. Patterns and fabric designs from different cultures also feature in the interiors, indicating that cultural ideas are mutable and constantly shifting. Solo Exhibitions: 'Close Distance' JGM Gallery, London (2022), The Tea House Paintings, TM lighting Gallery (2022). Group exhibitions: 'Cubitt 30'' Victoria Miro Gallery, London; 'Horizon' Cello Factory, London (2022), Contemporary British Painting Prize 2021 (Finalist). Residencies include: PADA studios 2018, Joya Art+Ecologica, Andalucia, Spain (2017); Listhus, Olafsfjordur, Iceland in 2015; KIAC Dawson City, Yukon, Canada (2008), University of Kathmandu, Nepal (2005), Hospitalfield Trust, Arbroath, Scotland (2002).



Artworks created by CUT students, inspired by Anna Lytridou's installations ©CUTING EDGE



Installation created by CUT students inspired by artist Anna Lytridou ©CUTING EDGE



CUTingedge 

Anna Lytridou's installation in Ayios Ioannis Pitsilias forest ©CUTING EDGE

THE NATURE OUTSIDE AND INSIDE ME

This action is a performative form of artistic expression that seeks direct impact and provocation by involving directly the audience or random people in what is happening. The artistic action is a short-term behavioral intervention in the public space. With it, the artists try to make direct contact with the attendees by involving them in an unusual situation.

It is based on mixing several genres such as site-specific (art created for the place itself outside the theater stage); Immersive (theater with immersion and involvement of the audience in the action and experience) and performative action. The performance is an interdisciplinary form of artistic expression that could bring together the means of expression of all arts in any combination. There are no restrictions on duration and places of realization. The only constant is the living presence of the artist, at the basis of which are placed the expressive possibilities of the body and behavior in natural or intentional situations. The simplest definition

we can provide is: presenting an idea through a live public performance.

An artistic collaboration between Prof. Dr. Velimir Velev (the actor, director, theatre choreographer, scenographer and pedagogue at NATFA professor), the art director Elina Topalska and the art manager Nikoleta Ilcheva, with the dancers from the Dance and Art company SOFISTIC ZIVO and actors of the Unseen Theatre

On a music background, two blind actors enter the crosswalk to cross it, but in the middle seem to get confused about the direction. At that time, starting from one sidewalk, eight sighted performers “afforest” the pedestrian path with trees on stands, and within 5-7 seconds, the path turns into a grove. The blind find themselves among “Nature”, they hear the buzzing of bees, the chirping of birds, the sound of a river. The sighted performers are part of it, as mythological forest creatures

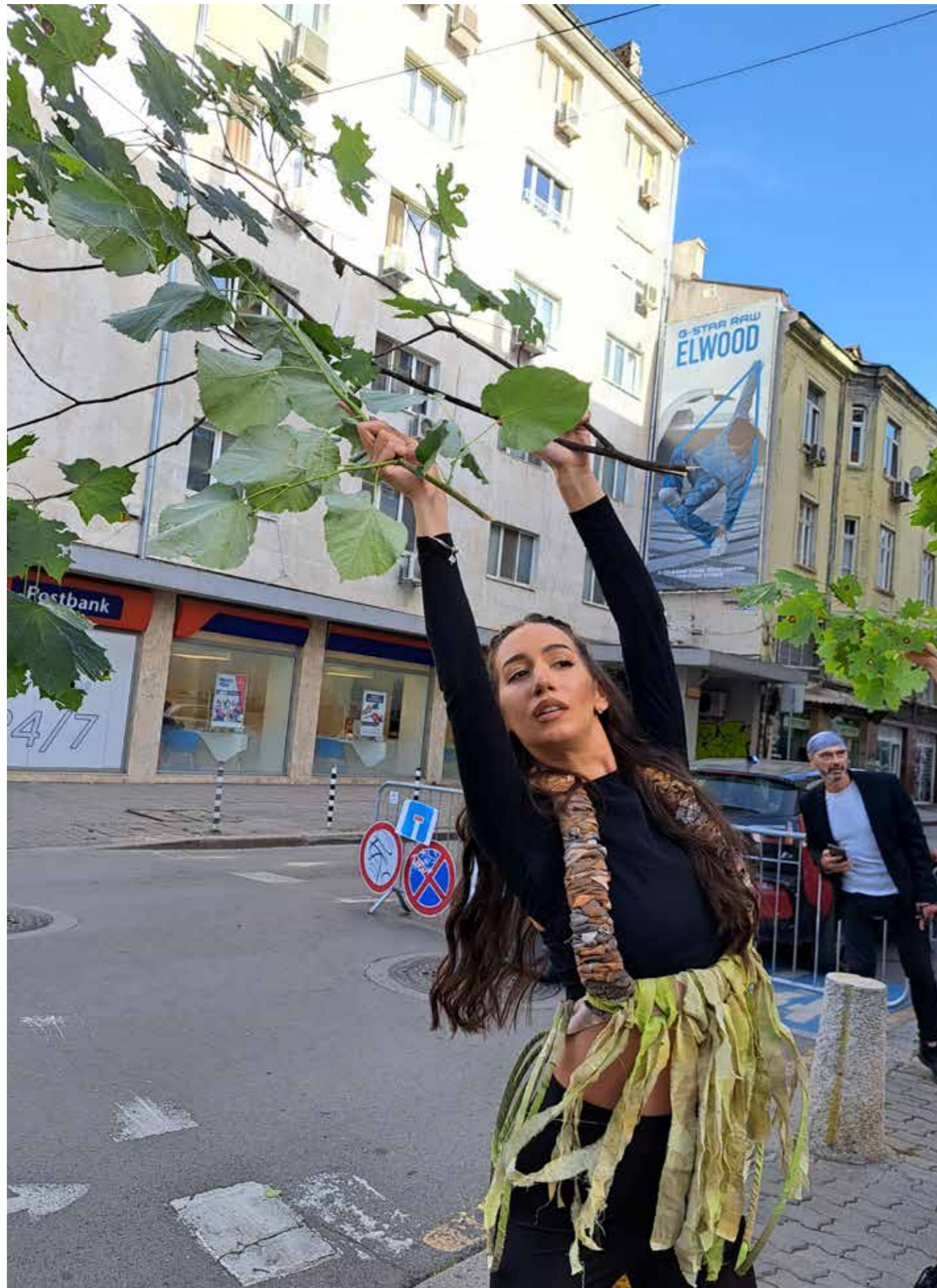


The Nature Outside and Inside Me performance in Sofia ©NATFA

(elves and fairies), in the next 5-7 seconds the actors act out their interactions/studies in this “natural” environment, around the blind. For the last 5-7 seconds of time, they clear the crosswalk by moving the trees to the other sidewalk. The blind actors follow the “forest” on the sidewalk. The action moves to the sidewalk for about 2.5 minutes, then returns to the sidewalk and then moves to the other sidewalk. In this way, all the time the Forest “moves” from one sidewalk through the pedestrian path and from there onto the other sidewalk and vice versa. In the time fragments between transitions, while on the sidewalks, the actors stop pedestrians who have to pass between the trees and invite them, if they are not in a hurry, to stay until the end of the performance and then plant a tree in a nearby park.

After the action, the actors together with willing passers-by go on a procession, in which the trees constantly move, “creeping” along the road to the park. There are trees prepared for planting. Holes are dug in the places provided for the purpose and set. The entire action is filmed and an option to broadcast live on the Web can be offered.

The idea is an artistic way of empathically immersive involvement of society - it is like an artistic and aesthetic shock, which aims to awaken, to take the modern person out of the context of the automated dynamic everyday life, by transforming the everyday urban environment into an artistic one, by turning the usual a daily route in an unreal secondary aesthetic time-space. This idea carries out information on two semantic and symbolic levels, which are part of the essence of the Project - the relationship between Human-Nature and Human-Human. The first level refers to the human as a biological



The Nature Outside and Inside Me performance in Sofia ©NATFA

individual that is not just a part of the Nature of the Earth. He is the very Nature that is within him. Despite the changes in human consciousness in the Information Society, the person must realize that the Information Society itself could not exist without the global ecosystem called "Nature on Planet Earth". Its preservation is paramount to the survival of mankind. To preserve it, a change in the relationship between Humans and Nature is necessary. Restoring the relationship of mutuality, care and support. From one-way, consumerism, it must turn into dialogue, into unity. The second level refers to the relationship between Humans in society. The need for a change in the relationship between people is identical to the aforementioned relationship between Man and Nature - the relationship of mutuality, care and support. Relationship - dialogue and unity. The performance was located in crossroads in the center of Sofia (ul. G.S.Rakovski / ul.Gurko) with a traffic flow and pedestrian crossings. The play is performed on the footpath and its two adjacent sidewalks.

The performance aimed to provoke public attitude towards environmental issues, especially deforestation, to help promote the human-nature relationship and To awaken public empathy towards people from social groups with special needs: blind/. Furthermore, it engaged public attention to the focus and objectives of the EMPACT project and broadcasted the creative intervention in real-time and film short parts to be used for the EMPACT project.

Velimir Velev

Prof. Dr. Velimir Velev is an actor, director, theatre choreographer, scenographer and pedagogue with a long-standing successful professional practice in Bulgaria and abroad. He is the Head of the Drama Theatre Department at the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts "Kr. Sarafov", Sofia, and Head of the BA program in Theatre of Movement. Prof.

Velev has created VIA–Virtual InterActive Theatre in order to test the theoretical predictions, postulates and new spectacular keystones, which were laid out in his author's "Theory of Digital Interactive Spectacle of the Future". He is also the creator of the Non-Physical Theatre in Bulgaria (a new genre between the Theatre of Body Expression and Puppetry Art, based on a new author's acting "MethaMethod" system) and the Unseen Theatre –the first company of blind actors in human history, creating in the field of visual performing arts (shadow theater, marionettes, masks, visual impressions) without the use of any sight. It is widely recognized by critics as a cultural and theatrical phenomenon in the field of global professional theater. Prof. Velev has been a visiting lecturer in Croatia, Montenegro and Germany.

Nikoleta Ilcheva

Nikoleta Ilcheva is a professional art manager who graduated from the Master's program "Management of Performing Arts and Industries" at the National Academy of Theater and Film Art "Kr. Sarafov". Her professional interests are primarily in dance and performing arts; management and leadership; digital marketing and graphic design. Nikoleta is the manager and artistic director of the Dance and Art Company "SOFISTIK-JIVO". Her work in the organization is aimed at organizational and creative activity, including the conduct of dance classes, stage performances and the creation of choreographies for different age groups (children, adolescents, youth) in a variety of dance styles; the implementation of advertising campaigns, festival participations and tours in Bulgaria and abroad, as well as the implementation of various creative projects in the field of arts.

Elina Topalska

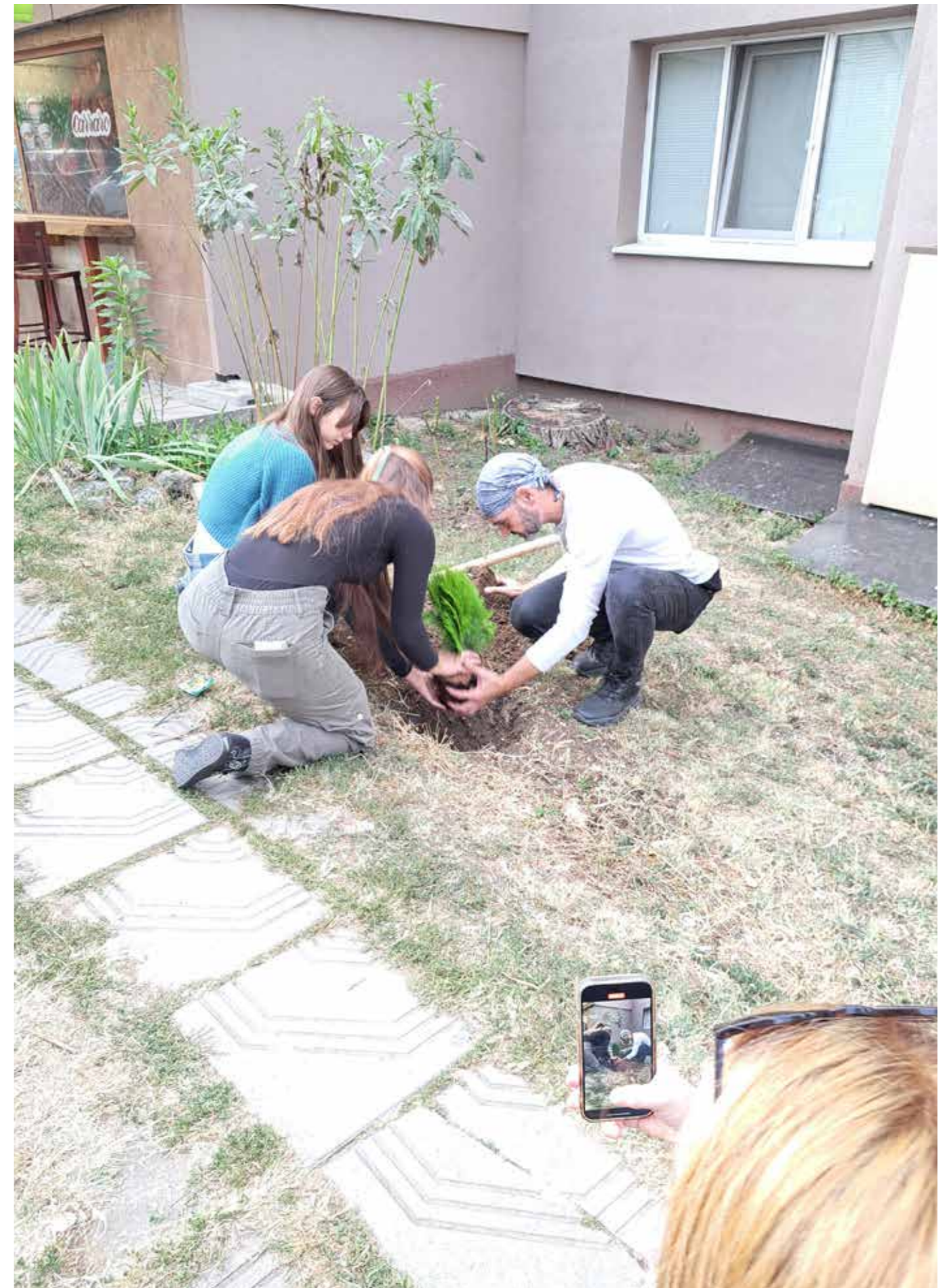
Elina Topalska is the founder, manager and artistic director of the Dance and Art Company "SOFISTIK-JIVO". She carries out organizational and creative activity, related to conducting dance classes, stage performances, individual and joint concerts, festival

participation, advertising campaigns, etc. He is the author of dance compositions and choreographic settings for different age groups. Participation in the rehearsal process and preparation for stage performances of children's, youth and youth groups in various styles. Elina has participated in the conceptual construction and practical implementation of various events in the field of arts - seminars, art workshops, workshops, festivals and conferences. She has realized carried out international performances and tours of the Dance and Art Company "SOFISTIK-JIVO" in Europe and Asia. She is an external leader of courses, practices and workshops on art therapy, neurographics and personal development. Elina has practical

experience in the administration and organization of creative projects, tours and international cultural projects. She is a member of the Board of Directors of the Association of Dance Figures in Bulgaria.



The Nature Outside and Inside Me performance in Sofia ©NATFA



The Nature Outside and Inside Me event with the participation of the Unseen theatre ©NATFA



The Nature Outside and Inside Me performance in Sofia ©NATFA

MALLEABLE UNITY

The socially engaged art intervention known as “Malleable Unity” originated from the minds of Lea Petrou, a multidisciplinary artist, and Olga Daniilopoulou, a curator. This project was dedicated to promoting communication, inclusivity, acceptance, empathy, and sustainability by uniting vulnerable groups, students, and the wider public, fostering connections. The primary aim was to engage more than 250 individuals in this initiative, which centered around an interactive workshop where children embarked on a creative journey exploring handprints, portraits, and tactile experiences using clay and seeds.

To facilitate this immersive experience, various materials were required, including seeds, measuring tape (preferably white or brown) for the wall, transparent containers for the seeds, a clay sprayer, wet wipes or paper towels, gloves, colored paper tapes or sellotape, scissors, and A4 and A5 papers. The workshop area consisted of four long tables, each accommodating 10 individuals, supplemented by rotating platforms housing essential materials like clay, seeds, and soil. The

primary objective was to create a collaborative and imaginative environment conducive to artistic expression and interaction.

The workshop unfolded with children imprinting their hands on A4 paper using markers or pens, followed by a creative game where they quickly listed specific items related to given categories. This exercise stimulated observation and expression. The resulting handprints were proudly displayed on the wall using colored tapes, forming a vibrant and interactive exhibit. Subsequently, participants received A5-sized paper and colored pens to observe and draw the person sitting opposite them, creating portraits or depictions displayed alongside the handprints, showcasing the children’s interpretations.

The session continued with a tactile experience involving clay and seeds. Children were paired, provided with gloves, clay, and seeds, and tasked with mixing seeds into the clay, creating hand impressions with closed eyes, fostering patience and sensory exploration. Each pair’s creations were observed by others, emphasizing teamwork



Participants arriving at the Vorres Museum for the socially engaged art intervention event ©Vorres Museum



Participants arriving at the Vorres Museum for the socially engaged art intervention event ©Vorres Museum



Artist Lea Petrou explaining the objectives of the workshop ©Vorres Museum



Participants during the workshop ©Vorres Museum

and understanding through observation.

This workshop served as a platform encouraging creativity, teamwork, and sensory exploration among children. It blended artistic expression with tactile experiences, allowing participants to exhibit their handprints, portraits, and clay impressions, fostering an engaging environment for learning and self-expression. Using earthy materials, Lea Petrou collaborated with the participants to create ephemeral installations that would eventually degrade and return to the earth. These sculptures were placed at a special spot in the museum's garden, allowing them to assimilate with the soil and let the seeds grow once more.

Lea Petrou's works aimed to approach reality from various perspectives, incorporating notions such as translation, conversion, code, mapping, and metric systems. Themes like the perception of time, place, movement, and speech constituted a significant part of her artistic interest, with participation being a fundamental methodology in her practice.

The Vorres Museum's involvement in the EMPACT Project featuring "Malleable Unity" was an initiative showcasing art's power to promote empathy and environmental sustainability. By combining art with social consciousness, this project engaged the community in critical issues, highlighting the potential of creative expression as a catalyst for change. This collaboration of artistic vision and community engagement demonstrated how diverse talents could unite for a common cause, introducing young minds to concepts of inclusivity and diversity while potentially shaping their perspectives from an early age. Beyond the initial event, the project envisioned these sculptures as meaningful gifts, extending the message of empathy and understanding. This concept of 'art with a purpose' ensured a lasting impact.

In conclusion, The Vorres Museum's involvement in the EMPACT Project exemplified

how art could be a powerful tool for social change. Addressing critical issues in an engaging and inclusive manner, this initiative had the potential to make a lasting impact on both participants and the wider community. The workshop's use of clay aligned with sustainability principles, minimizing waste and resource consumption. Returning the children's sculptures to the earth reflected the cyclic nature of materials, emphasizing the workshop's commitment to minimizing waste and returning resources to the environment.

In summary, this workshop embodied several sustainability principles, including cooperation, material recycling, creative expression, empathy, environmental awareness, and the cyclic nature of resources. It illustrated how a simple creative activity could be a potent tool for instilling sustainable values in children, fostering a sense of responsibility toward the environment and the community.

An artistic collaboration between artist Lea Petrou and elementary students

The participation of the Vorres Museum in the EMPACT Project unveils an enthralling venture known as the "Malleable Unity" workshop, crafted to interlace art, societal involvement, and sustainability. This initiative embodied art's transformative prowess, igniting empathy, advocating for environmental sustainability, and sparking economic consciousness. Delving into the workshop's mechanics revealed a nuanced tapestry that seamlessly interweaved social involvement, interdisciplinary cooperation, comprehensive objectives, educational influence, inclusivity, practical implementation, and a commitment to enduring positive ideals.

At the heart of the "Malleable Unity" workshop lay its capacity to harness art's profound influence as a catalyst for societal transformation. By amalgamating artistic expression with a mindful focus on societal concerns, the initiative

underscored the potential of creative endeavors to trigger positive change. Art, in this context, transcended conventional boundaries, becoming a conduit for engaging communities in critical dialogues, fostering deeper comprehension of shared challenges and mutual understanding.

This endeavor stood as a testament to the potency of interdisciplinary collaboration. Enlisting the expertise of esteemed artist Lea Petrou alongside community collaboration exemplified the harmonious merging of artistic vision and community engagement. Such a confluence of talents showcased the strength derived from diverse perspectives converging toward a unified objective. The “Malleable Unity” workshop epitomized how the fusion of creativity and community collaboration birthed innovative and impactful projects.

The project’s aims spanned a wide spectrum, encapsulating themes of empathy, inclusivity, environmental sustainability, and economic consciousness. This holistic approach underscored the interconnected nature of these multifaceted issues, positioning art as a conduit capable of collectively addressing them. This all-encompassing vision propelled the workshop beyond mere artistic expression, transforming it into a conduit for comprehensively addressing societal challenges.

Integral to the project was the involvement of students spanning from the third grade and beyond. By engaging participants of varying ages, the initiative introduced young minds to critical concepts while potentially shaping their perspectives on inclusivity and diversity from an early stage. The educational impact extended beyond the participating students, fostering a community-wide discourse on the role of art in shaping societal values.

A commendable facet of the project was its commitment to engaging a diverse audience inclusive of people with and without disabilities, vulnerable social groups, educators, professors, and students. This deliberate inclusivity underscored

the project’s dedication to making art and awareness accessible to all. Breaking barriers, the “Malleable Unity” workshop transcended socio-economic and physical constraints, promoting a more inclusive and equitable artistic experience. The innovative concept of “Malleable Unity” transcended mere artistic expression; it embodied a tangible application of creative principles. Participants actively engaged in shaping clay, crafting a tangible representation of empathy and inclusivity. The interactive nature of the workshop transformed it from passive appreciation to active involvement, amplifying the impact of its message. While many art initiatives were fleeting, the “Malleable Unity” project envisioned a lasting impact beyond the one-day event. The sculptures created were envisaged as meaningful gifts, extending the message of empathy and understanding. This notion of ‘art with a purpose’ ensured a resonance that extended far beyond its temporal boundaries, contributing to sustained community transformation.

Fundamentally, the project endeavored to shift attitudes towards diversity, advocating for social acceptance and equality. Aligned with broader societal values, it challenged existing norms and nurtured a culture of acceptance. By infusing positive values into its artistic expression, the “Malleable Unity” workshop emerged as a powerful agent for societal evolution.

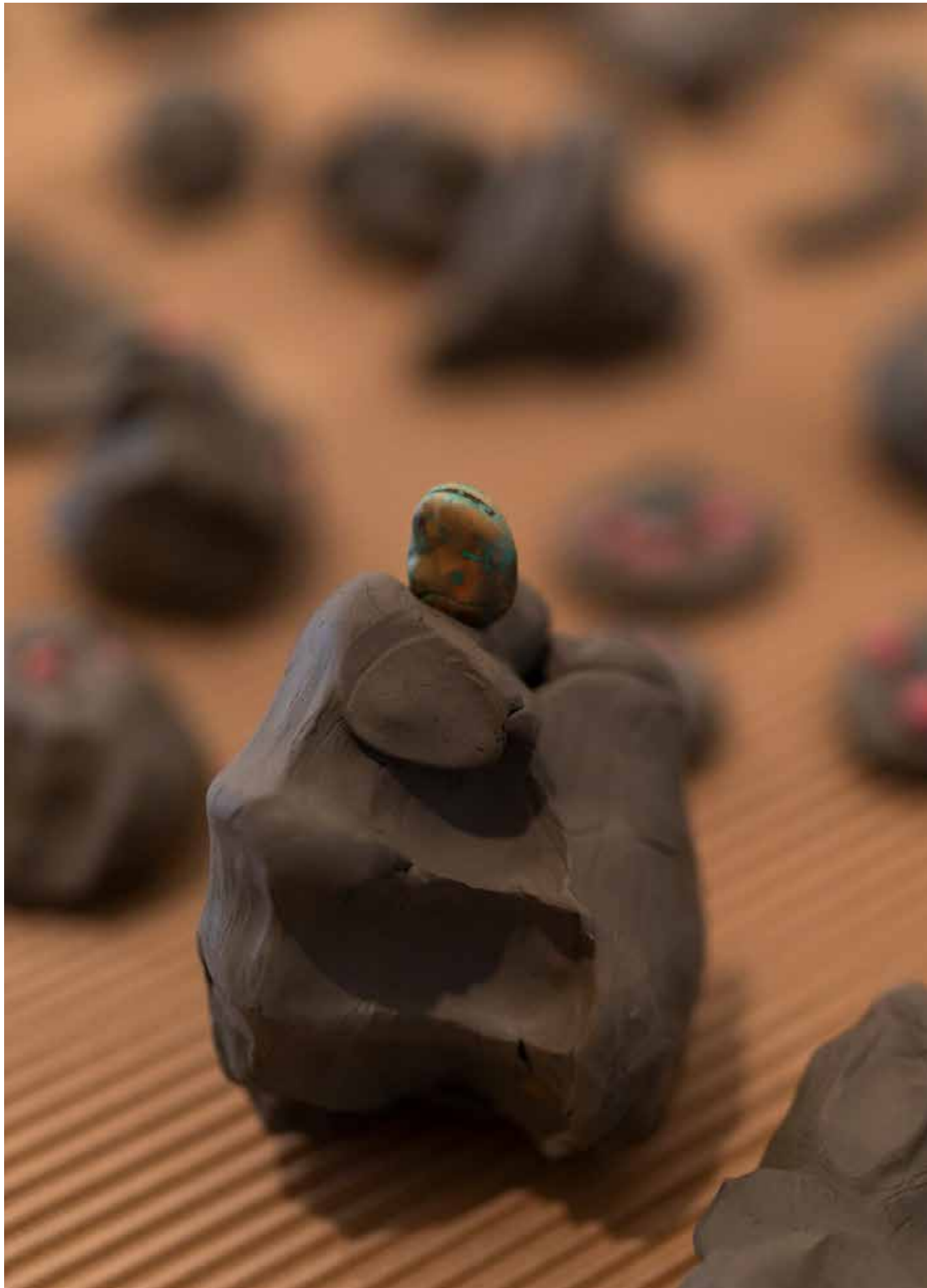
In summary, the Vorres Museum’s involvement in the EMPACT Project, particularly the “Malleable Unity” workshop, served as an exemplary testament to art’s potential as a formidable tool for societal change. Through a meticulous tapestry of social engagement, interdisciplinary synergy, comprehensive objectives, educational influence, inclusivity, practical implementation, and the promotion of positive values, this initiative held the promise of leaving an enduring mark on both participants and the broader community.



Setting up the wall collage ©Vorres Museum



Mixing the seeds into the clay ©Vorres Museum



Malleable sculptures ©Vorres Museum

Evangelia (Lea) Petrou

Evangelia (Lea) Petrou holds a Masters in Sculpture from the esteemed Royal College of Art in London. Her educational journey also includes formative years at Chelsea College of Art and Design, Central St. Martins College of Art. Currently, Lea is dedicated to furthering her academic pursuits by pursuing a Ph.D. at the Athens School of Fine Art. Her educational background also includes an enriching 8-month research program completed in CCA Kitakyushu (2003 – 2004, Japan) and active participation in a 15-day workshop on digital culture at the University of the Aegean (2014, Syros, Greece). Renowned as an accomplished visual artist, Lea Petrou’s work revolves around geographical interpretations that challenge our perceptions of time, space, movement, and language. Her artistic endeavors intricately explore concepts of translation, conversions, codes, mapping, and metric systems. Lea’s practice is an endeavor to unearth alternative approaches to understanding and engaging with reality itself. Lea Petrou’s artistic contributions have been featured in numerous prestigious exhibitions worldwide. Her works have graced curated shows in prominent art scenes such as Athens, Stockholm, Paris, Skopje, Venice, and London. Notable among her exhibitions are “The Butterfly Effect,” “Weaving The Future IV,” “Remembering Remembered,” “Ephemeral Gardens,” and more, each contributing to her diverse artistic portfolio. With extensive experience as a visual art educator, Lea Petrou has imparted her knowledge and creativity at various esteemed institutions across England, Greece, and Japan. She has designed and spearheaded art programs at schools like Hellenic American Educational Foundation, Moraitis Primary School, Platon High School, and the International School of Piraeus. Beyond teaching, Lea has conducted workshops, attended IB workshops, and played a pivotal role in shaping national curricula in Greece. Aside from her artistic and educational endeavors, Lea Petrou actively engages in collaborative projects, co-running workshops, and participating in initiatives aimed at fostering community-based

art projects. Her commitment to promoting artistic participation and engagement within communities is evident through her varied initiatives. Currently based in Athens, Greece, Lea Petrou continues to expand the boundaries of artistic expression while making significant contributions to the visual arts and education sectors.



Setting up the wall collage ©Vorres Museum

L'ARIA BUONA

The result of the socially engaged art intervention “L’Aria Buona” - empathy among humans and nature was an intense experience involving a theatre director and playwright, a documentary author and director and participants from the local community. They started a collective work exploring human empathy with nature and non-human forms of life through the intertwine of audiovisual narrative, theatrical improvisation and collective writing with bodies and voices.

They explored differences among human beings and, first of all, among themselves, as unusual abilities or very peculiar characteristics that each one of us has and that can result as “aliens” or “astonishing” to others (as: “I can perfectly reproduce the sound of a trumpet”, “I can move my ears in unusual ways”), to start understanding the “alien” and “astonishing” capacities that non-human forms of life have in comparison to us, humans.

The artists worked applying a “documentary” language, putting together

empirical data and interviews. They decided to start from fundamental scientific and philosophical contributions, as Donna Haraway’s essay *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, *Love Letter to the Earth* by Thich Nhat Hanh and *Praise to the Earth* by Byung-Chul Han. Then they concluded their research focusing on Italo Calvino’s works who, since the ‘60s, proposed a clear and personal vision on the human/nature theme, as can be read in two among his most renowned works: *Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City* and *Mr. Palomar*. Through his ironic perspective, Calvino guided the artists and the workshop participants throughout the adventures of characters who, perceiving nature as an alien entity, confront it in a comic and often surreal way.

The workshop title “The good air” is the same as one of the Marcovaldo stories, to get inspiration from Calvino’s perspective and with the aim of generating an engagement in good spirits within the workshop group and with the public.



Theatre director Orazio Condorelli (centre) and documentary film director Mauro Maugeri (right), musician Antonio Calandra (left), preparing the participants during L’ARIA BUONA event ©Fondazione Lamberto Puggelli



Experimenting with bodies and voices thinking about nature during l’Aria Buona ©Fondazione Lamberto Puggelli



Applying empathic connection during l'Aria Buona ©Fondazione Lamberto Puggelli



Moments of the final performance from l'Aria Buona ©Fondazione Lamberto Puggelli

Alongside a first research approach, they embraced a “synergy approach” when meeting people living a symbiotic relationship with the natural environment, (because of personal choices or significant events in their life), collecting interviews to people who, for example, built a house made of straw on the Etna’s mountainside or moved to the countryside to start a farm. These people became living examples for the workshop group (including the artists, too) of a symbiotic connection with the natural environment and the group let these people inspire them and open a new perspective, a different state of mind.

After this preparatory phase, this art intervention focused particularly on the resilience of nature in the city. The participants went walking in the city to look at the urban spaces with other eyes and finally see how nature always lives among us, with us. They found out that so many plants were growing and springing out from fissures in the concrete walls, in the asphalt paving, in the remaining of ancient lava flows, emerging here and there in the city centre: flowers, grass, even edible plants and a tiny fig tree that found a safe place nearby a church’s gate.

When working on their collective performance, music helped a lot so to avoid a mere “theatrical representation” of reality: having a musician in the group has been a key element in the development of the performance. Thanks to his participation, the possibility to include music in the performance “languages” allowed to create a bridge connecting the various components in their work, developing a symbolic representation of nature, adding sensory and emotional dimensions which made this experience more resonant and engaging for the artists, the participants and the public.

In fact, the participants from the public played a role too: before the beginning of the final performance, each person joining the event received a sheet of paper with a number on it, and a pen. Then, during the performance, they have

been asked to write down what was their definition or idea or sensation of “good air”; they wrote it on their paper sheets and then some numbers were extracted from a hat. The people whose paper sheets had those numbers were invited to read their definitions/ sensations of “good air” and their words, memories and experience became part of the performance.

The persistent resilience and endurance of Nature, within “our” urban spaces and within ourselves as part of nature, was the key theme of this participatory art intervention.

An artistic collaboration between documentary director Mauro Maugeri, theatre director Orazio Condorelli and the local community of Catania

Mauro Maugeri, documentarist author and director

Our first approach to the EMPACT project has been the concept of Anthropocene and reading the peculiar Donna Haraway’s essay *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* has been fundamental. In the essay, which is complex and amusing at the same time, the anthropocentric perspective is overturned (if not denied), starting from the assumption that the human being is part of Nature and that the definition of Anthropocene itself results from an “external” (disconnected) point of view and, as a consequence, misleading.

Going beyond a conflictual concept separating humans and Nature, we proceeded in our research working on pantheistic and holistic studies such as *Love Letter to the Earth* by Thich Nhat Hanh and *Praise to the Earth* by Byung-Chul Han. Then we concluded our research with Italo Calvino (this year, 2023, marks the centenary of his birth) who, since the ‘60s, proposed a very clear and personal vision on the human/nature theme, as can be read in two among his most renowned works: *Marcavaldo, or The Seasons in the City* and *Mr. Palomar*.



Participant Concetta Connie Sapienza playing Summertime reproducing the trumpet with her lips and hands during the final performance of l'Aria Buona ©Fondazione Lamberto Puggelli

With his *Lightness* (which is the title of the first lecture in his famous *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*) he introduces us to the ironic situations of some curious characters confronting Nature, as they perceive themselves as dissociated, separated from it. The good air, the title of our EMPACT socially engaged art intervention, comes from the story with the same title in Calvino's *Marcovaldo*.

In the preparatory phase, we chose the participatory workshop format, with the intention to realize a collective final performance to reflect together on such a universal and politically important theme as the one EMPACT proposes. Therefore, Calvino's book was our guiding text - but never too explicitly - to carry on a research work with the workshop participants and their own dispositions, experiences, readings and visions.

Then, in addition to the idea of a participatory creation of the performance and its "text", came out the desire to start from empirical data, real facts that would bring reality on the stage and not only a representation of reality. For this reason, we decided to include the adjective "documentary"

in the workshop description and to begin the workshop activities interviewing people who, as a personal choice or because of events, live a symbiotic relationship with the natural environment. Many human voices, following the seasons' rhythm: a house made of straw on the Etna's mountainside, a farm in the inner area of Sicily, the grandparents' old olive tree grove restored by their nephew.

Orazio Condorelli, theatre director and playwright

Our fascinating journey within the EMPACT project started addressing empathy among humans and nature, getting inspired by various reflections: different perspectives - from the most traditional and separating ones to the more holistic which acknowledge the interdependence among all the elements and debate the dichotomy between human being and nature as separated entities.

Our work has been developed in two phases; each of them has been decisive in the creation of our workshop and its final performance. The first phase was the beginning of our creative process:

research. The second phase has been dedicated to the transformation of ideas and visions into an engaging "participatory documentary theatre" performance.

In the first research phase, we immersed ourselves in Italo Calvino's works, in particular *Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City*. Through his ironic perspective, Calvino guided us throughout the adventures of characters who, perceiving nature as alien, confront it in a comic and often surreal way. Our workshop title "The good air" has been inspired by one of Marcovaldo stories. It has been a deliberate choice, with the aim of generating a common reflection with the public and the workshop participants, but with lightness, in good spirits.

The second phase allowed us to transform the ideas into a performance: participation has been the beating heart of this process. We wanted to realize a collective experience, a shared reflection on the EMPACT universal themes. Calvino's works were our underlying guide, encouraging a common research, including all our personal dispositions, experience, ideas into a creative and enriching dialogue.

The language we used has been a "documentary" one, putting together empirical data and interviews. We applied a "synergy approach" when meeting people living a symbiotic relationship with the natural environment, thus collecting sincere interviews to people who made important choices, such as building a house made of straw on the Etna's mountainside or moving to the countryside to start a farm. These people became living examples for us of a symbiotic connection with the natural environment.

In this captivating collective journey, we transformed our workshop into a moving experience for the participants, creating human connections through participatory theatre. Having a musician in this group has been a key element in the development of the performance. His contribution has been much more than a musical accompaniment: it has been a

bridge connecting the various components in our work. His participation contributed significantly to develop a symbolic representation of nature, adding sensory and emotional dimensions which made this experience more resonant and engaging for the public.

We started a sincere dialogue and reflection on empathy among humans and nature: we tried to offer a deeper perspective on universal themes with a unique and original collective performance.

Orazio Condorelli

Director, playwright and trainer with a sound experience in social theatre. He conduces theatre workshop series for universities, schools, no-profit associations and penitentiaries. In 2009, he directed his own play "Librino" which was nominated for the Ubu Special Prize and then won at the Mediterranean Experience Festival in 2011. In 2018, he authored and directed "Alla Furca", staged at Matera, European Capital of Culture 2019 and at Kilowatt Festival in 2020. He co-authored with Mauro Maugeri and Carrozzerie | n.o.t. the participatory documentary "Geografia Privata", presented at the Short Theatre in Rome in 2021.

Mauro Maugeri

Author of social and anthropological documentaries, participating at several national and international festival; he works on the whole production process: writing, direction and photography. In 2016 he won a special mention in the I LOVE GAI contest within the 73rd Venice Film Festival with "A lu cielu chianau". He has been working for RAI (the Italian radio and television national public service broadcaster), Mediaset, Sky, Fondazione Vodafone Italia, Eni-Snam, Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia. He also works as a trainer in the movie and communication sectors, running workshop series on audio-visual theory and technique and coordinating the realization of participatory documentaries. He is a member of the UCCA (Unione Circoli Cinematografici dell'Archi) National Council.



WEAVING LINKS: DAYS OF ARTISTIC CREATION AND ECOLOGY

“WeavingLinks” is an artistic intervention between different agents and visual artists. A proposal of co-creation based on the knowledge and use of materials such as clay, natural fibres such as rope, esparto grass and site-specific creative actions. Some of them resulted in ceramic pieces that combine these elements in a current and significant way. In the elaboration of the artistic intervention, the following works were created together with various groups in vulnerable situations: ceramic pieces combining materials and designs, art and collective action of medicinal plants, inclusion of fabrics and natural fibres for the installation work “Nido” by the artist Alejandra Diaz Guerra. Clay, the use of rope and esparto grass have been protagonists in the creative process of the sessions. Through open workshops, the participants had the opportunity to get to know, manipulate and explore shapes and colours.

The participants have delved into the process of transformation of the material. The clay has been kneaded, modelled and painted

with glazes and then fired at temperatures ranging from 800 to 1230°. As for the use of esparto grass and rope, it has been provided by artisans and a collective from rural areas who collect this plant and guarantee its tradition at risk of being forgotten.

In order to carry out the collective creation proposal, the program included different creation laboratories. Particularly, the “Planting to take care of life” consisted of an artistic action led by an expert in medicinal plants who carried out a collective Hacker Gardening action to activate a medicinal garden spot in an abandoned community center. The proposal was the first of a series of actions in the creative phase with the community and artists. The action aimed to generate a first contact between artists, experts and the community for the rest of the actions, in addition to restoring the garden. The action was complemented with a poetic action inspired by the work *The sun and its flowers* by Rupi Kaur. The “Weaving to be art and nature” was a path for reconnection.



Planting to take care of life : Hacker gardening action, learning about medicinal plants ©Espacio Rojo



Planting to take care of life : Hacker gardening action, activating a medicinal garden spot ©Espacio Rojo



Weaving to be: sewing esparto grass techniques ©Espacio Rojo

It was carried out by artists and collectives that made known the esparto grass culture: traditional harvesting, preparation, weaving and sewing techniques. Linking cultural and artistic initiatives and intangible heritage. This proposal was carried out with the collaboration of the artist in residence Rebeca Sforzani. Last but not least, the “Whisper of clay: creation with clay”. Clay is an element that arises from mixing earth and water, two of the essential elements of nature. This creative phase developed a ceramic creation laboratory and the artistic intervention with the weaving of esparto grass and rope in the work “Nest” by the guest artist Alejandra Diaz Guerra.

The outstanding feature of this action within this project is its group and empathic character. The active and practical participation of the participants, the interdisciplinary cooperation between artists, professionals and experts in other social and community areas demonstrate

the value of our project to make culture an accessible and transformative right. “Weaving links: Days of artistic creation and ecology” is focused on specific groups and their needs, such as women in situations of social vulnerability. Linked to this proposal it is important to highlight the ecofeminist theory and thinking, a theory and practice that allows linking oppressions and understanding the world combining the tools of social ecology, and the movement of groups in a global world in defense of the earth that are presented and configured as key agents to defend and protect life.

The interdisciplinary nature of the proposal promotes in the participants thoughts, sensations and actions that transform community and social spaces into an artistic environment. It also aims to reach people who have little affinity with standardized art and culture, transforming the everyday urban environment into an artistic

and dynamic environment that evokes a deep and shared reflection in the face of eco-social challenges. The role of the artist and his work in this context is configured as an empathetic mediator working together with artisans, artists, and the community. The value of the action highlights the relationship between the artistic work and the traditional crafts, combining contemporary art, design, and ecology.

An artistic collaboration between artist Alejandra Diaz Guerra and women in situations of social vulnerability

Crafting art through the interplay of esparto grass and ceramics takes me on a journey that weaves together the threads of harmonious collaboration between nature and communities. My artistic expression mirrors the delicate balance between nature and human connection, intertwining strands of purpose and meaning.

Esparto grass, with its resilient fibers, serves as the cornerstone of my artistic narrative. Each strand establishes a connection to the environment, a tangible link to the Earth’s bounty. As I navigate various weaving techniques, I am reminded of the intricate relationships that form the fabric of our society.

Growing up between a village near Toledo and the bustling city of Madrid, I realized that my approach to life and art needed to be rooted in communities. Weaving became a tool for me to connect with my local roots, Spanish traditions, and the labor of women who found a bond to community and liberation through art. Inspired by my grandmother, I use weaving to empower other women and children to express their voices through encounters with communities willing to listen as we weave threads that bind us together. My work revolves around materials that enable empathy to guide my creative process. The tactile nature of esparto grass and ceramics allows me to



Weaving to be: sewing esparto grass techniques ©Espacio Rojo



The whisper of clay: artistic intervention with the weaving of esparto grass and rope in the work "Nest" by the guest artist Alejandra Diaz Guerra ©Espacio Rojo

communicate on a sensory level, inviting viewers to feel the stories embedded in every twist and turn. Through this medium, I aim to evoke a shared experience, fostering empathy that transcends cultural and societal boundaries.

Communities, both local and global, serve as a wellspring of inspiration for me. In my art, I celebrate diversity and unity, recognizing that each strand contributes to the overall beauty and strength of the composition. This celebration extends beyond the artwork itself, reflecting the inclusivity I aspire to cultivate in the communities surrounding and engaging with my creations. Making big art installations using natural materials and open collaborations with local communities have allowed me to transform my art into a channel to spread traditions for new and old generations. One such installation, NIDO, was redefined for participation in encounters like “Weaving Links: Community Creation, Art and Ecology” in Madrid by Espacio Rojo and Empact Creative Europe.

“NIDO” an immersive and participatory installation woven entirely with esparto grass in collaboration with the artisans of the “Habitar el esparto” project by Alfresco Museos organization and the NGO Cesal, embodied a spiral shape, inviting exploration of various esparto grass techniques. It evoked the labyrinthine play of memory connected with the tradition of esparto in Spanish craftsmanship, a tradition facing decline due to cheaper materials with a greater environmental impact. Esparto grass, as a renewable resource, underscores the importance of working in harmony with nature. Through my art, I aim to raise awareness about the ecological impact of creative practices, advocating for a mindful approach that nurtures the environment. Working closely with local communities relying on esparto grass for centuries has influenced my artistic philosophy, addressing the value of craftsmanship and the impact of consumer choices. By using sustainable, locally sourced materials,

I support ethical practices and contribute to the economic well-being.

This intentional approach challenges conventional notions of mass production, emphasizing the significance of investing in art with deeper meaning and purpose. In the intersection of esparto grass and ceramics, my art engages in a dialogue between tradition and innovation. It stands as a testament to the enduring power of craft, rooted in centuries-old techniques yet infused with contemporary relevance. The fusion of these materials serves as a metaphor for the delicate dance between preservation and evolution, highlighting the importance of embracing the past while forging a path toward a more sustainable and inclusive future.

Alejandra Díaz-Guerra

Alejandra Díaz-Guerra is a multidisciplinary artist and art curator from Madrid (Spain). Her academic training in philosophy (aesthetics) and art curation defines her interest in mediation and teaching through art. Combining both aspects, theoretical and artistic practice, she aims to make an impact by tackling different areas of her concern such as our relationship with nature in the context of new implications of tradition as a framework for contemporary creation. In the form of experimental mediums, she speculates and questions not only contemporary ecologies but also new academic approaches and radical notions of learning within the context of crafts and communities. Alejandra has participated in art residencies in Spain, Portugal and France, while her work has been exhibited in Madrid, Valencia, London and Amsterdam.





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