(UN)COMMON GROUNDS

Ideas
around
art
and
community

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Content

INTRODUCTION

by Sofia Casarin

As with most cultural initiatives, value resides not in outcomes but in moments of the process, pause, and inexplicable encounter. We proposed to make this book based on assumed, anticipated, or even idealized similarities. In our attempt to interweave words and practices, we realize who we are and what we do. As a result, the content of this publication holds more disparities than common grounds. It offers irregular rhythms, shifting conjectures, contrasting contexts, and struggles standing at a distance from one another. Even against the forces of homogenization of global art ecosystems, we realized we experience time and our work in the arts so differently.

The nine of us met during the GCLP program organized by the Cultural Relations Platform, an EU-funded project. Few of us understood why we were there in the first place and what sort of connections existed amongst us. The program reunited us again; we met others, grouped, witnessed, and listened to each other. In conversation, we encountered a lack of, or a void for, publications and literary references that represent voices and experiences around art and community from overlooked territories. We found ourselves dwelling on hackneyed language and discourse. Moving from *platforms to exchanges*, to the geopolitics of the Global South, and the ways our cultural organizations and practices could perhaps concur and align.

Craving utmost transparency, we envisioned a book as a space for sharing useful and practical tools, futile and fruitful art projects. We thought that these would provide the answers needed to do our work better. The collaborations for this book were conceived and developed a couple of years ago. After different sorts of challenges: the necessary silences for the words to come together, the choice of English (although it is no one's first language), a global pandemic, complex logistics, overly renewed deadlines, today we find ourselves in a different moment for this book. Perhaps, an opportunity to assess the past as a way of rethinking and designing our practices for possible futures.

Collaborating with communities, working in vulnerable territories and public spaces, joining political demands through art – all of this has provided us with unending and arduous questions on whether our ways and our hows truthfully dignify their constituents. We continue to dwell on renewed meanings of fairness and justice.

We repeatedly question whether our work falls under a privileged structure that reinforces the gaps of inequality and our inherent complicity in the struggles we believe we are fighting against. Whether the cultural organizations we construct end up being co-opted by the forces of the voracious economical system (which they do, eventually). More specifically, whether we see it with clarity, realize it collectively, and respond meaningfully with our projects.

We are all systemically pierced and mediated. Our encounter, and hence the content of this publication, corroborates the re-enaction of hegemonic cultural structures. They also unveil an utterance of resistance – of continuous attempts of emphasizing – or, in some cases, collectively re-building the dignity of our territories, communities, and the place our practices occupy from within.

This book offers voices, gestures, testimonies, stories, conversations, and images of remembrance from places in Argentina, Brazil, Germany, India, Mexico, Russia, and Rumania. It reveals the variances in how we all understand art in the public space or socially engaged art and how these came to be named, studied, and learned in different contexts. This project attests to the potency of collaboration and coalition amongst women. It contains reaffirming acts of the central overlap between us. We whole-heartedly intend to make sense of life, generate a sense of our collective experience, integrate the unbearable through practices of togetherness. From the words of my co-editor, "On the most basic level, in order to live in this world without despair – that catalyzer of pain-inflicting gestures towards oneself as well as one's surroundings – humans look for explanations, possibilities, stories, and concepts."

Plotting a Practice

Conversations with **Sumona Chakravarty** & **Jasmeen Patheja**
proposed by **Radha Mahendru**

Editing this series of conversations with two incredible artists, friends, and allies, has been an important, almost meditative task for me. It has helped me find some grounding in otherwise uncertain times. The first six months of 2020 have been tumultuous in India: the residues of the #MeToo movement, clamp down on free speech and press, imposition of the fascist CAA/NRC law, subsequent countrywide protests led by the country's women and youth that culminated in violent riots in the city I call home.

Never before have I interrogated with such thoroughness the role of the arts and my place in it, as I plot myself along the axes of my creative practice, politics, and personal beliefs. I am grateful that I can turn to the work and practice of Sumona and Jasmeen, who have built two powerful artist-led organizations with a lightness of touch and rigor, with interventions that are rooted in affect.

Radha: Blank Noise began with a need to start a conversation, to explore how art can be confrontational, and heal and trigger dialogue.

Jasmeen: I remember talking to a friend and senior of mine at Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology. I said I wanted everybody to be part of the conversation, and he laughed and asked, 'Do you mean you want to start a movement?' I hesitantly mumbled, 'Yes'... Maybe I didn't have the vocabulary to articulate that desire and intention as movement building. The vision was always that it should be built by people who step in to take ownership and responsibility of street harassment. I remember thinking: if it affected everyone in visible or invisible ways, why are we not talking about it? Why are we not recognizing it and addressing it? Blank Noise began with 60 girl students from Srishti and a mind map in response to the word 'public space'. This was followed by a conversation: of the 60, nine were interested in taking this forward.

Radha: In many ways, Hamdasti has been the exact opposite. It actually grew out of an incubator at Harvard; in that sense, it had a lot more of a structured beginning. And perhaps that has been crucial for achieving a certain sustainability?

Sumona: To go back in time, seven years before Hamdasti began, I was part of one of Jasmeen's interventions in public spaces. I held a public poll on a street corner, with a message on how bystanders would react to seeing an incidence of sexual harassment. I remember the experience making me feel really powerful. But at the same time, it made me feel like I was disempowering people whom I confronted on the road. I told Jasmeen that I felt bad for making those people feel guilty, but I also recognized the power of the process, how it heals women when they can confront their experiences and those complicit and seize power. It was very moving. However, drawing from my theater practice, I was more interested in being a facilitator and seeing how an engagement could be a dialogue instead of a confrontation.

When I started Hamdasti, I wanted to find a framework that was broad enough to allow people to experiment within it: to have different artists working together without making a collective or a homogenous community; retaining individualism but without giving primacy to the artistic careers that one might have. I personally really like the idea of fellowship versus a collective, and that became the framework.

Radha: Both of you have, intentionally or not, chosen forms that have a strong sense of collectivity and co-creation.

Jasmeen: Blank Noise is now an organization, but the vision for it is that it has to be very tiny, to be organized enough to enable the wheels of the movement. It is a practice that is rooted in movement building, built by individuals who step in because the issue speaks to them – Action Sheroes/ Heroes/ Theyroes. There is a personal, lived, or inherited herstory to Blank Noise. The movement is built on their intention, labor, commitment, participation.

Blank Noise's first ten years were different from where we are today because there were people who were coming in with a sense of 'this is an issue I care about too', with a 'let's roll up our sleeves and do something' attitude. We were mostly the same age as well. Blank Noise is now 17 years of age… People coming in are in their late teens and 20s, and I am 40. The dynamic is different from the time when all of us were in our 20s. Earlier, we were discovering and probing the issue together, and now, for instance, people are coming in because they have 'heard of it', or could have seen and connected with my TED talk. They perhaps come thinking they will be engaging with some expert (I would say that with 17 years of practice, there is a certain level of expertise, of course). I suppose one way to negate that is to recognize that we might be in a new place with this issue, and the expertise may lie in asking the questions and creating inquiry.

Radha: Being a creative practitioner or an artist – it is a way of orienting yourself. Is this a map that is helping you navigate the real world? Do you define the focus of your work by the 'issues' and 'social themes' it addresses? Or do you feel no need to define it?

Jasmeen: I always feel that the inquiry behind my work would remain constant, even if I went somewhere for, say, an Artist-in-Residency program, even if it was outside of the country. I am interested in understanding this triangular relationship of fear, warnings, and victim-blaming, and how do we acknowledge it, and how do we free ourselves from it across contexts. I rarely introduce my practice from the position of 'this is India', but rather trying to explore how this triangle speaks to a community in another geographical, cultural context. This is where the conversation begins. There is no outsider nor audience. it is an invitation for everyone to step in. It invites you to articulate why you chose to step in.

I wanted to ask Sumona, 'What does the artist bring in or offer?' As artist facilitators engaging with different stakeholders, can we pause to ask, "What is my inquiry? Where do I locate myself in this engagement, and what am I giving myself permission to do or offer?"

Sumona: So, at one level, there is an individual artist, the one that is a part of a collective or fellowship of artists, and then there is an ongoing collective, collaborative practice, and so the role of the artist changes based on where you are positioned across these levels. **But you are always engaging, nudging, churning at all levels.**

I thought the arts have this way of constantly churning ideas or creating spaces to pause, reflect, look back, whereas, with a lot of development work in the larger social sector, you're moving on a forward path; but I think, perhaps, change takes a circular or spiralling path.

And then all of this is thrown into chaos when there is an immediate political issue that everybody is mobilizing towards. Something that needs direct action, like CAA + NRC [the Citizenship Amendment Act passed in 2019 which allows for expedited citizenship to non-Muslim refugees and in combination with the National Register of Citizens has the potential to render millions of Indian Muslims stateless]. Then how does this ongoing gentle stirring respond and galvanize towards that? I am confused about it, and I don't know what the answer is.

Radha: It's not like your work at Hamdasti is not political! Or do you think it's differently political?

Sumona: That seems so gentle. How do you even engage with these almost cataclysmic moments of disruption when your practice is about quietly pushing at the edges? I don't know. Maybe then you can't. I find some value in the way in which we can dovetail our work into the work of NGOs or alliances we collaborate with, as a way of being an interrogator, of providing a space for reflection.

Churning is useful, but it seems too gentle and incremental when you look at the scale of these destructive things that have happened. Right now, while the CAA+NRC protests were happening, I was doing this project with clubs of men or bodybuilding clubs in North Calcutta. I think that people only participate if you find some kind of common ground with them. We spent about three months just going there, talking to people, and then decided to create a series of videos for their club, a multi-part series, talking about the culture of the club, and creating a conversation around masculinity.

I kept thinking, what am I doing here when the country's up in arms, and what is this project all about, but I found ways in which the CAA conversation fed into this. So as a part of creating the image of an ideal man, I made symbols, things that could represent their ideas of what they should be in society. I included an image of the flag, of someone dissenting, or someone protesting; while people were creating the images, conversations about CAA and why we should be protesting fed into the activity. I felt I had found some kind of bridge. It gave me the motivation that maybe it's okay. Your activism doesn't have to happen at the level of a mass movement to be effective.

So here I am facilitating a collaborative practice at this community club, then at a second level, I'm working with other artists in our fellowship challenging each other's practice, and at a tangential level, I am an individual citizen joining protests or individual artists producing illustrations about this moment. Initially, I thought all the levels have to be connected, but maybe they are all parts of your toolkit, ways of responding to the world around you and creating space wherever you go, and negotiating the different spaces you occupy.

Radha: So, what is it that artists bring to the table that others don't?

Jasmeen: I think it is in the 'how' – the methods, tools, and ways of activating public consciousness. How are we opening a conversation? What are the multiple forms of confrontation? How do we communicate, to whom, and why? What do I and we want to say? What is the person or community being spoken to ready to hear? How do we recognize and nudge that? The artist is working towards communication, facilitation, and arriving at a tonal accuracy to shift and affect public or community consciousness...

Looking at the work, voice, and approach of activists and allies that I deeply admire makes me think that there is a shared vision for the world, but with different approaches to dissent. You could be allies, but the way of doing things is different. An artist is perhaps also seeking to build, arrive at, decipher ways of engaging and bringing people along – designing that is part of the practice. I admire the fierceness, fearlessness, and thoughtful swiftness with which my activist friends and allies respond to an ongoing crisis. I find that I take time to respond, step back, see how I am feeling, get a sense of the public sentiment, trigger community response and then propose interventions.

Sumona: I agree with that. For me stepping back and making room for engagement is not out of a natural tendency to be someone who takes time to process, but it is a desire not to take up too much space, and recognizing that I've done that in the past and that I have a tendency to do so.

Radha: I think it's important to be political, but that does not always demand immediate action or reaction – to take sides, to sloganeer, or cancel something. We need to make space to just listen and reflect.

Sumona: But that is also a question of our privilege.

Jasmeen: There is a need to find new ways of being heard and making change, a shift in how we imagine and perform protest. I witness a sense of borrowing from different practices – like an artist could learn from an anthropologist or a campaigner, or from healing practices, or even from mainstream and popular media. What can we exchange so that the protest meets its purpose? How do we protest so that it's heard so that the message is internalized? How do we protest so that the media carries a story with the accuracy of its intention and form? I think people are stretching and crossing boundaries of what was otherwise rigid.

Sumona: With Hamdasti, we've had this sustained connection in the Chitpur area of Calcutta, working with small community groups like the Hathkhola Byam Samiti (club) or the local school and police station. Parallelly, we have been trying to find ways to collaborate with the women's movement by working with different organizations like Anjali, Swayam, and Kolkata Sanved within the women's network in Calcutta. We have been engaging in an ongoing conversation about our role, and they're listening when we say that it's not just about artists designing your book or your brochure or making a poster. Let art be a part of the process, part of the work that your organization does, creating a place for reflection, not just as a means of adding beauty or providing a recreation space for communities. We recently did a project with

Sanjog, an organization that focuses on the prevention of child and women trafficking. We facilitated an art-making exercise through which the organizations in their network reflected on their processes of change-making over the past ten years.

Jasmeen, in your work as well, you've been testing for a long time the different ways of partnering with NGOs. You have also been testing this during the Nirbhaya Movement connected to the Jyoti Singh case; what was Blank Noise's role in that situation? Was social activism something you learned then, which you apply now?

Jasmeen: It was more of exploring, building relationships and solidarity with a network of allies instead of testing, I think. After Jyoti Singh's gang rape and murder on 16th December 2012, we saw a country united in rage. There was rage that demanded accountability. There was also a kind of rage that believed capital punishment was justice. At Blank Noise, we wanted to create space for reflection, introspection, and action. We wanted to affirm the very idea that every person can play a role in creating a safe space, in creating a safe city – that is the Action Shero. This led to the project and hashtag #SafeCityPledge, initiated towards the end of December on Twitter and in public spaces across multiple cities and towns, with people sharing a unique and personal pledge. The latter grew into a 24-hour #SafeCityPledge tweetathon and Safe City Pledge workshops in schools and events with feminist allies. Thousands of persons stepped back to reflect and propose ways of living up to their role and responsibility to end violence against women.

I don't think social activism was something I learned then and applied now. I find myself learning how to organize from other organizations and build movements from campaigners – both allow me to reimagine my art practice. I think that, given the newness of the discourse around socially engaged art practice, there is a challenge in how people make sense of Blank Noise. For some, it is an NGO or a collective. In some cases, there is a reductive perception of 'that creative group', with a 'box of ideas' to provide 'creative solutions' to a social issue.

Meet to Sleep (MTS) brings women, girls, and persons beyond gender binaries to take a nap in public spaces – in parks, open fields, or anywhere under the open sky. We sleep, asserting the right to live free from fear. It is built in association with multiple feminist organizations and allies and is held every year on 16th December.
I Never Asked For It (INAFI) has different interventions and projects within it, one being *Walk Towards Healing*, which invites Action Sheroes to walk through public spaces carrying a garment they were harassed in on their shoulder. *Meet to Sleep* and *I Never Ask for It* are

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two sides of the same coin. We are negotiating a climate and memory of fear and warnings in this act and rejecting every warning by sleeping defenseless. *MTS* is embodying what *INAFI* is making visible. The latter creates space for addressing victim blame by speaking, being heard and believed, and by building garment testimonials.

Radha: Do you ever feel burdened or boxed in by the mandate of the organization or what people think you should be doing?

Jasmeen: I don't feel burdened, but I do feel there is so much to be done, and we need to have the capacity to do so. Blank Noise is collective labor and knowledge. People have shared with the intention for it to be part of public knowledge, to shift something in the world. We are devising ways, formats, and media towards this. I am interested in finding more forms for sharing and publishing. We published a poem on a wall earlier this year – *The Step by Step Guide to Unapologetic Walking*. You are walking while reading it.

Sumona: I think earlier, we used to look at Chitpur as a site because that's what it was, two streets next to each other, and all our work was happening in that neighborhood. But engaging with different groups and communities has helped shift this. It's not a site but an ecosystem of different people with different interests and aspirations and this has allowed us to go outside Chitpur without feeling like we're abandoning the space. It doesn't feel like it's one unified community or identity or geography anymore. And I think that has resulted in going back to the question, **'How can you test the limits of people's comfort, their limitations, perceptions and how do you push those boundaries, challenge them'?**

Radha: How do you think about the future of your organization, and how does financial stability factor in?

Jasmeen: I spent the first decade of Blank Noise without thinking about it. We didn't have a budget – it was idealism, a deep interest, and in hindsight, also a privilege that contributed to me continuing my practice. We were also using forms such as the web, blogging, and our bodies as a medium. The labour was shared. The digital community would show up, respond, build dialogue, grow the community. I was personally supported through fellowships: I was a research associate at Srishti for a year, then I received the Ashoka Fellowship for three years. I didn't run into conversations on cost and budget in any visible way. But now the 'C' word has crept in – we need to build capacity to meet our vision, to have a robust team that will enable the walk towards financial stability.

Sumona: I don't think we've ever done a project based on a grant. We've always started working on a project and then raised funds for it. This was possible because we had other practices to sustain us, and this is something which we can do almost outside of the art world or the development world. That may have limited our growth and the amount of money we're using, but I think that frugality also lends to nimbleness.

Jasmeen: We didn't work with budgets and funds for most of the practice, but at this stage, we do. And it's because both the mission and the movement have grown in a way that at this stage, funding is definitely very, very important. We are working towards 2023 when we want to build a 10,000-garment testimonial to bring to India Gate. In the past, I have hesitated to put a finite date or number to our projects. The project needs infrastructure, and not thinking about funding is impossible. Having said that, I also don't want to lose that natural spirit of taking things one step at a time.

Sumona: We may be going in the opposite direction: we started with a structure of the fellowship, and now we want to try to open it up a little more towards experimentation and questioning. We are at that undoing stage right now, where we are building incrementally. This year the artists came into the fellowship structure very formally; earlier, it was more organic. While the rest of the process is more or less like before, there is something that is not working as well this time around. Maybe the work is not as engaged, or we're not building the kind of collectives that we want as intensely as we should; maybe something needs to be tweaked. We are trying to see what has failed and how we can make the structure more responsive to something failing.

This has also resulted in going back to the question of 'How can our work test the limits of people's comfort and push those boundaries?' During a project, everybody is collectivizing for an instant – there are moments of surprise, of free-thinking, of building new perspectives – and we disperse again. But to really identify what is working or not, we are trying to arrive at a set of questions – **'Are the artists creating encounters where people who usually don't interact with each other come together for a moment?' Are power structures being redistributed, are people's ideas being sufficiently questioned?'** That is just how I've tried to find one small metric to use for different projects, to see whether they are working or not.

Radha: How do you negotiate the power dynamics within the organization – be it the collective, the fellowship, or the movement? Have you received any critique?

Jasmeen: To begin with, by recognizing it and working with that. There is bound to be a shifting power dynamic, especially as the collective grows in age and as I grow old too. Working with feminists such as Srilatha Batliwala, who works on concepts of feminist power vs. patriarchal power, I have come to understand this distinction more and also, in some ways, 'watch out' for what we might even blindly perpetuate.

When it comes to critique, there has been a lot of it, from the very beginning; that critique has shaped us and informed us. When I started out, I had no understanding of words like class and caste. I just came from, 'That man in the bus groped me, he is bad, I'm right, and I deserve to be heard.' If it hadn't been for people criticizing us, as painful as it was, I would not have learned to see it as something that was not about me individually but rather systemic, and that there was politics in fear, and which men, and which women were taught to fear. It made me think of my power and privilege while still holding space to understand and process experiences of violation.

Sumona: There is an expectation to perform a certain level of wokeness or goodness, but I think that's also a problem. I feel we have to become comfortable with saying that we don't know, that we are privileged, we are unsure, we are not tuned in to the experience that is out there – that we make mistakes.

This happened to me when one of our trustees was accused on social media of inappropriate sexual conduct in the wake of the #MeToo movement, but unlike other instances of denial or half-hearted apologies by the accused, in this case, our trustee took the initiative to reassess his past actions. When you're faced with such a situation where the accused accepts their mistakes, you realize there is no right way around. Things are not so black and white. I think with these situations, recognizing that you've made mistakes, and will make mistakes again, is something which I'm getting more used to. Not trying to be right all the time, but trying to process, learn, and in general, trying to do more of that when engaging with Twitter-verse and Instagram-verse. I think that's something we have to become better at, in general on the left. Otherwise, it is too polarizing.

Radha: Over the past year or two, I have actively tried to reject a binary way of thinking. How do we inhabit more middle spaces – not choose between artist or activist, individual or collective? How do we break these silos in which people operate, whether it is the civil society space or the social change space, or the artistic space? Maybe it also extends to how we deal with certain politics.

Sumona: I do feel that this ability to exist in liminal spaces is a privilege. The reason why you are forced to sometimes stand for or against something is because you are possibly facing the direct consequences of an action or policy, or idea. So, to occupy a space of questioning, probing, or uncertainty is itself a privilege.

Radha: How to acknowledge that privilege but also accept it and build on the luxury of slippages it affords?

Jasmeen: Besides privilege, to also claim your practice as an artist and give yourself permission to ask questions and imagine your role. To acknowledge that I am still seeking something. My end result may or may not be a petition that you have to sign. It may be a different way of asking or responding, or it may intend to look exactly like something you have seen before... We've heard 'No violence against women' all our lives. We were born into a world that said 'No violence against women', but why has violence not stopped? How do we articulate our inquiry?

Sumona: That's true; it is a nice way to give yourself permission to play that role. I sometimes think of the artist as someone who is allowed to play the role of a court jester. As one who asks unexpected questions, creates surprising encounters, confuses assumptions and preconceived notions, subverts hierarchies and is allowed not to know, not to take clear sides. Even when personally you possibly have very clear opinions and politics.

Jasmeen: As artists, perhaps we are allowed to go beyond a problem-solving approach to a place of imagination and play. Perhaps we are facilitating ways for a community to imagine, play, and or arrive at new questions.

Sumona: Maybe if we don't look at it as a position of privilege but as being a jester so that you don't absolve yourself of responsibility, but take seriously the responsibility of stirring the pot, asking befuddling questions, and creating surprising encounters. Maybe we can be more comfortable with being this jester, with being in between.

Rebels for Peace

By **Anna Sagalchik**

50 teenagers from different countries
in the art-residency in Zeitz.
3 weeks side by side to get to know
yourself and the others.

HALLO ☺

WE BOMBED
THE WALL
SO COOL!

WE ARE
COOL CREW!

HEY,
YOU GO EASY
ON HIM!

NO, IT WAS
DEFINITELY
A GOAL!

They spoke different languages, had completely different experiences and cultural backgrounds. But very quickly they realized that they had more in common than they thought.

HMM... SHE IS
COOL TOO!

A performance at the grocery store,
a festival across town, choir rehearsals
at the noodle factory, and 100 more
crazy things to do!
The important thing is we are all together.

THE ART-GROUP "7MixKids"

THIS TOWN NEEDS
MORE BRIGHT COLORS
AND CRAZY THINGS!

"LET'S KEEP THE RHYTHM!
LET'S PUT THE FUTURE
BEHIND US!"

"WE ARE JUST GOING TO
JUGGLE IN THE
CENTRAL SQUARE..."

The rhythm, the first flip in one's life,
art objects you made yourself.
The residence was a chance for everyone
to rediscover who they really were.

TWEET-TWEET!
WHAT BIRD
IS THAT?

YES, YOU CAN!

OH, I MADE IT!

YO-HO-HO,
THERE'S NEVER
BEEN SUCH A VIEW
FROM THE TOWN HALL
WINDOWS!

We created the performance "DoMiNo"
at the residency. It is based on real stories
of teenagers from Germany, Syria,
Afghanistan and Russia.

Domino is a game everyone knows
since childhood.It helps you find a common
language and understand each other much
better, even if you speak different languages.

Just out of frame there were the difficulties of translations, tears, homesickness, fights, midnight escapes for Wi-Fi, stares from the locals, flying dishes, hard conversations about peace and war, trash accidentally thrown into the excavations of an ancient city, the first unrequited teenager love...

The “Rebels for peace” residency has shown us all that borders really exist only in our heads.

If the Old Bazaar Could Talk

By **Sarmistha Chatterjee**

It was like any other busy day at the office, packed with site visits, meetings, and project proposal developments. The telephone rang several times; I was the one who eventually picked up. On that hot summer afternoon, the busy noises inside the office made it difficult for me to clearly understand the person over the phone. Even though the voice was full of pleasantries and humbleness, the details were inaudible. I quickly took a run outside the door to not miss out on any more details. After a long, 30-minute conversation, I was confused about being invited to Kolkata to assess an old building, which was to remain a secret until I entered the site.

Upon reaching Kolkata three days later, the client met me at the lobby of the Great Eastern Hotel. This hotel has a history of its own. I found it mentioned by Rudyard Kipling in his book *the City of Dreadful Night*. It has also hosted the likes of Mark Twain, Elizabeth II, and many more. The day began by brushing with heritage from the colonial past.

We left for our site location. As we kept moving through the jam-packed streets of old Kolkata, the density of shops, people, vehicles, businesses, and buildings began to increase. The chaos was not unknown to me. Historic cities in India are often very dense with extreme vibrancy. It is where the city began its journey – a melting pot of ideas, images, and fantasy.

We reached the site at Pollock Street around 10 am, after a 20-minute drive. The site was approachable by a 4-feet wide road, encroached in the corners by shops selling different types of street food. The road perpendicular to Pollock Street led us to one of the largest electrical wholesale markets of India. This bazaar eventually became the main community space for all interactions during the conservation process. At the intersection of these two roads stood a yellow building known as the Beth El Synagogue. This area of Kolkata has three synagogues. Each one of them narrates a unique story of the presence and accomplishment of Jewish people in India. From a strong community

of 3000, presently, there are only 8 Jewish families in the city. Kolkata has begun to forget its history.

The contributions of Jewish people to the economy, technology, entertainment, and infrastructure of the city has been almost forgotten. The places of worship have started being referred to as churches by the common man. Often, I would be asked by the taxi driver if I wanted the vehicle stopped outside the yellow church or the red church. Whenever I would attempt to correct the driver, he would almost ignore me and not understand my point. Thus began our journey to rebuild the lost narrative of the historic city of Kolkata.

Upon entering the site, we were greeted by the caretakers of the synagogue: Mr. Khan, 71, and his two sons in their fifties, along with their families, who have been taking care of the synagogues for generations. What would come to one's notice is that the caretakers were not Jewish but Muslims. The co-existence of two different communities in a sacred space immediately shatters any of our adulterated notions of society. The first thing we became aware of was that it is not our man-made societal exclusions but the needs of the community that define the functioning of our historic precincts. Wars may occur in different parts of the world: but here it is a different story. During the next three years, conversations with Mr. Khan's family helped me understand how they were chosen to look after that heritage space and why it was very comfortable for my client to continue with the same family as caretakers.

Often as experts of old buildings, we directly jump into doing scientific explorations and other documentation exercises, but learning from the people who have grown up with these structures is overlooked. Rather it should be the first step to real heritage conservation. Mr. Khan, myself, and my team spent our lunch breaks chatting over cups of tea and recording his stories of the spaces in and around the synagogue. Some learnings that came out were that both communities perform prayers in a similar way, with believers bending and bowing the body in front of God; both pray to the Almighty and are not idol worshippers; they wear a skull cap inside the religious space. They do not eat pork, and only kosher and halal food is consumed within the premises. Baking bread comes naturally, too. All of this may sound very simple, but the complexity of existence is felt distinctly. A space that allows man to exist at his best without disturbing his necessities is accepted and adapted. It reminds me of a quote that I read once while researching Salman Rushdie. He said, *"There is no alternative to the peaceful coexistence of cultures."*

Pardon me for not taking you around the building yet. I will be conversing with you through small experiences and learnings that helped us achieve success in our conservation process. I will not be sharing scientific or technical details, only stories of people from a specific community in a historic city.

On reaching both the sites and being welcomed generously, I was awed by the simplicity and grandeur of the buildings. The two synagogues looked starkly different from one another and stood on opposite sides of the road. I noticed the first one because of its simple yellow facade with large rosary windows made of beautifully colored Belgian glass, which created endless reflections inside the building. I quickly sprinted up the stairs, opened the grand door, and there lay before me another hidden history of the city. I was enthralled by the scale and architectural beauty of the building. Every corner narrated a history yet to be discussed and discovered in detail. The other synagogue, painted in red, represented the high period of Renaissance architecture. It had a bell tower and several rosary windows.

The exploration began. It was only the three of us: myself, the client, and his assistant. We roamed throughout the entire site and looked at every corner of the buildings. After seven hours of talking and exploring each floor with me, the client and I developed a friendship. The buildings threw at us grave challenges in its restoration. However, the most critical challenge lay outside the premise of the property: the community. These historic sites have always existed within a context. A canvas where the community has grown, lived, and believed in the authenticity of the space. As the days passed, my team and I began to realize the value of people and how conservation is not just a scientific process but a community-led one. Every day brought about new challenges. The buildings intended for conservation were located in the middle of a large, high-density, wholesale market area. The people began to play a major role. The vision of the project was completely changed from an 'only built' to 'for the community'.

Let me share a few insights regarding this. As I had mentioned earlier, the Jewish population in the city has dwindled to approximately eight families. Since 1948, Jewish people from all over the world had migrated to the newly formed country of Israel, never to return to the cities where entire generations had lived. Earlier in Kolkata, three synagogues would fall short of hosting everyone during prayers; today, the aisles are almost always empty. Daily visits to the

three synagogues of the city have stopped. With only a few Jewish stakeholders left, and almost no regular meetings during prayers, marriages, and other festivals, it was easy to forget the meaning of that space. With dwindling visitors, the main gate had begun to disappear amidst the many shops that kept growing along the bazaar. Entering or leaving the site was a challenge, as a prior 20-minute notice had to be given to the shopkeepers to remove their goods.

Any worksite needs access; this was not possible in our case. The challenge here was not just a change in the functional pattern of the street but also a morphological change. We started asking ourselves if we were eligible to bring about this change. Would the community accept this change? Would a change like this lead to the loss of livelihood for those shopkeepers? Who decides whose heritage it is? Thus began another layer of understanding the context. The site required an approach without adversely affecting livelihood, land use, functionality, or loss of street character. The best approach that we could come up with was to co-exist once more. The team began to converse with each shopkeeper. Sometimes knickknacks were brought. At other times weather conditions were discussed. Food was ordered from the street corner, and adda breaks took place at the tea stalls. The idea was to make them accept us within their locality. Slowly, over the next three months, we began to unroll the thread of stories in the neighborhood. Shopkeepers soon began to see the value in the exhaustive and strenuous process undertaken by us in assessing and analyzing the historicity of the building. Of course, great care was taken, and proper scientific methods were employed throughout. The idea was to create as much awareness as possible for the buildings through proper conservation, which also meant better visibility and more visitors. It would also lead to a higher revenue generation for the market. Slowly, with consensus, the gate of the synagogue began to reappear. Although slightly delayed, goods reached the site and the work began.

The 6-month journey of conversations allowed us to believe that the role of communities is equally important in managing and maintaining heritage sites. We continued our discussions. For almost a year, we were associated with the site and its people. Our talks moved from friendly chit-chat to learning about their families. Sometimes, quick runs were made to shops to buy construction materials and interior design products.

The first thing we became aware of was that they are not our man-made societal exclusions, but the needs of the community, that define the functioning of our historic precincts.

The work progressed well until November 2016, when the Indian government declared demonetization, which made all banknotes of the Rupees 500 and 1000 denominations invalid. For any work that involved daily wages, it was the biggest shock. We were stranded in the city with 100-odd workers whose day's wage, which we had just paid, had become invalid. How could we go ahead with our work? Winter rains would soon approach, and the building was opened up. How could we finish re-constructing on time? How could we arrange for food and other necessities for our workers? How were we to buy the goods required to continue the conservation process? Another example of co-existence emerged during these tough times. We fell back on the local people, who by now had accepted us as a part of their system. The one-year journey of conversations, awareness, and mutual developments helped.

As you already know, our buildings were in one of the largest wholesale markets of India. Every shopkeeper by now knew us by our name. It is they who helped to arrange for goods and raw materials. From scaffolds to steel, timber, and light fixtures, everything was made available on time to carry forward the works. The community also arranged food for our workers under credit; we settled the amount later. Co-existence became almost synonymous with the project. With this thought in mind, the project was again re-developed for the people of the city. From being a building conservation project, it began to be called the "Re-dedication" – a complete brain-child idea of the client. The narratives of the streets, the people, their lives entwined with the synagogues, all of it suddenly became one.

Now came the time to head towards completion. It also meant bringing the people of the city together to re-narrate the lost history. From re-building to re-dedication, from exclusion to co-existence, from lost narrative to the newly restored narrative, this had been a journey built, lived, experienced, and learned. Our team, along with the residents, the care-takers of the synagogue, and the client, began to share people's experiences through short stories. Calendars, postcards, and posters were made and distributed for free; students from different schools and colleges produced the illustrations. The word was put out on the street about the re-dedication of the synagogues to the people of the city. Bloggers, heritage enthusiasts, tourists, school children, college students, government officials, and many citizens flocked to the place. Visitors had new experiences to share. Many spoke of the long-gone days of their association with these buildings. From nostalgia to historical facts, knowledge and imagination began to flow. Suddenly, the journey of three long years started to make sense. After all, we always ask: whose heritage is it? I can now say: it is a shared responsibility of the community, the owners, and each and every person associated with the site.

***

Now, I must confess that I wrote this piece to take you with me through these speaking streets. I have shared my experience as an architect to bring you closer to my city, my people, and this re-dedicated heritage.

Come to Kolkata, walk the lanes and reach these buildings.

Let the old bazaars talk to you.

The Factory of Miracles

By **Valeria Sabirova**

Guslitsa was an old weaving factory near Moscow, built of noble red brick during the time of the last Russian tzar. Since then, the factory went through times of collapse, closure, and abandonment. Irina Nikolaeva, encountered the space by chance in 2004, and while intending to reactivate production, she immersed herself in the history of the land, its tradition of craftsmanship and of the Guslitskaya painting style. Together with her brother and performance artist Mikhail Humm, they transformed the factory into a cultural centre, which opened its doors in 2012 as the only cultural venue in the area. Mikhail placed a stone in the center of the factory, in symbolism of Guslitsa's heart and of miracle-creature Gu, a supporter of creatives, to set the foundation for what would become a space for artistic experimentation and community engagement. Since then, Guslitsa has provided its residents an alternative way of living and co-existing with the surrounding forests, a profound engagement with historical craft tradition, and a space for artistic expression and shared knowledge. In ancient times this greenland bore the name Guslitsy, where the Guslitsa river still flows nearby. For the sake of historical preservation, the renovated space was named Guslitsa. And after 8 years since it opened, an entire city has been revived within the huge empty hangars of the factory. Today it has a blackbox theater, exhibition spaces, rehearsal rooms, a guest house, a shared dining room, coworking spaces and a workshop quarter intended for sculpture, carpentry, ceramics, sewing and other activities. Every object found inside Guslista is made by local artists and artisans. Challenges in modern times arrived, from a big fire that destroyed the guesthouse, to invaders and raiders who tried to illegally appropriate the building, to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Guslitsa remains on its journey. Its past, present and future residents and allies continue to protect and develop it, because of the power that resides in art, and a boundless desire to create worlds together.

I repair old clothes, a practice I call art upgrade. I am concerned with reducing our ecological footprint, and creating awareness about fast-fashion. In Guslitsa I am developing a collaborative project, where we remodel and upcycle clothes from the free market. I have also found a space where I can exhibit my collection of upgraded clothes and antique handwoven textiles.

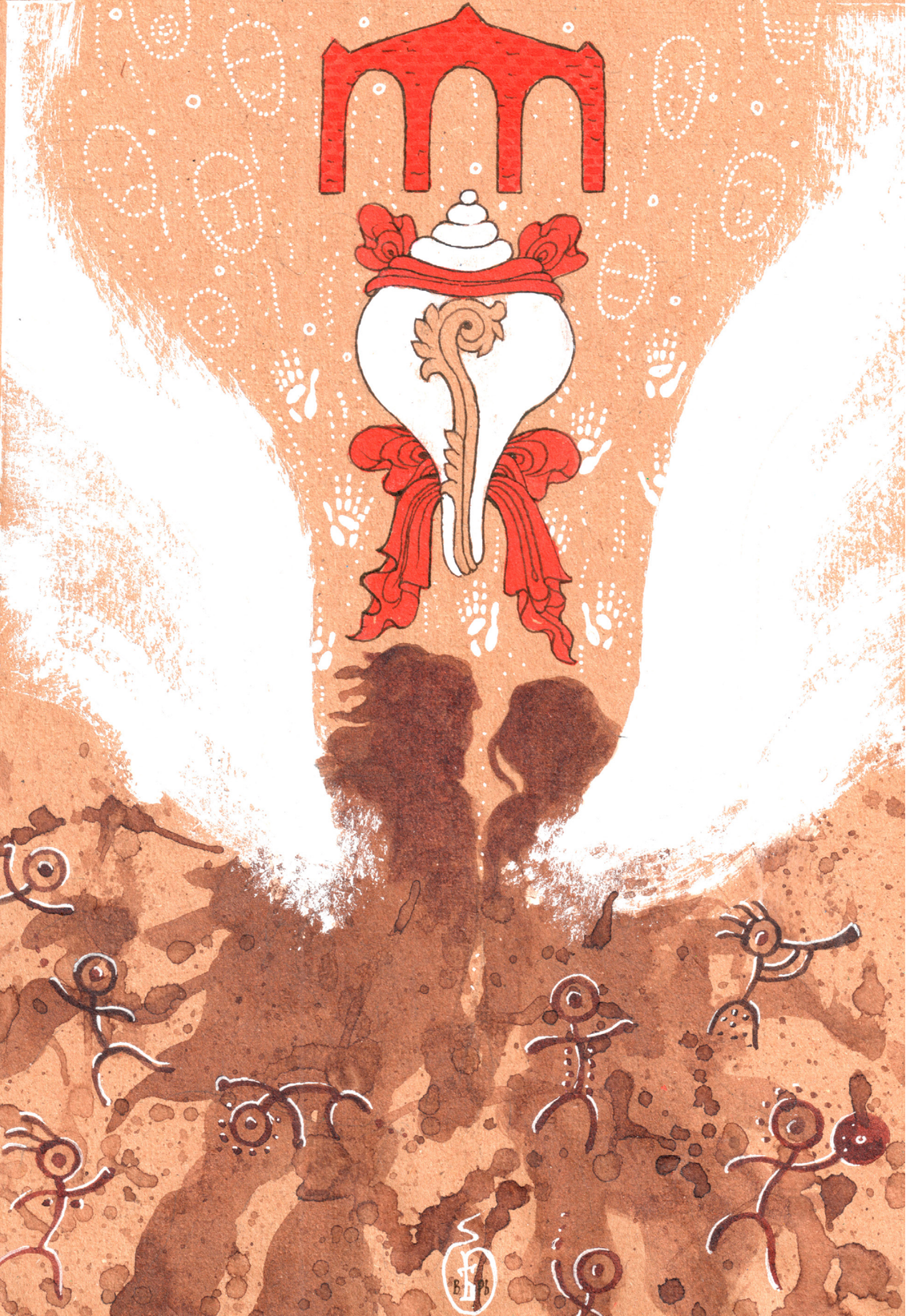
Liuba Bialion
Eco fashion designer and textile collector

I am like an astronaut in my spaceship, and Guslitsa is the orbital station. It is my friendly space base, where research and events are initiated. Once a ceramic stove appeared here, my ornaments and symbols came to life on clay objects; a technique I call handpokeclay. Ceramics led me to become friends with the artist Vladimir Solomatin, and since then my practice took a new course.

Alexander Arzamas Zhelonkin
Artist and founder of Guslitsa's School of Ornament and Calligraphy

Poets are messengers of our times. In Guslitsa we open up space for new formats of creating and presenting poetry. In the Poetic Laboratory we experiment synthesizing poetry with sound art, performance and video. We are interested in a fruitful exchange, where participants can share their experience and be open to new things. In the lab, I created the cover for my book through blueprint technique, which I learned from an artist here - a dream come true.

Lera Sabirova
Cultural manager and poet
Organizer of Guslitsa's Poetic Laboratory



Guslitsa was created as a place for artistic research and manifestation. People come here to experiment. Craftsmen and novices, businessmen and nomads, guests and volunteers – they all try something new. All of this is a great performance, and we learn the art of the present moment through touching the beauty and uniqueness of a person's texture, of a specific phenomenon.

Our students and performers dive into experiment, looking for the unusual in familiar things, discovering themselves on the stage of theater and of life.

Mikhail Humm and **Alexandra Zarakhani**
Creative duo and directors of Guslitsa's residency programme. Theatre directors, creators of the performance school Performama, the ART POGOST gallery, and the art group Mythos.

We don't stay here to save this place

Visiting Home for Work. ODD as a Case Study

By **Jasmina Al-Qaisi**

> *"While waiting for a world to be unearthed by language, someone is singing about the place where silence is formed. Later it'll be shown that the display of fury is not what makes the sea—or the world—exist. In the same way, each word says what it says—and beyond that, something more and something else."*
>
> *The word that heals* by Alejandra Pizarnik
> translated by Yvette Siegert

Give me a moment to mix different facts: the wacky memories with clickbait news cause me anxiety. As projections have it, Romania's future demographics show only decrease, heavy emigration being the main reason. Not sure where I am in the demographics; I did not leave the country; I am only traveling for longer. Cerebral feast from the East to the center, to the West: would it have been possible to have the language of my fingertips and my voice amplified if I had stayed? Could I be brave and loud as I see myself now if I were to stay? Friends, lovers, co-diasporic fellows came back and forth, teleporting their thoughts – I am wedged imagining that for myself and keep on traveling for longer.

The answers to these questions are not meant to polarize. I have become an odd type of a cultural worker in the West with my Eastern passport. In a naive search for a home, I realized I only needed a home for my ideas.

I *met* ODD in 2016, shortly after I decided to try swimming with one foot in Bucharest and the other in Berlin. I say met because it worked as an organism with agency. Since then, *we keep in touch* in diverse ways. Sometimes to absorb, some other times to liquefy, very often to learn. ODD advocating for non-specialists is attractive enough for me to de-home.

On a general scene where art is somewhat interdependent than independent, every Bucharest trip felt like we were all on the way somewhere else, tourists to ideas, to availabilities. From computational anarchy to post-colonial discourse and various feminisms, at first glimpse perspectives almost gone missing in the local Bucharest scene, ODD invited audiences towards trial and error. I liked to see that not just in Berlin. I liked to see that also as a non-Berlin version. I liked to see that with no regard to Berlin altogether.

With acquaintances, friends, and collaborators, Cristina Bogdan has strived for a while now in directions otherwise blurred by conformity, shame, conservatism, and various systemic forms of inequality – that being a generalization of the overall cultural scene back home. People like me, mesmerized, pushed compliments in that direction, but always had flights back to somewhere else.

ODD is a cake that made a difference on the menu and that worked for many. However, regardless of the effort poured into progressive programming, striving for a macro-micro analytical engagement, growing and maintaining fact-anchored forward-thinking discourses, it still often lacks participation.

> *"Simply put, it caters to a few, while the ideas it puts forward are of interest to the many. This is a typical fate of many of these tiny, so-called independent organizations running between different practices and imagining various futures yet failing to export their proposals to the world. Why is that? The answer lies as much with the local context as with global NGO culture: the failure is lived on the individual level so that nothing can truly be disturbed on the systemic level."*

As for me, I needed a reason to rebuild my home interest. Work was it, and that is how I met ODD and friends more often. Mixing my self-making and auto-historicization with my observation of ODD could be an attempt to excavate an answer to the oft-noted decreasing participation and other essential questions on culture-making that I unravel below. That evening, we few were dreaming big about times to come.

Despite being an organism, ODD is a mental rather than physical space. It has changed locations several times in its short life. A non-institution, not an artist-run space but an artist-made space. Since its never-complete genesis, ODD has been looking into different methods of breaking the form, an act I am personally attracted to in the process of making myself.

Breaking the form comes with the risk of remaining abstract, followed by misunderstanding and other polarities, yet breaking the form is necessary for critical thinking and re-thinking. This combination of factors coming from the liminality and periphery of the culture made by independent and interdependent artists may be misunderstood or misinterpreted in a cultural context that does not have the praxis of looking at its own wounds – at its predominantly western-fascinated, self-deprecating, and male-dominated scene. I see a home like that, yet I am always happy to go back to cry with my friends. Now writing these words, I feel the anxiety in the calling out, a praxis that pushes us to install ourselves comfortably in peripheries.

A void caused by this general avoidance of discussing layers of history, truth or belief, left me thinking: what does it take to call out fear? Or better, where can we dispose of the fear of calling out fear, which leaves us apolitical, confused, and tool-less to deal with our wounds?

> *"The fantasies of the past determined by the needs of the present have a direct impact on the realities of the future."*
>
> (from *Nostalgia* by Svetlana Boym)

Back to my case: as the meeting point of something between a cultural center, a gallery, and theory-driven discussion space, ODD offered an alternative to the canonical cultural swampy nucleus of arts and culture scene made for the people that make it. An aggregator, as I have heard, ODD diluted borders for more air. Such an increased molecular exchange is meant to be inviting for broadly interested people, for hybrid forms. Yet, what does it take to keep dialogical participation open when we lack structurally the means to talk *for real* about the world seen from this periphery?

ODD tried to create a situation where we would speak important things, but without mimicking *the west*. That was very attractive for me: a place where I would have zero fear of being bullied if I appeared as an artist. In my early 20s, I could never imagine becoming a poet in Bucharest. It seems like even self-entitlement stayed a thing of class, a possibility for the already empowered. Like everywhere and nowhere, one might say. However, I radar with my emotions, my embodied knowledge. I can tell you I could see flourishing possibilities for a while. This fear of taking ourselves seriously, of taking others seriously, the constant feeling that we are insignificant makes us consider others insignificant as well. I am led to believe that I have been taught from home to begin my public actions with excuses.

"Periphery without the pejorative. Practically, we wanted to explore spaces that have not been mapped, and exhausted, looked into."

When I think about hybridity, I check on how the art looks at itself by contextualizing and break-dancing itself with other types of knowledge. ODD THEORY is one of the pillars of the activities in ODD: gathering participants around long, forehead-sweating discussions, which I find necessary in a broken, ready-to-party Bucharest full of pain. In this Bucharest, there is still a bloody spirit of curiosity, but not enough for consistency. This hybridity, needed and necessary from small organizations, comes from taking responsibility for talking about everything that is not covered by the state-run cultural institutions, especially since there is no institutional form in between.

ODD THEORY occurred 21 times with free access for everybody. It was held in 5 venues, with Angels Miralda, Giulia Damiani, Mårten Spångberg with Alina Popa, Germán Sierra, Adriana Gheorghe, Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca, Ana Teixeira Pinto, Georgia Nicolau with Binna Choi, Luciana Parisi, Aymeric Mansoux, Caleb Waldorf, Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, Rab-Rab Press, Geert Lovink with Georgiana Cojocaru, Ovid Pop, Kamila Metwaly, Lynhan Balatbat-Helbock, Nebojša Milikić, Florian Cramer and Underbelly Soundartmedia.

"Small organizations, as the script for 'civil society and NGOs' runs, function as a substitute for a weak state, enhancing the latter's weakness by their mere insistence of putting complicated issues out in the open, even affirming that there is a way to deal with them. It is an unhealthy ecosystem where the courage to think laterally and speak out feeds a repressive establishment. Neither ODD nor any other small organization in the Bucharest cultural – even civic – space has managed to find a satisfying solution to this. The logical conclusion is that a solution is not to be foreseen within this system: the 'independent scene' is a dumping ground for the responsibilities of governance, and as long as it exists, it will merely prove that it has been created as an aporia from the start, one that has the extra benefit of frustrating and definitively wearing out those caught up in it 'on the good side' – basically, those who are still trapped in linear thinking."

It is never enough to talk about art if we don't talk politics, as much it is never enough to look at local politics without thinking globally. If the approach is,—for lack of a better word—internationalist, we increase the chances to see a sharper future for the ones to come. Traveling far is a way home as well.

The situation is not helped by the lack of solidarity inside the scene itself. Often, these responsibilities to talk about the not-talked-about, the giant elephants in the rooms, end up becoming fights on an individual level on a string where it feels like nobody has your back.

> *"We tried to conceive a vision for Romania, tried to open this from an individual vision to a collective vision. It did not work because there is no space for that."*

Picking in the mainstream looks like the cultural life is pushed into 'a special corner', especially when it comes to press coverage. Apart from the specialized media, I fail to see columns sending people to contemporary art gatherings, which, on the other hand, remain most of the time free. Unfortunately, even the specialized media I have observed try out clickbait news. However, I also see that such intellectual poverty comes against a necessary conceptual re-form that can elevate the honesty needed in art and culture-making. This, in turn, can *multiply curiosity.* Thus, we remain our own archivists and our own propagators, naming the documentation files for our gatherings.

If I may preach, local art journalism must thrive; otherwise, we are left unseen staring at each other. We need to ensure that mainstream news platforms also write about small initiatives, something that does not happen unless there is a scandal. Otherwise, small initiatives would continue to be born and die with small audiences, never reaching the large ones, practically staying invisible. It seems like small spaces play a role in gathering a milieu of shared loves and aches. They call and give support and, most importantly, connect the inner and outer worlds, especially in art and culture. This is entirely different from the link between art and culture established by the cemented institutions. That requires press coverage.

When we burst the bubble, it is essential to remember that we cannot talk about art without discussing the politics behind it. Even then, one must be wary not to look at local politics without thinking about the bigger picture on the global scale. Suppose the approach is, for the lack of a better word, internationalist. In that case, we increase the chances to see a sharper future for the ones to come. Traveling far is a way home as well.

> *"Said Antigone: Who throws me out? A place where I can't hold my head up isn't my country. O, there are less in the city since you are in power. The youngsters, the men aren't they coming back?"*
>
> (from *The Antigone Legend* by Bertolt Brecht, translated by Judith Malina)

Two of the ODD THEORY sessions that still feed my sentimental sediments, encounters that have shaken me the most (from afar) are as follows. Decolonial thinker and theoretician Ovidiu Țichindeleanu gave a lecture on "the other Europe" of the forgotten and racialized Eastern Europeans. Ovidiu was reordering historical facts with empirical thought. The talk was a step towards reclaiming socialism, taking into account Samir Amin's delinking rather than a jump towards a quick, short revolution. It pushed the bubble towards its bursting point (though now, one may see it as less of a bubble and more of a dormant volcano).

Most importantly, he gave clear examples vital to grasping *decolonizing sensibilities*. His examples also illustrated how this implicitly enables the global replication of racialized violence typical of the white supremacist imagination.

One year later, social theorist Jan Sowa talked about Eastern Europe in the times of populist revolt. In the waiting for a homogenous Europe, the divisions between East and West remain visible in the experience of the individuals traveling back and forth for work. Keeping the discussion regional, ODD opened this dialogue on an unrehearsed stage where it is already challenging just *to be*. These topics are like a diaspora of thought, carried out so rarely 'at home' that they almost come as surprises to the participants.

> *"As an Eastern European, the first stage in your discourse is to affirm your existence; that is not required for the westerners, who know they exist, and therefore have the right to speak. To speak about anything, especially about the most abstract things."*

I assemble perspectives on the collective imaginary of where I happened to be born is made of. I wonder how not to be vague, call things by their name, and not play the abstraction that often is simply a sign of luxury. The auto-history of my voice, however, is highly marked by an anti-bully shield that was integrally built in Berlin, where I learned that my perspective matters. To rewrite our future is to believe our perspectives are important, and eventually, to feel important makes us important.

When ODD became an option for the first meal at home, I started thinking about a romantic comeback. There is the radical education, the root of a pedagogy in which I would find myself reborn. Who has legitimacy in proclaiming what Utopia means nowadays? I propose a metaphor for the critical *comeback (home)*. Gating Eastern Europe in media and arts is like a circus of the later literate, enhancing exoticism, eroticizing the hybrid. The borders are where the last chances for solidarity left the new dreamers bleeding. It is a trap; home is a trap.

Small-sized territories wave for recognition. We fail to acknowledge their essence. We gloriously maintain an imaginary of inferiority which catapults us into the middle of the periphery – outside of the comfort zones of the systemic repression designed to maintain the illusion of an edge, of radicality, and to keep the binaries and inequalities vivid.

Creeping away from political despair and other starvations, it feels good to return home for work.

“A home, like this body,
so alien when I try to belong,
so hospitable
when I decide I’m just visiting.”

(from Arundhathi Subramaniam)

The essay was developed following a series of conversations with Cristina Bogdan, the founder of ODD. All quotations, unless otherwise marked, are hers.

Travessias

People really believe we're going to last forever

Georgia Nicolau in conversation with **Marina Pereira**

The following conversation happened over breakfast between myself and Marina Pereira, co-founder, and coordinator of LAB Procomum, respectively, on a warm summer morning in January 2020, in Santos, Brazil.

I first saw Marina in 2016 at Casa Rizoma (Rhizome House), an independent culture and citizen innovation center she had founded in the Bacia do Mercado (Market Wharf) area in Santos. We were doing an international event called Lab.irinto – the embryo of Instituto Procomum – and Marina was an attendee at the event. She was also the host and DJ of the event's mixers, which were hosted at Casa Rizoma. Rodrigo Savazoni, my friend and dream partner, had met her and, with his incredible sensibility for good encounters and crossings, wanted to get to know her more. He quickly understood that what Marina and her partners at Casa Rizoma did was innovative and powerful. And that is how she became a fundamental piece in the development of Instituto Procomum, the LAB, and countless other processes that we have witnessed since then.

Georgia: Marina, first of all: what was Casa Rizoma?

Marina: Casa Rizoma was a project also located at Bacia do Mercado, in Santos, where the LAB is based. We tried to promote a collaborative space of creation for people in the networks we knew – artists and people in the fields of art and culture. Because I had been part of the management at CES – Centro dos Estudantes de Santos (Santos Student Center), I knew there was a demand for this. There were folks who liked to gather in spaces just to create. So we thought this would be a good avenue: promoting a gathering space again but, this time, adding the element of earning money and making the space sustainable. This didn't happen because we lacked knowledge about it. But the project lasted for nine very intense months.

Santos was in a period of cultural effervescence. This convergence gave me some certainty about what I wanted. Four or five months later, we were robbed. Our computers, which were our work tool, were taken. That was when Rodrigo came to mind. I thought: "Hey, that guy had a bunch of computers!" I remember texting him and saying: "Look, we were robbed, so I wanted to know if you have any computers left around." His response was: "I think my daughter has one." I thought: "Well then, it seems like those computers are all being used in his project." (Laughs.)

Later, when Procomum promoted Lab.irinto, Rodrigo contacted me again twice. The first time was to invite me to participate, and the second was for us to talk about the parties and celebrations that would be held during the meeting. I think Lab.irinto was a tipping point in my conscience of what a project can be. Until then, I had a very limited view of the possible paths. When I saw that many people from all around the world were sharing their experiences with projects so similar to the one we were doing, that expanded my horizons. I left there feeling astonished. Marcio, who was my partner at the time, said: "We're not in that big of a hole. There's a path here, a solution that we should explore." That gave me hope. We were at a really bad time, and it really was as if a new horizon had just emerged. The other people who were also part of Casa Rizoma and had participated in Lab.irinto told us that we were mentioned many times during the gathering. This brought us some self-esteem: knowing that what we were doing was being watched by those who knew how to do the same thing. So, I guess we weren't that lost, you know?

After Lab.irinto, I called everybody who was part of Casa Rizoma to show them Corais, the online collective management tool that was presented at the event by Pedro Jatobá. It was a very striking meeting, but it was also when I realized that we were more alone than I had imagined. The need for us to get serious, especially in planning our work, brought on a lot of responsibility. The people in the meeting left without wanting to come back. We had no financial incentive. It was something you just had to believe in. In the end, it was just Marcio and me. We were the ones who had created all of that, and it was our whole life at that time. For everyone else, it wasn't. That brought us hope and, at the same time, led us to realize our limitations.

The project ended, Marcio returned to Brasília, and I was thinking of going back to Taboão da Serra, in São Paulo, in order to look for a job. But, before that, I made a move to seek out a few people. We had a rent debt. I contacted Rodrigo again, told him what was happening, told him I wasn't doing well emotionally. He asked to talk to me about a plan that he had at Instituto Procomum – a project, an idea he was creating. He was really generous, laid down the options, and said: "I can try to help you get Casa Rizoma back on its feet, but I have this other proposal." Then he invited me to be part of the team. At that point, I had just found out I was pregnant, Casa Rizoma was closing, and I was completely out of it. I didn't really understand what he was talking about, but it was a job. He wanted to discuss how much I wanted to make, and as he talked, I couldn't even listen properly. I just said: "No, really, it's fine, I'm in…" Right then and there, I realized that, because of all the relationship strains, particularly with Marcio, it didn't make sense to insist on Casa Rizoma, regardless of my belief in it. That was the movement. I remember the first meetings we held at [Instituto] Procomum. I didn't have a full understanding of it, but I identified with it. It was something I wanted to do, even though I didn't know how, especially in that format. Although I had worked in nonprofits, they mostly did aid and charity work: small projects in schools, support to families, etc. But at Casa Rizoma, I had experimented with a different way of working with people. And, at Instituto Procomum, I felt this same potential to do things differently, mixing the stuff we like to do with the problems we need to solve. That was the experience.

Georgia: You are not from this area, so at that time, did you already know the people who became part of the first Citizen Innovation Circuit we did?

Marina: I knew most of them. But at Casa Rizoma, we didn't have any money. It was good to know that I was in an organization that had resources that could be shared with people who I knew were doing interesting, powerful things. We could now offer the funds to strengthen these initiatives – and think not only in terms of selection but also of mobilization. And we mobilized beyond what I thought was possible. There's only one public grant in the city, called Facult (Santos City Fund for Culture), which is still exclusionary, because it's super tiresome and hard for those who don't have experience writing projects. We, on the other hand, did everything in a very open and democratic way. Some people were more familiar with project writing, such as Preta Rara, a famous MC, and Talita [Fernandes], who was her producer and wrote a proposal. But there was also Luciana Jorge, who built low-cost solar heaters and had never fundraised for anything. She was always task-driven, with a "let's do what we can with what we have" approach. People like her applied because they knew me and trusted me. Seeing them in this different place, being

able to do things with a certain level of structure, understanding the importance of networks, and connecting to other initiatives, territories, and forms of innovation was remarkable. I don't know anything else in the [Santos] Basin that does this. I felt that we were doing something new and that it would be good for the city.

At that time, we still didn't have a physical space, only an office. The LAB didn't exist yet. The stuff we did was way too focused on outputs. We weren't able to gather people, but we were in search of a place for that. In 2017, we found the space that now houses the LAB. It had been the headquarters of another organization called Prato de Sopa [Bowl of Soup].

Georgia: And what changed once we had a space to work in?

Marina: Mainly, what changed was the possibility of people knowing that there is a space for gatherings and creation in Santos, something nonexistent until then. The Student Center, CES, was surviving without any infrastructure. It was an old, abandoned house. Spaces like CES are filled with conflict. People don't feel well there. When Casa Rizoma launched, all of its power came from the demand for a place just like it in the city. The LAB rekindled that demand. Historically, Santos was always a city filled with these spaces. Between the 1960s and 1980s, CES was a place of cultural effervescence and creation. That's why it carries this legacy of resistance: people need a meeting space in the city. We can fight for the streets too, but people feel safer inside physical spaces and are able to form networks in them.

Another thing that, for me, is essential in the LAB is the infrastructure. Nowhere else can you find an internet connection, a printer, fans – just a comfortable space. It's at the same time a blank canvas and a space filled with people. The essential pillars are maintained by the team, and then the people come in and contribute. That's what's most important: **the reason the LAB exists and why it makes sense to the city.**

When people see how we work and understand that there is a team there, caring for the space, they get serious about it while also not being afraid of getting involved. This issue of having no meeting spaces created a lot of trauma: many people abandoned places like Casa Rizoma, which appeared and then sank with the blink of an eye, or fled the conflicts that emerged from the lack of proper organization. Mauro, for instance, a local artisan and inventor, was part of CES but went off the map between 2015 and 2019. Many people who now go to the LAB were working only on their own stuff or had stopped doing anything because they no longer felt confident. **I think we bring hope in a more grounded way. People really believe we're going to last forever.**

Georgia: Do you think that hope translates into better living conditions? Do you think that the people who are part of this effort end up being able to live better, including financially, because they are part of this network? How do you think Instituto Procomum impacts their lives?

Marina: It is very clear to everyone that that space, and what happens inside, didn't come out of nowhere. They can see tangible work behind it. This alone changes their attitude and the way they think about what they are doing. An example is Lu: Luciana Oliveira, a black woman, homeopathy practitioner, dentist, public health, and medicinal plant expert. She arrived because of a personal search, but what she was doing wasn't shaped as a project. There was no audience or design to it. When she saw what we were doing, she began to exceed herself. The same goes for the Inventions and Trinkets Working Group. They do meetings; they take out a flip chart; they talk, plan, create... But they don't just create for the sake of it. They have a goal. We are offering these people the understanding that, without a minimum amount of planning and organization, you won't get there. You can't be creative just for the sake of it without a goal. I can't think of a single group that we haven't impacted in this way, from Maria Sil (a young, non-binary artist, activist and cultural producer who lives with HIV), to Fabrício (an artist, visual designer, LGBTQIA+ intersectional activist). I've known Fabrício since the CES times, and he won his first Facult now. I believe that we as Procomum contributed a lot to their realization that, if there's anything they're doing now, such as an annual gathering, this can become a project. The fact that people seek us out today has much to do with their wish to learn more about what they already do.

Georgia: It's as if they were now allowed to make a living out of their own creations or create their own profession. We usually learn the opposite, right? We learn that this is a hobby and that we have our real jobs. The LAB is a space where people ask: "Why can't this be my job?". And there is a discussion on the importance of art to society. What good are these people doing in the world? Why should they be paid for this? The existence of someone like Lu in the world, for example, can change lives for the better. But sometimes people think that she should just be a dentist. Clearly, there's a big dispute over ways of life. At the end of the day, what really matters? I remember when Lu sat with me at a bar. She told me: "At first, I was distrustful of Instituto Procomum. I kept thinking: 'what's in it for you? What do you

want out of this?' Then I saw all of your YouTube videos and gradually understood why you do what you do." And I get her. In addition to race and class issues, there's something about humanity, the world and system we live in, where we're always thinking "What's in it for them?" That's how we learn that life is. For me, the LAB breaks down many barriers. It makes us more open. My dream is that the Santos Secretary of Culture pays us a visit because we're making public policy! Why can't he go there and think of doing something similar? I don't want to work for [the government], but they can do what we're doing. It's a logic of fostering creativity and treating people as valid beings in the world. And I see no sense in this happening in a single organization. It can't be possible that people are happy with the way things are. Who is benefitting from this segregation and inequality? It can't be possible! It's not good for anyone, at the end of the day.

Marina: I think this happens because, in today's Santos and the current political situation, the kind of creativity we're boosting isn't seen as beneficial.

Georgia: But what are people afraid of?

Marina: I think there is a lot of dormant potential here, like people who are powerful, provocative, and revolutionary in their work. The more you encourage it, the more they will turn against the power that exists today. There is a lie. They say that Santos is a creative city and that they invest in it. At the same time, if they encourage it, they will be asked about what kind of infrastructure they are offering to make this happen – which is non-existent. Yesterday I was watching the ad for the construction projects of the "New Santos", as they call it. What is happening inside the city's Vilas Criativas (Creative Villages), for instance? It's all a lie; there's nothing there. There is no entryway, no form you can fill out to say you're a collective in the Santos Basin and you want to participate. But there's not a single ad on the City Hall website saying, "Register your cultural collective at the Creative Village." If they opened up like that, so many initiatives would turn up because we know that there's a huge number of them out there. It's a deceitful way to do things, like an empty mockup. It has to do with political interests and fear. We can't erase the history of Santos. It's still lying asleep somewhere. So many things are still effervescent and will blossom as soon as we plant a small seed. This city was known as the Brazilian Barcelona because there were so many revolutionary movements here – movements of theater workers, for instance. I did research at the Tribuna Archive for a project. In the 1970s and 1980s, right here in Santos, the Tribuna, the biggest newspaper in the region, had a whole culture section and not just a small column! There was poetry and street theater going on all the time. They showed Plínio Marcos, an important local writer, reading the tarot in a packed Guarani Theater on a Tuesday.

Georgia: Those people from the 1970s and 1980s are still alive. What happened to them? Where did they go?

Marina: These people took one of two paths: some of them are still out there now, doing things, and others were absorbed by politics and became secretaries, city councilors... It's a way of doing politics that is disconnected from everything else. But I think there was a strong movement of repression. CES, for instance, was a space that everybody went to – students, intellectuals, people in the left-wing... And the Raul Soares ship was out on the Port of Santos as a very grim symbol of repression, reminding people what would happen if they didn't keep quiet. However, by the 1980s, we still had Plínio Marcos. But this way of doing things became gradually marginalized. It was no longer printed in the Tribuna. It became seen as the work of a bunch of lunatics. And so a different kind of Santos resident emerged, one who is conservative, votes for Bolsonaro or the PSDB, who doesn't believe in social policies. Until the 1980s, the Workers Party, PT, still won elections here. But I don't think this shift happened by chance. It took a lot of social engineering to achieve it.

Georgia: Why start a Memory and Ancestrality Working Group at the LAB? Where does your connection to this issue come from?

Marina: It doesn't begin here. When I started studying Social Work at Unifesp, the Federal University of São Paulo, for my first college paper, which I wrote with two friends, we decided to investigate the black history in the area surrounding the university. We looked at street names in Santos and found out that Ana Costa was a black woman, just like Luísa Macuco and Escolástica Rosa. We began to realize that there was something left unspoken, something dormant. We were in college there, but we couldn't see ourselves there. That was in 2012. We also researched the local Umbanda houses.

When I arrived at the LAB, I felt like reflecting on racial issues somehow. In the first meeting I did with Marília, Simone, and Ornella – members of the LAB Procomum network and participants of the Memory and Ancestrality Working Group –, we did an exercise to think about our memories as black women. Each of us recalled something different. Marília mentioned Father Bobó's *terreiro*,

for instance. According to Reginaldo Prandi, a sociologist and researcher of candomblé, Father Bobó of Iansã is a central figure in the constitution of candomblé in São Paulo: "The oldest candomblé *terreiro* [ceremonial site] in the state of São Paulo was founded, according to my data, in Santos in 1958 by Pai [Father] Bobó, or José Bispo dos Santos, who came from [the state of] Bahia." I kept thinking that everybody has a place of reference, and this is left unspoken. We even diminish them, deeming them insignificant. I realized that we had to reaffirm them. This is a more subjective perspective, of course. I always felt conflicted because I never liked Santos. I kept asking myself why life made me come back to this place and what was left for me to resolve here. When I first did the *catraia* crossing to Vicente de Carvalho [catraias are small motorized boats shaped like canoes], I noticed something inside me, as if I had been here before. I didn't understand it, but at the same time, I did.

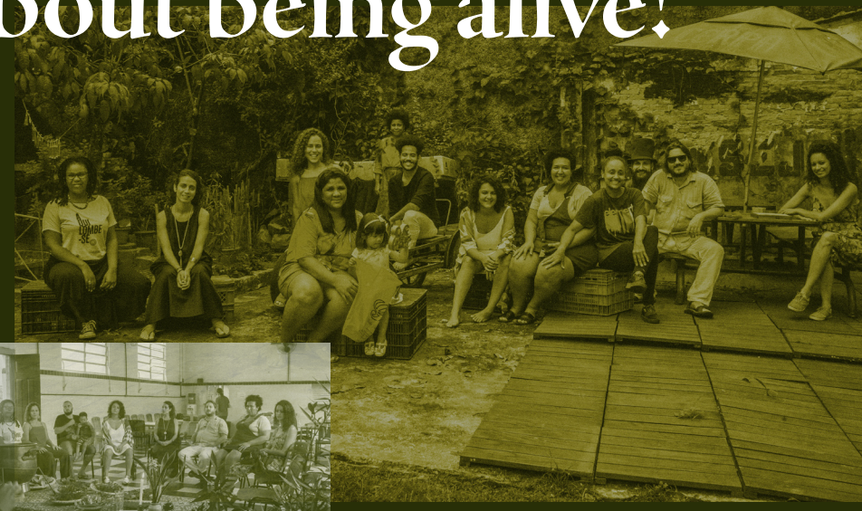
Georgia: In your family history, did someone spend time here?

Marina: No.

Georgia: But, given the history of Brazil, it's also not impossible.

Marina: It's really not. So, these two things come up together: the acceptance that I had to be in this place, and the need to understand it through the things that matter to me. CES, for example, was a very white space. There were two groups: the black and poor people who, like me, lived there because they didn't have their own home; and the students. There were two different worlds, and the one that prevailed was the students'. When I became part of the management, I started saying that we needed to see ourselves there, at the parties, in the music that was played. I did a photoshoot for Black Awareness Month. It was a reinterpretation of Milton Nascimento's album cover that shows nothing but his face. I launched an open call for the black people who lived at CES or were close to us. There were many of us. I realized that these people exist, even though we can't see them. So, through the Memory and Ancestrality Working Group – which we named Acotirenes –, I wanted to bring this up to think about where those memories are, why they are dormant, and what we can do with them. **I started to understand that memory is not static; it's something that we're creating all the time.** To preserve it, we need a few things. The first is the awareness that we are creating it all the time, so we need to document and tell it. In the movement for the creation of the Working Group, we also realized that a big part of what we considered important to the city couldn't be found

In the end, it's about being alive!



I wonder if, when people are younger, they have the feeling that life is something more. For me, this is life.

anywhere. For instance, take Casa de Cultura da Mulher Negra [House of Black Women's Culture]. Where's the documentation of that? There are some issues of their Eparrei magazine available online, but it's all so incohesive. If we don't talk about this, in a while, it will seem like it never existed. And that happens to so many things - like Father Bobó himself, who has an acknowledged candomblé *terreiro* in the Santos Basin.

Georgia: What about the movie about Father Bobó's *terreiro* that the Working Group is doing?

Marina: We haven't made the third cut yet. But we thought about how we can affirm the memories that already exist, bring them to the surface and start recreating them. Take Marília, for example: after we started doing Acotirenes together, she gave her life a whole new direction. In January, she sold a lot of workshops with children to Sesc. We even connected them to Afroketu, A nonprofit organization focused on promoting Afro-Brazilian culture and based in Guarujá, in the Santos Basin, next to Santos, and took them to Sesc, the Mission of the Social Service of Commerce, a national Brazilian nonprofit that offers Education, Health, Culture, and Recreational programs, for the third time. Before all of this, they had never been there in the 19 years of the organization. Marília says that "after Acotirenes, I reconnected with my dream." She always wanted it. She was always a dancer. But before, she said: "I am an English teacher who dances every now and then." We slowly realized that this stuff works when we do it. It's not in vain. I'm very proud.

Georgia: I know you've had a hard life, but every time you tell your story, I see someone who went after their dreams. And that requires believing, having faith, self-esteem, believing in your own dreams, understanding that they make sense, going after them even when everyone thinks you're crazy. And making a lot of friends: you are a person who has a best friend here, there, in Recife... No wonder our work involves creating encounters: that is what we value in our lives. My encounter with Rodrigo took me to you, for example. I would never have met you if I didn't have Rodrigo in my life. The same goes for Marília: without Rodrigo in my life, I would never have met her. And today, both of you are extremely important to me, not just at work; I feel your presence, understand you, and share things with you. You're my friends. I don't know if it's an age or character thing, but I get what you're saying about context. That's really important to me too. It has a lot to do with the invisible aspect of life, such as care work. At the Colaboradora gatherings, 80% of people name their mothers as essential to their being alive. "If it weren't for my mother, who gave birth to all those children and believed in me..." Alê Almeida, a movement artist, told the story of when other boys threw stones at him, and his mom picked up all the stones and said: "With this right here, you will build your life. You are not going to throw them back." It's a striking example of the defining attitudes of our mothers, or someone in our lives, who tell us: "Go." On Wednesday, Rodrigo was talking about non-monetary resources. I asked the group: "If it weren't for your mom or the other people you named at the gathering, would you be here, as artists?" A defining presence like this is a resource. And the LAB has plenty of those. You gave Daniel and Mauro a shot, and look at what that studio became... In the end, it's about being alive! I wonder if, when people are younger, they have the feeling that life is something more. For me, *this* is life.

Marina: As if what we have together wasn't enough.

Georgia: As if we were yet to get there.

Translated from the Portuguese by Carolina Munis.

The Prospect of the Other

By **Lizaveta Matveeva**

The art which is close to the principles and practices of social engagement is a direct way to leave one's comfort zone. While visual arts pieces that are generally exhibited somewhere in a museum or a gallery have an artificially constructed hierarchical distance between them and the spectator, socially engaged art is aimed right at the face and the heart of its audience.

Often considered a tool for social and economic changes or as an instrument for initiating a dialogue, socially engaged art needs direct involvement from the people. Frequently, the initial request for a project comes from artists, art managers, or art organizations and not from the actual people experiencing difficulties aimed to overcome by art practitioners in collaboration with them. Therefore, it might seem that art knows better what people really want and thereby follows a particular paternalistic strategy.

As any other practicing curator, I am sometimes blamed for paternalism. Somehow, curatorship and paternalism are mixed up. Therefore, we reasonably expose the substitution of these two concepts. Since 2015 I have been working at CEC ArtsLink as a project manager. Besides permanent coordination of the international art residency program, which requires a lot of care and hospitality from me, I am involved in organizing an international public art festival Art Prospect as one of the curators. I started working in this organization a year after my graduation, based on my experience of co-curating the artist-run space, the Luda Gallery, together with the artist Peter Belyi, and independently organizing shows. This gallery experience cannot be identified as pure social engagement. However, it could definitely be considered a sum of practices of care involving art practitioners from different backgrounds and generations. For me, Art Prospect became a platform to experience actual social engagement with different social groups, asking the same questions every time. Answering these questions helps me better understand why I am working in the arts. Although I am still looking for the answers.

One or Two Things About the Art Prospect Festival

Started as one of the first international public-art projects in St. Petersburg as well as in Russia, Art Prospect is organized by CEC ArtsLink, which promotes international communication and understanding through collaborative, innovative arts projects. The first Art Prospect iteration took place in 2012, and its prototype was an NYC-based festival, Art in Odd Places. In 2012, the idea was to bring contemporary art to places far from its usual habitat, such as exhibition spaces. Historically Russian people perceive art in the traditional sense and expect it to be in a big state museum. Going to a museum is usually considered a festive, special, and sometimes formal occasion. Bringing art on the streets and in the courtyards was revolutionary back then and still is in some cases. Although Art Prospect began as a festival of public art/art in public spaces, and is technically not considered a socially engaged art project, it still has a strong element of social engagement as none of the festival projects would be possible without proper engagement with the local communities.

Through their experience of organizing the Art Prospect Festival in St. Petersburg, the CEC ArtsLink team realized that the festival could become a base for an international exchange network for peers working with socially engaged art and public art forms in the countries of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Before the launch of the network, there was a lack of collaboration and exchange between these countries. This had resulted in a profound lack of information about each other's projects.

Urban Olum vs. Baku Vandals

Although each festival's experience in these countries was unique and each location has its unique context, the organizers still face some similar issues in each country. These issues could be grouped under one heading — the human interaction issue.

The Baku iteration of the Art Prospect festival took place in Baku's Bayıl District and was called "Urban Olum." The title was inspired by the Azerbaijani phrase "Qurban Olum," which refers to a person who is willing to sacrifice everything to reach their goal. With this in mind, the festival strived to stimulate local residents to participate in shaping their neighborhood and its public life. In the long term, the festival's organizers aimed to encourage Baku residents to be more engaged in the transformation of public spaces through public lectures about the experience of the festival held in Bayıl. For two weeks, four local and three foreign artists worked with the Bayıl community and municipality to create a variety of installations in different locations. The festival was organized by CEC ArtsLink's partner Pillə platform, a group of urbanists and architects who only recently graduated from university and had little prior work experience.

The experience the organizers had was traumatic. Although the Pillə as an organization still exists, the team broke up, as most did not have this type of experience before the festival. They realized that socially engaged art is not their cup of tea while working on Art Prospect. However, some grasped that social practice is needed in Azerbaijan, and they still continue their work in this field.

The Bayıl area was chosen as the location for the festival because of its complexity and background. The district is situated 15 minutes away from the Baku city center, which was reconstructed to appear very glamorous and glowing. Bayıl, on the contrary, is diverse, partly ruined, partly posh, partly poor, partly rich — it has a lot of contrasts and conflicts. Back then, it was at risk of being occupied by developers and pimped up with expensive residential buildings and private mansions. The Pillə team wanted to attract the people's attention and encourage the locals to speak out and to take care of their public spaces.

A significant part of the festival took place in an old green square, neglected, trashy, and comfortless. The idea of the Pillə team was to create a space for people to gather and spend time together. The organizers started by cleaning, constructing benches and summer houses, and planting flowers. While doing that, they initiated a dialogue with the local community because people were

curious and engaging. They enjoyed the process and the festival's approach. They joined the festival team and helped them a lot with the preparations, and told them about their disappointments and local problems.

The Pillə team faced problems in getting the required official permissions from the city administration. They got the official papers only two weeks prior to the festival. They had to spend this time mostly on installation. Also, some of the locations were not approved. Therefore they had to adapt the festival to the new areas. This lack of time complicated the process of building relationships with the locals. Although some of them were very responsive, a majority still did not understand the idea behind the project. They did not want their public areas to be improved, even when these areas were marginalized. The Pillə team did not want to start the conversation with the local communities before they got the official permission because in case you cannot work in a particular location where you have been interacting with people, it would mean that you took their time and hopes for no reason. It brings mistrust and trauma. The next time you went there, people would not take you seriously.

The main problem with the green square was that everything there usually got stolen or demolished. Even parts of the kids' playground, benches, and plants. When the Pillə team improved this location, the neighbors were happy. Kids would hang out there after school, moms with kids would spend time there. But things started to get ruined at some point, and with each day, the improvements were gone until nothing was left. One of the locals criticized the festival's strategy by saying that it would have been better if a cafe or restaurant occupied the area. There would have been someone responsible for the place. Although it sounded absurd, this man made a valid point. If someone owned the area and it gave them financial benefits, the person would have taken care of this park. But collective responsibility does not work because people have too much trouble and problems in their own homes.

In the private area where they worked, they had two types of people: supportive and engaging, and withstanding ones. The area they wanted to improve was an outdoor hall at the bottom of an apartment building — it was a dark place, with no light, no benches, but with an amazing view over the Caspian Sea. The Pillə team, once again, did not have enough time to build trust with the people living there, partly because the administrator mistakenly convinced them that everything would be fine. The Belarusian art group MONOGROUP proposed building a recreation zone with benches, a community garden, and a camera obscura to give the local people an opportunity to have a different view of their neighborhood. But the main complaint from one of the locals was that homeless people would come to live there, or kids would hang out, drink beer and take drugs there, as they do nearby at another abandoned spot. One of the organizers, Sabina Abbasova, tried to convince him by explaining that if the inhabitants hung out there, the 'marginals' would not occupy the place. Although the Pillə team decided to go ahead and install the project there, it was taken down by someone two or three months later. Sabina does not even go there since: it is just too painful.

There was also an inner crisis in the team. Two people had organized the festival because most of the team pulled back at some point. This also affected the entire festival, as these two organizers did not have enough resources for the proper programming needed for interacting with the community. "It all depends on your work with people. It doesn't even matter what exactly you make there. It is not about the quality of projects, not about the context of works. However, the interaction with the community was a failure. It was not as one would expect from projects of this kind," Sabina told me.

Meeting the local community prior to an event also makes sense in understanding the practical features of the place. For instance, people from the neighborhood told the Pillə team about one band of children who would come and destroy everything. The locals advised them to use decent materials and to fix everything.

The Pillə team wanted to have the festival in Bayıl to attract attention to this area to stop the building processes — but now this area is built up. All these courtyards, with their culture, environment, and connections, have been demolished. Of course, more people got to know Bayıl, an autonomous, isolated area, despite its location, which puts it at the city center of Baku. Around 100-200 people from outside of this area visited Bayıl. They saw its initial state before the developers completely changed it. Half of it is built up with luxury apartment buildings, and luxury buildings are mixed with poor areas, but all this will change soon.

As Sabina says, it is not a pity that everything got demolished or stolen because these are just objects. However, it is a pity that it did not last – if something was destroyed, someone could have come to replace or restore it. People were excited about the process, but they did not continue maintaining the area by themselves. There are no bad people. It is the approach that matters. But the organizers of the festival do not know how it actually affected people. Maybe in ten years' time, someone will decide to do something similar, maybe one of the kids would be influenced by this festival. The experience they had is not useless. But they feel that they could have done their part better.

Breathing New Life into the Green Zones of Bishkek

The Bishkek experience was no less complex. The CEC ArtsLink's Kyrgyz partners ArtEast, led by Muratbek Djumaliev and Gulnara Kasmalieva, organized the Art Prospect festival twice, in 2017 and 2018. Its first iteration took place in the Botanic Garden of the National Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz Republic. The theme of the festival was Breathing New Life into Green Zones.

Created before the Second World War, this garden is a precious public space. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, it suffered the fate of many state institutions: lack of finance, the pressures of the new free-market economy, and as a consequence, an attempt at "re-profiling." The festival organizers and artists invited people to rethink areas in the Botanical Garden, using the devices of art, design and architecture. The aim was to help create a setting for informal gatherings of Bishkekians of any age or grouping. The objects and installations were intended to become idea motifs that serve as the kernel for the reflective consideration of "green zones" as a necessary part of public spaces – places not just for relaxation, but also for the discussion of burning issues, and the education of the citizens.

The second time the festival took place in one of the courtyards on Bishkek's main street, Chyngyz Aitmatov Avenue, where the ArtEast office is. The festival's theme, "Neighborhood," addressed several current issues and conditions. A neighborhood was considered something inevitable that provides certain rights and requires its residents to take up certain responsibilities. A neighborhood in the urban environment is a subtle substance of relationships, compromises, and contradictions. The festival was planned as a practical experiment to rethink public spaces, bearing in mind the influence of neoliberal policies. Although the second festival was much smaller, it faced more problems than the first one.

The first festival took place in the Botanical Garden because the organizers wanted to stop deforestation. For now, at least the construction has stopped. Murat and Gulnara think the festival helped because they gathered an active community. Like their Baku peers, they started by cleaning the park and invited students and volunteers to help.

While working on particular projects, people were getting involved, and they felt responsible for what was happening. For example, while Maria Uvarova and Dima Fatum made the necessary preparations for their mural, such as cleaning the wall, repainting it, etc., the passers-by noticed this process. When artists came and started making the actual mural, those people thought they were vandals or hooligans and called the police. It happened several times, and ArtEast had to issue an official letter to explain the situation. When the mural was completed, people enjoyed it. The locals felt responsible for the Garden and did not want anyone to harm it.

Most of the objects in the Garden are utilitarian; they are actively used by visitors. For example, the Kyrgyz artist Chinara Niyazova made a sports ground in the Garden — sportsmen who use this ground take up the responsibility for maintaining it as well. The festival was more like an investment — now the Garden administration takes care of the objects. The Botanical Garden is a rare example where 60-70% of the works survive even three years after the project. The nearby area is also improving. Who knows, perhaps the festival influenced this process. For the past few years, people have been organizing strikes against deforestation. It was effective because the government has frozen some projects. They also opened a big new park in the city. And a few more are in the works, as the city has started spending money on green zones.

This positive experience was followed by a negative one during the second festival. For instance, Kyrgyz artists Zulaika Esentaeva and Kanaiym Kydyralieva made a pavilion in the courtyard. This pavilion became a stumbling block for the local community. At first, the locals supported this idea, but later they were against it because strangers began hanging out there, drinking beer, and leaving garbage. Then the organizers put a fence with a gate in the courtyard to limit strangers coming there. But the locals neither close the gate nor do they use any locks. When you start talking to them and ask them to follow these minor rules, they get offended and say, "Why do you tell us what to do? Who are you? You are not our owner or boss. We are independent people." Murat and Gulnara made different proposals to solve these problems. Their suggestions included installing a garbage can, talking to people, discussing the possible rules, etc. Of course, different people visit the pavilion. Some of them come there because it is cozy; they do not have anything like that in their courtyards and just want to sit and chat. Some come to drink alcohol; others come to have lunch. The locals, annoyed by all this, started calling it a passage yard. Those with cars do not want to close the gate after leaving. Gulnara and Muratbek had to put the gate because they wanted to protect the artworks from vandals, but the locals did not like it. Before the festival, Gulnara and Muratbek started talking to the locals, asking them what was needed. In the beginning, it was great because they brought new colors to the courtyard, nice objects. But when the garbage appeared, the locals were disappointed, saying, "You are not here at night, when we are afraid of going outside because of the drunk people." The confrontation became so intense that Gulnara and Muratbek planned to move the pavilion to Assykul, their art residency.

The festival's organizers had multiple meetings with the local community. They came up with some simple rules, but people did not follow these rules for some reason. Maybe because they are lazy, do not have the time, or do not want any changes. Maybe they do not want to think about others, communicate, self-organize. Gulnara and Murat hoped that locals would self-organize, but they found that it needed more time and resources. Unfortunately, they did not have time to engage with the community constantly. When Gulnara suggested reorganizing the trash, people replied: "We will not do anything until the government does not change it." People follow the state's priorities. They will not do anything if there is no command.

This shows that people are separated, atomized. They do not want to communicate with each other, come to some consensus, to make any efforts to unite with their neighbors in order to make their courtyards and common spaces better. On the one hand, they are indifferent to any collective actions. On the other, the younger people liked the changes. For example, a girl from one of the buildings had been living abroad for a while. She came to visit her family and was surprised by the positive changes. These changes inspire younger people, who are more open-minded, communicative, and engaging. There was a young man who helped with the electricity. People from the 30-40 years age range were supportive. This brings us to another problem: the migration of young people who move to Russia. Older people are pessimistic, even aggressive. Probably pensioners need calm and do not want to be disturbed.

Sharing Is Caring

Although the Art Prospect teams in Baku and Bishkek worked in different contexts and faced different backgrounds, their main issues were probably due to a lack of trust, which is highly needed for proper social engagement. Such a form of trust can only be built over time. Regardless of how excited and supportive people are initially, you cannot guarantee their long-term involvement without your constant, sincere commitment.

Sincerity is probably another problematic element in the field of socially engaged art. When I work on this type of project, I constantly ask myself: where is this border between sincerity and dishonesty? How can I ensure that all actors of the socially engaged artwork do not feel used? How to make sure that I will not feel used after all this is over? Where is the boundary between making people do what you need from them following the initial idea of your project and helping them overcome the problems, troubles, and issues they are struggling with?

Once again, as is the case with my constant query, "Why am I working in the arts?" I am still looking for all these answers. But I know for sure that you need the help of others to answer your own questions.

after the tianguis

A conversation between **Ana Carolina**, **Mariela Scafati**, **Nadia Lartigue**, **Sofia Casarin**, **Tadeo Cervantes** and **unx.**

On February 8th 2019, Ruta del Castor and Serigrafistas Queer, in collaboration with various Mexico City based collectives and art organizations, organized ***Tianguis Queerkuircuir, a public intervention*** *in which serigraph printing served as a medium for sharing slogans, ideas, emotional states, songs, stories, and memories, all of them printed on posters, T-shirts, flags, and other formats.*

During the transition of the printing workshop to the tianguis, from printmakers to street vendors, a series of encounters were deployed, sustained by an active setting, a place of participation and complicity that led to alliances and exchanges among different territories.

Sofía: One year after *Tianguis Queerkuicuir,* and five days before a historical 8M in Mexico (March 8th), a country where precariousness, impunity, and a brutal ascendance in violence all intertwine, we are waking up more each time to the knowledge that we are living in a reality constructed in spite of ourselves and our bodies. I propose we reflect upon a few questions and narrate a few stories. What has happened within our circumstances, practices, organizations, and collectives? What was the potency of printmaking, the slogans and demands that we carried on our bodies, and that we invited other people to carry?

Mariela: In Argentina, I almost can't even speak. The political moment is very complex, way different from the one we shared a year ago. There was a different outlook. What do I know? I would like to hear from you all if anything has changed with Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador or not, in terms of the things we demand. I'm also interested in talking about LGBT participation in relation to feminisms. For *Serigrafistas Queer,* we find that it all converges, but what I have felt in the atmosphere is that there is a movement of women on the one hand, and on the other, a whole LGBT movement. That's my sensation. For example, the Spanish Ministry has a flag up for the International Day of Women, and these become the "correct" discourses, you see? Who is going to oppose something like this? I'm worried that the larger institutions, ministries,

museums, biennials begin to learn what they have to say about this swiftly, and meanwhile, nothing is changing. I don't know if I'm being too demanding, or if we must allow some time for things to change, or if it's a way to share my doubts so that we are all attentive; so that we don't fall into the trap. I think about this.

There are some comrades in the organization that asked themselves, where did we fail? They didn't ask it in a tone of guilt. They rather said, how did we fail that we are still seeing femicides? More femicides. It feels as though the volume of violence has been upturned, not only in terms of the amounts but also in terms of the cruelty.

We understand what is queer not only in terms of identity but also in the way of behaving. Right? Queer as a mode of action, beyond political logic or other ways of conceiving a group, due to these matters of appropriation, of who becomes the owner of an idea. During recent times we have worked, even if desperately, forming alliances with other groups. This is something that happens spontaneously; we're in a bit of a tangle.

If we were to weigh up what we've done in recent times, we have to say that we haven't stopped building bonds, constructing when faced with the emptiness and the damage done by Macri's government. Breathless, we have kept our bodies on the street. We can say the name of the street, schools, hospitals, football pitches, theatres, assemblies, cultural centers, communitarian centers, museums, parties, fairs, places whose existences we defended. And when we managed to get Macri out of office, we said: we can't keep on being as frenetic. Let's really think about what kind of alliances we want, maybe something that happens more slowly, through longer processes. Allow ourselves to work differently, because it is impossible to sustain the work the way we had been doing until then. The levels of exhaustion were extremely high. Luckily, Serigrafistas Queer was always a strong refuge in the affective sense. It was, for me, the most important refuge of recent times.

We are now in a different moment. We are feeling strange with the coming 8M. Three of us are in Madrid, and others are prioritizing other agendas. There is a strange social climate in Argentina. When Kirchnerism began [the beginning of Néstor Kirchner's government], the demands from the street were being appropriated for their political agenda. Something of that process can be felt now, even though the political context is way different. The demands of feminisms seem to have become present in State politics, and the street became a space related to desire and banishment at once.

Nadia: What are you doing in Madrid?

Ana Carolina: We came to Madrid to do a workshop at the Reina Sofia Museum and produce print screens for Sunday's demonstration so that those screens can then be shown after and beyond the demonstration. We are not sure what we will find because we are not from here. We are not fully aware of the debates that are being held, or which are the most fervent demands within the community.

Mariela: What we do know is that they don't want to call it a strike. The levels of participation are very different from those in Argentina.

Sofía: It is interesting to witness how feminist movements converge and diverge in different places and how they transform through time. At the same time, many of the phrases on the screens seem not to expire. I feel like a few of the ones we did for the tianguis a year ago are more relevant than ever.

Mariela: With many of the slogans, we can't believe how long it can be that they remain current, while with others, you say, *time left it behind.* Perhaps sometimes processes are quick, and at other times they become outdated. Others vary depending on the moment, acquire a different meaning, maybe on account of news, depending on the context of where they are printed, depending on the reality of our lives, which also shifts and morphs. We can even do something that doesn't seem to make sense at the moment, and then as time passes, we begin to understand it better. Alternatively, they begin to resonate as they resemble something else. A good example for me was the case of the slogan "Hasta que nuestra muerte no sea normal" (Until our death is not normal), which I found similar to the Chilean saying, "Hasta que vivir valga la pena" (Until living is worth it). On the other hand, "Vivas nos queremos" (We want us, women, alive) is more optimistic, more positive – this thing about time and talking in terms of life and death, like something is at stake, and we are the ones who are saying it, the people who are putting their bodies at risk. I think it's strong.

Unx: I would like to begin with what Mariela is saying. I think that the slogan "Hasta que nuestra muerte no sea normal" is harsh. In this trans-feminine-genocidal ambiance, it's true that it is sometimes hard to speak from a place of joy, and this is something that we have asked ourselves within *Invasorix.* When we came up with this slogan, which was not during the workshop for the tianguis, we had finished writing a corrida, taking up this very masculinized musical genre portraying very heroic stories. We wanted to shake that up. We wrote this song to sing it during a demonstration outside the Court of Supreme Justice, trying

to address the people who, in the end, decide on matters of life and death. Justice has many faces; it's not blind – that you can play dumb is something else. What we had in mind with the corrida was to evidence the work of mothers who, because of everything that happened, ended up becoming activists. They were not planning on it, but they have taken on the work of demanding justice. This song can become an eternal mantra of infinite verses. We are not musicians, and generally, when we do this kind of work, we collaborate with musicians who can do things we can't. For the process of writing the lyrics, we did an open call, and after discussing many things, we ended up asking ourselves, what the hell is feminist justice? We were also bringing very specific anecdotes from Mexico City into the conversation, where we've seen young women in very punitive positions reproducing a very complex state system. So, we thought, how would a sort of justice pierce through our bodies while we are alive, and what would that mean? It might mean that we could be out at night knowing nothing could happen to us. We concluded that a feminist justice is that in which our death is not normalized. The slogan stemmed from that discussion.

Creating a screen for the tianguis was very beautiful since one of our strategies with *Invasorix* has been to create T-shirts. However, we do it in a different format. For example, we did another project with the slogan "Me duele la cara de ser tan güera" (I am so white my face hurts), which we printed on T-shirts for a video project. With "Hasta que nuestra muerte no sea normal," we hadn't thought about it that way. When we met you, we found it nice, the resonance despite operating in places so far apart.

We then offered a workshop in Ciudad Juarez with the "Hasta que nuestra muerte no sea normal" T-shirts, where we held an open call for women who wanted to come and sing the corrida song. Since the phrase is so long, we realized that the original screen wasn't legible, so we did a new version that could be better read from a distance. We enlarged it, and the women over there kept the T-shirts.

It has been very interesting to see how these messages migrate beyond a workshop with *Invasorix* or with *Serigrafistas Queer.* Following the assassination of Isabel Cabanillas, an activist from the group Hijas de su Maquilera Madre, we saw that one of the members of the group was wearing the T-shirt as she announced her comrade's death, which was very beautiful, moving, and very sad.

Nadia: The group Hijas de su Maquilera Madre… the maquila in Mexico is this mode of mass production where Mexicans work for foreign enterprises, and it's one of the industries that were created around the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994. This industry – one of labor exploitation along the Mexico-US border – developed rapidly.

Unx: Hijas de su Maquilera Madre is an art collective. Isabel, one of the members, was recently murdered. We were not in contact with them up until the time of her death in January. What is key about all this is that in Juarez, this violence related to the industry, drug-dealing, the US border, and human trafficking, intensified in the 90s. And it was because of the rise of murders of women in Ciudad Juarez that these cases began to be classified as femicides. Now, with all this talk about painting over monuments last August 16th, it was when the mothers from Juarez told us that they had been marching in silence since the 90s, candles in hand, asking themselves how they could continue doing the same thing.

Mariela: Is the whole thing about the candles similar to a procession? How are candles seen in Mexico in that sense? Generally, when we see something like that, it's related to religion.

Unx: In Mexico, the catholic legacy has permeated in a very general way. Nonetheless, I think that the use of candles does not come from there. For example, with Ingrid Escamilla's femicide, people took candles to the demonstration as an added element. This has been happening more and more. It also has something to do with the Day of the Dead tradition, which is also very syncretic, and I think the Mexicans here know much more than I do about the subject.

Nadia: When I think of the use of candles in demonstration contexts or in political contexts, I think it's something that is responding to different kinds of mourning, and in the case of recent femicides, it has become a device. A big part of the struggle belongs to the mothers, and we have seen this across the country. They are leading the struggle in terms of demands, actions, everything. In this case, the candle is more related to mourning than to religion. When someone dies, it's common to lay out an offering, and even if it's not religious, they hold a degree of mysticism linked more to death or mourning. It obviously has a religious backdrop, but it's not only that. We are also dealing with the religious syncretism related to fire. In 2014, during the massive marches for what happened in Ayotzinapa, if the march took place at night, we were asked to bring candles to symbolize the city's tremendous sense of mourning.

Justice has many faces, it's not blind—that you can play dumb is something else. What we had in mind with the corrida was to evidence the work of mothers who, because of everything that happened, ended up becoming activists.

Sofía: Yes, these objects or elements, the candle, the fire, even the screens or the T-shirts with the printed slogans, have this potency to mutate symbolically, depending on how and where they are activated. Nadia, tell us more about your screen.

Nadia: I'll tell you about the screen that Juan Fran and I made for the tianguis. We participated with La Liga Tensa, a Mexican-Uruguayan choreography collective that works around demonstrations. We came up with the slogan "No me calmo mi amor" (I won't calm down, my love), which was closely linked to that moment in Mexico City. We never knew for sure if it happened through media distortion or if it was only a rumor. There was a phrase that was being used during kidnappings, something like: "Calm down my love," which consisted of a man grabbing hold of a woman in the subway to kidnap her, and if the woman resisted, the man simulated being in a relationship with her and shouted, "Calm down my love." We didn't know for sure if this was something that was actually happening or not. Until it happened to someone we directly knew; before that, we were a bit lost on the subject, but then we understood it as a trigger.

We came up with this slogan that not only applied to this case but also more generally in terms of people not asking us (women) to calm down in the context of a demonstration. I think that throughout the year, this is the main symptom we are living with – that women's demonstrations are not calm at all and they are not going to be that way. I think that much is clear.

Something like that happened on the day of the tianguis, we were not prepared, and it made us feel down. We were very excited with our screen, and we started seeing men getting in line who wanted to get the slogan printed. Only then did we realize that this was a T-shirt meant exclusively for women since it could be misused at any moment. We didn't know how to handle it: many men were laughing as they got in line, not only taking the phrase out of context but also producing the opposite effect – like a macho telling a hysteric lady, "I won't calm down."

It was interesting for us to analyze how we thought about serigraphy at the time of printing, and the other matter was who was wearing the T-shirt. For example, Juan, from our collective, printed his own T-shirt but hasn't been able to use it because if he did, we would be running into the same problem.

Unx: We experienced something similar, with the “Hasta que nuestra muerte no sea normal” t-shirt, there were guys, some of which we knew, who said, how can we get one? And our invariable answer was that they couldn’t have one.

Nadia: Yes, we gradually realized that the gesture was distorted. Until we decided it wasn’t available for men. It was nice to think how at the time of activating, the potencies were different depending on how the phrase was used. It led us to think that we should be much more careful. A few comrades of ours who have a group devoted to women’s self-defense made a version of it that read “No me calmo pendejo” (I won’t calm down asshole), where the implication of gender was much clearer, and they wore them during demonstrations.

Mariela: It was interesting to think of the use of the public space and the little details we couldn’t catch. There are always variables present that might not be so subtle, but that changes everything. For example, to incorporate new T-shirts to print on them is quite different. The exchange involved in taking off your T-shirt to get it printed generates new exchanges like there’s a mode of protection and care.

Nadia: I recently heard from someone that a T-shirt that said, “I won’t calm down, my love,” was being sold on Instagram.

Tadeo: I’m not sure if it was plagiarism or not, but the typography was similar, and the phrase was the same.

Ana Carolina: And at the same time, if the T-shirt works, it becomes popularized and is replicated. The question is who is making money from it.

Unx: I think that talking about plagiarism with this exercise is complicated because it involves reproducing the logic of a work of art, which was never our intention. On the other hand, it’s complicated to capitalize on something that was meant for a demonstration.

Ana Carolina: We might then find out that the person who is printing and selling the T-shirts is a woman who has two children and is raising them by herself. We never know what is on the other side.

Tadeo: For me, the workshop and the tianguis were both very positive exercises. I’m not sure if this was one of the goals of the workshop, but one technique that we were taught was precisely that: how to use serigraphy as a social form of protest and how it can activate discourse.

Sofía: Tadeo, tell us about the life of your screen after the tianguis. What has happened to “Toda señora es política” (“Every señora is political”)?

Tadeo: Unfortunately, we haven’t given much use to our screen. But I do think that the slogan came up at the moment, and I think it was accurate. I go away with a great experience in terms of technique and learning. I think it’s a very ludic way of activating the public space. In Mexico, having a great printmaking tradition, like what happened in ’68 and with collectives based in Tepito, I’m interested in finding ways to reactivate this tradition and relocate it in the collective memory.

Sofía: How did the idea for the slogan come up?

Tadeo: We were asked to come up with a slogan that was to be printed. We began with some phrases that were a bit strange. We wanted to criticize the legality of things. After talking to Mariela, the phrase “Todo arte es político” (All art is political) came to us. We thought about it in relation to women, or the figure of the Señora, in a broader sense. A señora is a woman but can also be a drag queen, and she can also be a trans woman. So we played around with the phrase and ultimately came up with “Toda señora es política.”

Thinking about it in hindsight, I remember having talked to a colleague, Regina, who works with resistance communities in the south of the country. She told me that in these communities, the work of women is essential, especially the work of señoras, because they sustain the movements of resistance. They’re the ones who cook, who take care of children, who guard the fire. They are sustaining the life of a political movement.

I think of the slogan and say, of course! Señoras have a great impact on certain political spheres that we don’t consider because they remain in the private realm, but for certain movements, they play a crucial role. I also think the phrase is cool because it’s irreverent. If you think about it in grammatical terms, it doesn’t make much sense at all – maybe that is where its value lies.

Unx: A really nice thing about that phrase, “Toda señora es política,” is that it activates the idea of dismantling the figure we are accustomed to imagining as revolutionary par excellence, which is someone young. I find it brutal.

Ana Carolina: Yes, totally.

Tadeo: Talking about the current context, the people who are becoming protagonists in these fights are the women who have suffered the loss of their children. I saw a video of a woman saying that she doesn't care about burning it all, that her daughter was murdered, and if people can't understand that, she has all the right to break everything she wants because there is nobody there to offer any solutions.

Nadia: I think this happens at all levels, and I think it comes with the virtue of the word "Señora." In a country like Mexico, this figure has a certain power. Maybe the woman who sells quesadillas – there are many ways of understanding the word señora – and this is something that really enriches the slogan. For example, when I turned 40, I loved the idea of wearing my printed sweatshirt and saying, "Maybe I'm a señora." Or, when I argue with my mother or women of her same generation about current feminist movements, we argue and fight a lot because I feel like they're still embodying other forms of thinking about movements because it's all too tied to '68. There's a huge stigma around the actions and figure of the señora, be it the one who is 40 or the rich señora from a fancy neighborhood in Mexico, or a señora in a rural setting with a rooted political activity. The phrase alludes to the fact that we can all be the señora who launches the Molotov cocktail. I feel that the relationship between the image and the word is really nice. There is a lot of power there.

Unx: And it also subverts this other phrase we sometimes use, "Sit down señora" — this lapidary phrase that suppresses her emotions. This phrase opens up new possibilities.

Mariela: Something very interesting also happened to us in relation to the slogan of "Toda señora es política." In recent times, we had been campaigning. We held open calls where older women have participated and offered a lot in terms of the alliance between women and trans-women, which was a great surprise for me. I would have loved to print that slogan over there.

Ana Carolina: Yes, those who put their bodies at risk and responded to the situation were the older women. It would've been nice to give them a T-shirt that said "Toda señora es política." The older women over here all did things that were not easy for them and wanted to call on their friends, while younger people were not as present. In the imaginary realm, I would've thought I would see more young people, and these were women in their 60s and 70s.

In one of the demonstrations, I heard someone say, "the point here is to light everything on fire," and then, my mother, who was involved, raised her hand to talk and said she didn't think this was about burning or breaking anything, that it was more important to distance ourselves from certain practices. We thought it was an interesting proposal. I'm not saying it's easy because it's hard to escape the system. The reproduction of such a system happens through our bodies. We cannot do without them, but as a gesture, it was nice and poetic, and it painted a scenario, one of walking away.

Unx: I wanted to ask you something, because I, too, in a past life, when I was doing printmaking, had all my ideas come up at the moment. Coming from a punk scene, we did it for concerts. I would like to ask Mariela and Ana Caro what the deal is with the translation of the word *tianguis*? What did it make you feel? I don't know if there's anything similar in Argentina. I say this because, coming from this punk tradition, I see something that is more festive on your side.

Mariela: It's quite daring to appropriate something that is so local to Mexico like the tianguis is. Things just happen that way sometimes. On this occasion, with all the planning Ruta del Castor had made, everything was very programmed. But on other occasions, there are fewer of us, and everything is more precarious, so everything becomes more punk. It depends on the characteristics of the demonstration. They tend to have a certain rhythm to them, and other times we can only do what we can, and the result is a bit more punk, or trash, even. It depends on the place.

It's a good exercise to think about what would've been the ideal place for this Tianguis *Queercuirkuir* in relation to the people we want to appeal to in different places. We chose a space that was symbolically strong, the Monument to Revolution, which at the same time was right in front of an art fair. The public in general also has an influence, the people who walk by change, depending on the place.

The conversation in its original language is available at rutacastor.org.
Translation by Diego Gerard.

Contributors

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Cristina Bogdan is a researcher, art historian, writer and editor. In 2014, she founded the research & education space ODD in Bucharest, as well as the online edition of Revista ARTA, the main contemporary art publication in Romania. Currently, she is growing the research and design studio Forest Cybernetics in Assam, India.

Ana Carolina is a comedian who has worked in radio, theater, television and web series. She enjoys and learns through activist work and by getting her hands dirty with Serigrafistas Queer.

Sofia Casarin is a curator and art historian born in Mexico City. She is co-founder and co-director of Ruta del Castor, a non-profit organization dedicated to the management of public art projects and socially engaged art programs in Mexico. Co-founder of TAMOA, an initiative that contributes to the preservation of endemic crops in Mexico and promotes food sovereignty. She holds an MA in Art and Politics from Goldsmiths University of London and a double major in Art History and International Relations from Florida International University.

Tadeo Cervantes García is an architect from UNAM, graduated with a diploma of merit for his thesis: *Contrasoma o cómo la tensión entre cuerpo y biopoder hacer la arquitectura (pos)moderna.* He is currently working on his thesis to obtain a master's degree in visual arts with the theme: *Cómo hacer arquitectura con los cuerpos: un refugio, una morada, una barricada.* His artistic work has been exhibited at air gallery in Philadelphia and Centro Cultural Border, among others. Together with Nicolás Marín, he is a member of the collective Maricamen.

Sumona Chakravarty is the founder and a trustee of Hamdasti a platform of socially engaged arts practices. Her practice explores the role of participatory art and design practices in creating spaces for civic engagement. She is currently also the Deputy Director of Ghare Baire, DAG Museums, a newly established art museum in Kolkata, India.

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Darya Gorchakova is a PR-manager and SMM-specialist. She is a master of philological education at Astrakhan State University. She writes about wildfires, oil pollution, and information technology. She has more than 5 years experience in environmental and civic volunteering.

Nadia Lartigue Zaslavsky is part of collectives Liga Tensa, Vecinos del Ritmo, and Colectivo A.M. She also collaborates in different projects where she works with artists related to dance and other disciplines, some times as a choreographer and other times as a researcher or performer. La Liga Tensa studies political manifestations from a choreographic perspective.

Radha Mahendru is a researcher and curator working at the intersection of art, advocacy and activism; she is interested in the forms of engagement that art can produce outside of the exhibition space.

Lizaveta Matveeva is a curator and art critic focusing on creative spaces and incubators, self-organizing art initiatives, artist residencies, research-based curatorial projects, social engaged art and art as a tool for community engagement. She works as a Project Manager in the international organization CEC ArtsLink.

Georgia Nicolau is the co-founder and director of Instituto Procomum, a facilitator of organizational development processes and a consultant specialized in innovation projects, culture public policies and development.

Jasmeen Patheja is an artist in public service. Patheja builds ideas for public action committed to ending violence against women, girls and all persons. She is the founder and facilitator of Blank Noise.

Marina Pereira is a cultural producer and a social articulator. She is currently the coordinator of LAB Procomum, the citizen innovation lab of Instituto Procomum.

Valeria Sabirova is a cultural manager, poet and a performer, interested in alternative horizontal and sustainable approaches to project management, team building and community organizing. She claims to bring diverse things together: poetry and new technologies, management and deep listening, projects and dreams, to create new ways of happy living on Earth.

Anna Sagalchik is an independent curator, as well as arts manager and producer for Upsala Circus. She graduated as a sociologist from the Belarusian State University, then graduated with distinction from her MA in International Cultural Programs at the Russian State Institute of Arts, Saint Petersburg.

Mariela Scafati is a painter, screenprinter and queer activist from Buenos Aires, Argentina. Her work is characterized by a formal vitalism always at the service of her personal interests, such as desire, the streets and other people. Scafati uses techniques such as sewing pieces of fabric to compose geometries, writing posters that amplify text messages from a period of activism and incorporating her intimate bondage practices into her paintings. Her work is direct and unmediated, and manages to connect her formal experimentation with her private and political activism.

Unx follows an artistic parctice, does performances, videos and drawings. They get together to work with others, for example with INVASORIX. They can menstruate and dance reggaeton at the same time. Their work is situated from a transfeminist, queer and decolonial perspective, they are interested in investigating and twisting the hegemonic representations of femininity. Descendant of guarichas, they are a southaca that currently inhabits Mesoamerican territories in the contemporary Monster City.

Instituto Procomum
Instituto Procomum (IP) is a Brazilian not-for-profit organization whose mission consists of working towards recognizing, empowering and protecting the commons thourgh citizen innovation and community networking.

lab.procomum.org
georgia@procomum.org

Ruta del Castor
Ruta del CASTOR is a collaborative art platform based in Mexico City that commissions and produces temporary and permanent public art projects, that challenge the limits of traditional exhibition space, fostering social interaction and contributing to today's discourse. Founded and run by Andrea de la Torre Suarez and Sofia Casarin.

www.rutacastor.org
sofia@rutacastor.org

ODD
A space for theoretical discussion and social gatherings of all kinds, ODD provides for a combination of intimacy and playfulness, dialogue and resistance, from which to act upon the world. Founded in Bucharest and run by Cristina Bogdan.

www.oddweb.org
info@oddweb.org

Hamdasti
Hamdasti, meaning partnership in Persian, is a non-profit arts organization based in Kolkata, India that develops collaborations between artists and communities with a firm belief that art and design play a critical role in creating public platforms for dialogue, interaction, civic participation and social engagement.

www.hamdasti.com
contacthamdasti@gmail.com

Blank Noise
Blank Noise is a community of 'Action Sheroes, Theyroes and Heroes', individuals and citizens united to eradicate gender based and sexual violence. They have been instrumental in building public discourse on sexual violence, through a range of interventions, designed across media (video, audio, live action, performance, posters). Blank Noise was founded in 2003 and is based in India.

www.blanknoise.org
actionhero@blanknoise.org

Guslitsa
Guslitsa is a creative space, cultural centrer, public event & art exhibition venue and a co-living space. It is situated in the country side in the former 18th century textile factory, 80km from Moscow. Founded in 2012 by family members, brother and sister, Mikhail Humm and Irina Nilolaeva, a businesswoman and a performer, who purchased the building privately. During 8 years it has been revitalized by entusiast artists and became an international platform, space of inspiration and creative collaborations.

art-guslitsa.ru
art.guslitsa.2017@gmail.com

Art Prospect
Art Prospect is an annual public art festival founded in 2012 by the nonprofit CEC ArtsLink. The festival alters the familiar urban landscape, filling streets, courtyards, parks, and other public spaces with works of contemporary art. By 2020 the festival has taken place in St. Petersburg, Russia, as well as in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; Baku, Azerbaijan; Kyiv, Ukraine; and Tbilisi, Georgia. Its mission is to develop new forms of creative interaction, offering artists and local residents the opportunity to explore the urban environment and to determine and reimagine its aesthetic, historical, cultural, and social ingredients.

www.artprospect.org
lmatveeva@cecartslink.org

Upsala Circus
Upsala-Circus Center for the New Circus combines socio-cultural, educational and art projects for children and adults. The initiative aims to develop the creative potential of its members and inspire their desire to contribute. The organisers believe that contemporary art cannot be separated from life itself, its various aspects and all the people around us. This is why Upsala-Circus always invites the participants of their projects to be actively involved in the creative process and become co-authors.

www.upsalacircus.ru
hello@upsalacircus.ru