

AGATA SZYMANEK

STRATEGIES OF COLLECTIVE LEARNING

KATHRYN (KATIE) ZAZENSKI

MARTYNA MILLER

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ASP KATOWICE 2026

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AGATA SZYMANEK

Agata Szymanek lives and works in Mysłowice, Poland. She studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice, where she also earned her doctorate. She is currently working at the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice, where, together with Prof. Jolanta Jastrzęb, she runs the studio Art in Action, dedicated to socially engaged practices in art.

Her recent practice focuses on creating artistic workshops and designing activity books and mobile apps for educational purposes. In her pedagogical work, she often seeks to translate the knowledge she encounters into artistic experiences by repositioning words and images and examining them in various contexts. The contexts she explores are connected to our relationships to animals, the environment, and a deeper understanding of medical care systems.

Her workshops are focused on developing and advancing critical and creative

thinking. During her residency at Stiftung Künstlerdorf Schöppingen in 2022, she conducted *The vernacular thinking workshop*. In 2020 and 2021 she taught the workshop *Bees and the sword of contestation* at the 6th PhilosophyCon, the workshop Balsamic Garden addressed to pharmacy employees, and *The creative workshop of virtual touch* at the Youth Biennial in Belgrade.

Agata Szymanek has collaborated with institutions and organizations such as Temporary Gallery (Cologne), Pilipczuk Gallery (Copenhagen), Stiftung Künstlerdorf (Schöppingen), UNIDEE Residency Programs (Biella), ACC Gallery (Weimar), Youth Biennial (Belgrade), Zachęta – National Gallery of Art (Warsaw), BWA Awangarda (Wrocław), Bielska BWA Gallery (Bielsko-Biała), BWA Katowice (Katowice), Rondo Sztuki (Katowice), Centre for the Meeting of Cultures (Lublin), Kolonia Artystów (Gdańsk), Silesian Museum (Katowice), City Museum in Tychy (Tychy).

INVITATION

AGATA SZYMANEK

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.¹

bell hooks

In institutions, learning is often based on group work, but most of the time this still involves a hierarchical structure. Activities where people learn from one another by spending time together and getting to know and understand one another, then exploring new tools, feelings and spaces together, are an interesting arena. Thanks to a more open approach to collectivity, we increasingly also include non-human entities in our groups. Simply restructuring and expanding the group allows us to discover new, intriguing starting points for collective learning.

This leads to generating collective knowledge in new areas. The sheer number of definitions of collective knowledge and collective knowledge-gathering strategies opens up a very interesting prospect of collective learning based on diversity. This perspective operates at different scales and encompasses an elaborate network of relations.

In this publication, inspired by the question of how collective learning works across different contexts, I've invited artists, curators, and educators associated with institutions, organisations and various initiatives that support collective action to talk to me about their experience. Thanks to the conversations in this

¹ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, New York–London 1994, p. 207.

volume I was able to learn about different practice-based collective learning strategies, and it's precisely this practical dimension that makes them so attractive.

One example are the community residencies organised on the Vistula river by Ewa Ciepielewska and Agnieszka Brzeżańska. During a several-week-long river cruise the collective learning process is activated directly by being in nature, sharing experiences, cooking, resting, and observing the landscape together. The participants may share a sighting, for example: “You can see a beaver together. We're on the boat and all of a sudden a frightened beaver tumbles down the embankment and falls into the river. It was insane. All of us, all eight of us who were there, will always have this etched in our collective memories. You can't unsee it. We all have that experience, the whole crew.”² Here, being together moulds the very act of perception, creating a shared experience for those who are there in the moment, and a shared way of looking emerges. Seeing together thus becomes a form of collective cognition and gives rise to a collective memory whose quality and emotional depth is greater thanks to the personal bond forged at that particular moment.

Since 2024, together with Prof. Jolanta Jastrząb, we have been running the studio *Sztuka w działaniu* (Art in Action) at the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice, where we support socially engaged and participatory projects. The intention underpinning the present study was to create a tool that could be used by students, those working in art education, artists, or anyone else with an interest in collective work.

The conversations presented here are proof that community action today is a rich polyphony of practices. The approaches can differ vastly, accentuate very different aspects of learning or being in relationship, but what remains key to all of them is the way they support attentiveness, mutual listening, and getting to know one another in the process of sharing an experience.

² From the conversation with Ewa Ciepielewska.

Some of the conversations indicate that this is not an easy task. Collective action is not an easier alternative to well-established, hierarchical structures – on the contrary, it requires more time, understanding, and sensitivity. The process also entails occasional failure, difficult collaborations, or unsuccessful projects – all of which can cause frustration. As Aneta Rostkowska points out, collective practices are also sometimes instrumentalised by institutions, such as grant-giving bodies, which often fail to understand what is required for good cooperation and what it actually looks like. At the same time, well-designed collaborative action can be deeply rewarding and take us places we never knew existed.

When considering the contemporary art context at the heart of *Collective Learning Strategies*, one cannot fail to notice that compared to other areas of life, artistic practices are particularly well adapted to experimenting with different forms of collective action because they are geared towards sensitivity, openness, and processuality. Here, art functions as a forum of exchange, not just a place of individual expression. At the same time, it can be approached in an interdisciplinary way, as a field that straddles education, social work and activism; also simply as an opportunity to spend time together or live through something together. When venturing beyond the art context, the conversations often shift to fields like law, inmate reintegration, therapy, politics as well as everyday life and neighbourly relations. It is precisely thanks to collective practices that art and creative approaches can penetrate these spheres much more effectively. As I see it, all the collective practices described by my interlocutors are taken up in the hope that what develops in the art context will spread to other areas of life.

Our publication has a research quality, although the study itself doesn't have a rigid structure. It's flexible and permeable – infused with the energy of conversation. I asked my interlocutors three basic questions related to how collective knowledge can be generated. First of all, I am interested in the collective learning

strategies my interviewees employ in their artistic, educational or curatorial practice. I also ask about how they would define collective knowledge based on their experience. The third key question is in what direction should we be developing collective learning methods in the context of the changes occurring in art institutions, education, and society today. Taken together, these three questions form the backbone of the study which we then flesh out together with details regarding the individual practices of those invited to this project.

The question regarding what type of knowledge we consider to be most valuable sparks reflection on how such knowledge arises and how it can be used. It is worth emphasising that in the context of this study, the value of knowledge is not defined by its universality or objectivity, but by how readily it can be deployed to build connection, broaden horizons, and empower collective agency.

At the end of our conversation, Alessandra Saviotti says: *“This is important because it means that knowledge does not follow a hierarchy, at least not for me. What you learn by talking to people at the market, or speaking with farmers, is as valuable as what you learn at a university. For me, it is always a matter of how you use the knowledge. What do you do with it? Can it lead to something that does not yet exist? Can you have an epiphany while shopping at the market? For example, when you see where the tomatoes come from, what does that tell you? What can you do with that?”*³

Collective knowledge so defined is not a closed conceptual system. According to Leigh Biddlecome, collective knowledge *“is not knowledge in the sense of propositional knowledge, but rather a kind of knowledge about how to communicate multimodally and create with a group of people who come with an array of different skill sets.”*⁴ It is rooted in practice, everyday acts of collaboration, negotiation, and collective decisionmaking. Collective knowledge is thus embodied and contextual, it emerges in relationship with

3 From the conversation with Alessandra Saviotti.

4 From the conversation with Leigh Biddlecome.

other people, with the space we spend time in and create in, with institutions we have dealings with, and with the natural world.

Asked about the definition of collective knowledge, Jolanta Jastrzb replies: *"It's hard to say exactly what it is. I see it as something that we are continually expanding. We learn from one another, we look at one another. It's extremely capacious and continually expanding. I like the word 'total'. It's something total, something we gather and connect, something fluid and open."*⁵

The question of how to work with this knowledge and how to find common ground invites the search for new collaborative methods and ways to pass on shared history. The issue of archiving collective knowledge now comes to the fore. Martyna Miller underscores that collective knowledge is often carried by individuals rather than documents, which makes it potentially fleeting and ephemeral. Thus creating a shared archive is tremendously important.

Creative archives, understood as sources of inspiration for collective undertakings, are studied by Alessandra Saviotti. One example is the Arte til Archive; the educational initiatives developed within the framework of Hacking (Art) Education are another. The archive so conceived is not just a record but a tool for actively sustaining communal knowledge. Sara Buraya Boned talks about the Archivos del Comn project implemented by Museo Reina Sofa and Red de Conceptualismos del Sur with the support of the Foundation for Arts Initiatives (FfAI). Here the archive is seen as a catalyst of political empowerment and facilitator of reflection on common heritage, while emphasising the significance of joint ownership and the need to counter the appropriation and monopolisation of memory. Another example is the project *Widok z okna* (View From the Window) realised by the DOMIE collective. Here, local residents were invited to journal and record daily events and emotions, both positive and difficult. The project looked at how an archive can become a platform for relating to one another and for reflecting on local reality together.

5 From the conversation with Jolanta Jastrzb.

For the purposes of the present study, the word "strategies" refers to ways of organising and experiencing the learning process within a community, but the focus is not on strategies in the instrumental sense but on practices that shape relations between participants and inform the collaboration format and knowledge-sharing. The strategies mentioned by interviewees include: sharing happiness, working toward compromise, stretching time, using the everyday, searching for authenticity, engaged withdrawal, Narrative Exposure Therapy, or striving for degrowth.

"AS: Can psychoactivity be a collective learning strategy?"

Ewa Ciepielewska: *I think that collective action can be psychoactive in and of itself, even if you're not using any substances. In deep altered states, like after taking mushrooms, LSD or even smoking marijuana, acts of transcending everyday perception together lead to greater closeness and connection. It's the same in other situations: when you take part in an activity, or you weather a storm in the mountains together, or you go through a difficult experience. It brings people together, one naturally seeks proximity and support. A need for mutuality, mutual attraction, emerges."*⁶

In this understanding, a strategy is not a set plan but an open design that evolves along with context, group dynamics, and needs. Alessandra Saviotti says: *"For me, it is not interesting to have the idea of a programme or curriculum as a fixed structure which I could give to the students and they just follow it. It is more interesting to have a draft or a sketch that the community or group of people can complete together with me."*⁷ In this vein, strategies are orientation points that help those participating in a collective process navigate complex and often unpredictable situations.

When reflecting on the sort of imagination that supports collective learning, it might be said that collective learning

6 From the conversation with Ewa Ciepielewska.

7 From the conversation with Alessandra Saviotti.

requires a relational imagination, the ability to see oneself as part of an interconnected network. This type of imagination is open to difference and helps us grasp the complexity of the world around us. It not only operates as a learning and cognitive method but can also contribute to greater empathy.

The issue of managing collective time is often raised in the conversations. Unlike results-oriented projects, collective activities often follow a different rhythm. They require greater attentiveness and openness to the process, where time must be stretched in order to make room for relationships, feelings, and personal change. In this context, deciding how we spend our time and reflecting on the significance of moments that outlast specific tasks becomes paramount. As Aneta Rostkowska says: *"I often see how doing something together turns into something functional: 'an hour on Zoom and see you later'. Those who do this have no idea that collective work requires totally different conditions. That people have to have dinner together every once in a while or just hang out in one room, give it time and talk about totally unrelated things."*⁸

At the same time when thinking about the space that comes into being during collective activities, we are not talking about a precisely defined and delineated space, but a dynamic field that emerges in the encounter between participants and thanks to what they are doing together. It isn't merely a physical place, but one that includes the intention and attentiveness we bring to it. The organiser of the artistic residency programme in Gyumri, Armenia, Mary Mikaelyan, says: *"We like to think of the space as something that can be offered to the people who live there, a space to meet, to be together as neighbours, and to spend time together. It becomes a kind of community space informed by the presence and initiative of each artist. Sometimes, for example, artists who work with sound or music come, and the space turns into a music workshop. Kids might start learning something, like how to play an instrument. If*

8 From the conversation with Aneta Rostkowska

*an artist works with drawing, the children and others learn how to express themselves through drawing. So, using different media, and depending on the artist and the occasion, people of different generations are invited to share the space, to exchange knowledge, skills, and ideas – and simply to spend time together."*⁹

Today virtual space also plays an important role. Katie Zazenski and Leigh Biddlecome point out that the internet has become an extension of communal space, a place where different identities can co-exist. Digital space welcomes those previously excluded from artistic and collective life. It is a still undefined area and one that's rapidly evolving, and might in the future become an ideal place for exploring new forms of community.

*"The internet also has this potential of a space where people who previously lacked access or power to participate can now do so in a different way. It is even more possible to have larger collectives, collective knowledge, knowledge pools, and spaces for learning through the internet and this kind of sharing. There is also the space of shadows – sometimes it is more powerful, more empowering, to be able to work in the space where there is blur, where there is some veiling. That's definitely a component of this, too."*¹⁰

A recurring theme is how artistic and educational practices can impact institutions and how those institutions can in turn be transformed from the inside. The idea of impacting art and academic institutions from the inside, as well as using existing structures to create more inclusive and open venues finds expression in the conversations with Sara Buraya Boned, Alessandra Saviotti and Jolanta Jastrząb. These efforts focus on renegotiating the rules and expanding the field of possible activity. In practice this means setting up alternative structures, for instance ones that include people from outside the institution, experimental education programmes, or workshops that promote new modes of cooperation. Such endeavours are not

9 From the conversation with Mary Mikaelyan.

10 From the conversation with Katie Zazenski.

always free of tension; they require an ability to compromise and an awareness of limits. Yet it is precisely through negotiation that their transformative potential unfolds, making it possible to test new ways of working.

Sara Buraya Boned describes workshops organised at the Reina Sofía Museum by Paula Pin and Laura Benítez, involving building self-made microscopes using a cheap online camera.

“In the end it became something like a witch club, sharing forbidden, non-commercial knowledge related to our bodies, but also to our subjectivities, affects, and feminist militancy. Within the span of five days a new collective body was created. It was truly transformative for all of us. On the final day we were naked, examining one another’s cervixes, collecting cells, and exploring them with the microscopes we had built together.

*We could see our own body’s cells on the screen. This is something one would never imagine happening inside a museum, within the regulated space of the white cube. Yet such an experience became possible when it was grounded in trust and in a temporary autonomous community that shared both witchcraft and scientific knowledge about their bodies.”*¹¹

A key problem that also emerges in this context has to do with new ways of understanding the economy. Alessandra Saviotti’s project *DPE – Decentralising Political Economies*, realised together with Poppy Bowers and John Byrne, is an example of this quest. Using the Arte Útil Archive project database, the project showcases tools that can help people explore alternative economic models. Seen through this lens economics is no longer arcane – we can trace it back to our daily lives.

The emotional economy, i.e. managing energy, passion, engagement but also burnout within the framework of collective endeavours holds an important place in the publication. When describing the experience of co-creating DOMIE, Martyna Miller says: *“because this type of work, aside from being unpaid and often*

11 From the conversation with Sara Buraya Boned.

*very demanding, is very energy-consuming and requires a high degree of self-awareness, it easily leads to burnout. We know of many different collective initiatives or spaces that simply ended, for a variety of reasons. And the knowledge disappeared along with them.”*¹² The conversations suggest that managing your emotions is very important in collective work and helps us find one another in today’s world, while making us resilient to crises that affect us.

On this note, Leigh Biddlecome and I talk about the crises around us and about ways of dealing with them. One way to respond is with collective creativity, because given the complexity of these crises, simple, streamlined solutions no longer work: *“how to make meaning of what is happening. For me, the only way to do that is through dance, writing, engagement with other art forms, and ideally through being and creating with other people. If you try to do it alone all the time, it can feel overwhelming in the face of a crisis. That is why the idea of collective voice feels essential to me.”*¹³

Working on *Collective Learning Strategies* has been a very rewarding process and I am proud to have met these extraordinary individuals on my path in art and education. I think that they are channelling their enthusiasm in the right direction and inspiring others to develop new, interesting and transformative artistic activities. My interlocutors are people who are not afraid to experiment. They are open, sensitive to their fellow humans and to the environment, and in tune with the places they co-create. I am very grateful to them for accepting my invitation.

In her curatorial work, Kathryn (Katie) Zazenski, the founder of Fringe Warszawa and Stroboskop gallery, highlights the need for projects like *Community Critique*, which create a space of dialogue that welcomes people from diverse backgrounds. At the same time she emphasises the significance of activities that happened during the pandemic when it was necessary to adapt art projects to emergency measures, which sparked a search for

12 From the conversation with Martyna Miller.

13 From the conversation with Leigh Biddlecome.

new formats and venues. Katie also highlights how important it is to understand group dynamics when doing collective work, including the role of ego and of the emotions which play an important part in the collaborative process. As she notes, genuine engagement in cooperative endeavours requires openness, honesty, and a willingness to be vulnerable.

The conversation with artist Martyna Miller, co-founder of DOMIE, brings an interesting perspective on ways of creating a community that might incorporate a non-human body, such as the body of a building. The DOMIE collective adapted an abandoned building in Św Marcina street in Poznań. This type of approach identifies new sources of knowledge and expands our understanding of community. In this case, the collective had to gain administrative and technical knowledge in order to take care of the building. The initiative also brings an opportunity to build neighbourly relations with local residents and to create a shared archive.

The conversation with Aneta Rostkowska, the head of the Temporary Gallery in Cologne, features considerations on the nature of knowledge, classical and discursive definitions of knowledge, and the distinction between “knowing that” and “knowing how”. Aneta Rostkowska spells out her personal perspective on collective work based on her curatorial experience as well as her everyday experience, for instance sharing a flat. She underscores that spending time together outside of formal meetings and goal-oriented effort is very important in collective work. She also mentions Narrative Exposure Therapy, an interesting therapeutic modality that may be used for getting to know each other in the collective process.

Camilo Pachón, an artist from Bogota, talks about collective work based on experience he gained while working with different communities in Columbia, in particular within the framework of audiovisual and film projects. Film – a medium that by definition involves collaboration and requires a host of different competencies – becomes his backdrop for critical reflection

on hierarchical production methods. He asks how the process of making a film can be made into an even playing field, where the entire community contributes to the narrative and speaks in its own voice. At the same time Camilo also introduces an interesting perspective when talking about the art world understood as the art community and about how we could change our thinking in order to simultaneously take care of our own art community.

The artist and curator of the residency space Art Basis in Gyumri, Armenia, Mary Mikaelyan, describes ways of introducing art practices into a local community. The residency is housed in a residential estate built for people who were left homeless in the wake of the disastrous earthquake in the Spitak region in 1988. This makes it a very special setting. Mary talks about the residents and the connections that form between the local community and the resident artists, emphasising how these projects affect the life of the neighbourhood. She points out that new collective learning strategies come into being every time and are unique and informed by whatever conditions are present.

Alessandra Saviotti, curator of UNIDEE Residency Programs in Cittadellarte – Fondazione Pistoletto in Biella, Italy, alludes to her educational practice, reflecting on creating open, flexible curricula and “hacking” art education to make it more inclusive and relational. We also talk about the concept of the Not-Yet, understood as the power of art and imagination to create things that don't yet exist. Alessandra talks about her research on Arte Útil – art conceived so as to bring about real social change.

Sara Buraya Boned, who does her research and social work at Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid, brings a viewpoint grounded in institutional practice. The initiatives she is engaged in explore institutional change driven from the inside and show how the personal goals of those working to bring the artistic experience to outsiders can become an integral part of an institution's

way of operating. She also uses the notion of “unexpected partner”, i.e. an unexpected, unannounced person or group that becomes involved in a collaborative project. This type of partner has the potential to transform the space of an institution and open it up to new forms of collaboration.

The conversation with Ewa Ciepielewska touches on how experiencing nature and spending time in nature creates opportunities for community practices. Striving for well-being together and trying to understand how love and happiness can facilitate collective learning is an interesting dimension of collective action. The artist emphasises that feelings and emotional engagement are crucial to the learning process; they instil the desire to learn and make us receptive to new ideas. We also talk about how community practices involving being in nature could be deployed in the field of inmate resocialisation and reintegration.

With Jolanta Jastrząb we reflect on how an art-therapy-based group process can facilitate collective learning and how everyday life can be artfied. Jolanta cites examples from her social work and the research and art therapy projects she has done. She reflects on how research can be set up to be done collectively and talks about the role of interdisciplinarity in this process. She underlines that collective research is a demanding and complex task predicated on the ability to compromise.

I talk to researcher and facilitator Leigh Biddlecome about crises and how to identify collective learning strategies in the face of contemporary political, ecological and social upheavals, as well as the metacrisis affecting various areas of our lives today. We ponder how different strategies may grow out of working with the body and observing the body mindfully, as well as from practices that introduce the body as a source of knowledge into the space of institutions. Our conversation also touches on authenticity, its role in the process of learning and building relationships, and the idea of postgrowth, understood as the search for alternative, sustainable development pathways.

GUMBO

KATHRYN (KATIE) ZAZENSKI

Artist, curator, writer, editor and lecturer whose practice is centred around cultural production and community building in independent, artist-led communities. Since 2018 she has directed the Warsaw-based independent art space Stroboskop, where she has produced 50+ exhibitions as well as critical partnerships with international artist-led projects. In 2020, Zazenski began editing and writing for BLOK magazine where she developed the monthly column “Off-space Q + A”, featuring artist-led spaces and projects from the CEE region. In 2021, she became co-editor-in-chief, which she co-stewarded until February 2024. The editorial team formally resigned in April 2024 and together launched MOST magazine, of which Zazenski is co-founder and co-editor-in-chief.

In 2022, Zazenski also founded FRINGE Warszawa, an annual event that platforms artist-led, grassroots spaces and projects in Warsaw. Zazenski currently co-organizes the project with a small team, who are working to ensure that FRINGE remains a critical platform for independent contemporary art in Poland. Zazenski received her Master of Fine Arts degree in Sculpture from Cranbrook Academy of Art (USA) and is a two-time Fulbright Program scholar in Poland, where she has lived since 2015.



Image from the opening of WARSAW>KIN~BERLIN at super bien! One of the two exhibitions co-curated by Elisabeth Sonneck (super bien!) and Katie Zazenski (Stroboskop) focused on the complexities of artist-run spaces, the people that run them, and the communities that are built around them. Each exhibition featured two works by artists or collectives represented by six artist-run spaces each from Warsaw and Berlin. Berlin, April 2023. Photo: Katie Zazenski.

GUMBO

A CONVERSATION WITH KATHRYN (KATIE) ZAZENSKI

Your practice as an artist, curator, writer, and editor is deeply rooted in creating and supporting independent cultural communities. Through your long-term involvement with Stroboskop, your editorial work at BLOK Magazine and now MOST magazine, and the creation of FRINGE Warszawa, you've built platforms that elevate voices and practices often overlooked by dominant institutions. Given your experience, how do you see the role of spaces like Stroboskop in shaping or holding collective knowledge?

I think the goal in everything that I do [at Stroboskop] is to make it a place for people. A place for people to show and talk about their work, and for people to see artworks. I think essentially this whole place is a kind of knowledge-collecting space in some ways. We don't have this typical production exchange or money exchange. Our real value lies in what people bring and what people give, and what people share, because that's all it really is.

Since we're an artist-run space and don't have or earn money, we can't pay the artists we work with, but still, we have value to exchange. We support people with concept development, curation, installation, sometimes sourcing materials or solutions, promotion, and visibility, etc. We give our expertise and our community as a way of thanking and supporting the artists who choose to work with us.

Before COVID we were doing in-person meetings that we were calling *Community Crit* – like *Community Critique*. The point of those meetings was to provide a place where you could meet other artists or people not only working in but simply interested in contemporary culture, talk about your practice in a group, or you could talk about really anything that felt relevant. It was an open platform for people to feel like they could engage

more with the contemporary art space, whether it be their own, or the more public art space. Sometimes during our meetings we had scientists, sometimes musicians. And always, there were artists. Naturally, when you're presenting your work in front of a scientist, there's automatically going to be ideas and questions exchanged that are completely different from what you'd experience in a more homogeneous bubble.

That was always really interesting for me – to see how different ideas would evolve from the random people who would come to these meetings. Then when COVID happened in the spring of 2020, when we first went into lockdown, we worked together with a local organization focused on allotment gardens, and started a project that we called *Spring Fling*, of growing mushrooms in a bathtub inside Stroboskop. This was both a philosophical as well as a physical, material experiment – we were thinking about the rhizome and how communities work when our main source of connection is broken. When we can't physically be together anymore. How do we still share knowledge? How do we still support each other and build community in times when our main way of doing that is blocked from us?

And so in connection with this project, we created a kind of online platform modeled after *Community Crit*, where people could share whatever they wanted via Facebook and Instagram Live. We had meetings with artists around the world; there was an old-school slide projection night by Welsh artist Dafydd Williams, there was yoga, there was a performance of the online work *The System* by American artist Carrie Sijia Wang, one former artist-couple hosted a cooking "show". Over the course of four hours, Sarah Pearl and Zachary Titford made gumbo, a typical Southern dish that Titford grew up with. It was wild.

Do you think collective learning works better when a group starts with a clear purpose and then builds tools and strategies around it, or can it also grow out of just being open to any possibility, without a fixed goal?

These collective activities for learning are so different, and you can do so many different things to learn together. And it could be, like, with purpose, without purpose, with a lot of people or with a small group.

When we say *community*, I think the general image is often of a group of people – ten, fifteen, or more. But actually, couldn't it be just more than one? It could be just two people. Exchanging knowledge is something we do every day, in different ways, like right now. This conversation is an exchange of knowledge. I feel like community can be a mindset, or a perspective, it doesn't only have to be a physical thing with a clearly defined structure or goal. It's a way of being, a way of experiencing the world, of encountering other people, a mentality of learning, questioning, engaging, of remembering that there is consequence and responsibility and opportunity in thinking and acting outside of just for ourselves. This experience of creating and sharing knowledge takes the form of community through its scope.

This might be a slightly twisted way of putting it, but I think an interesting element in all of this is the question: what is a community? It's a group of people who, theoretically, trust each other and are vulnerable with each other. That's a really critical element. And if you can have a situation where you can be vulnerable with someone, where you can trust someone, then that automatically becomes a space of knowledge and of learning and of building.

In a collective, to work with each other, you have to start by getting to know one another, or knowing who knows what.

I have to bring my skill set, and that means I have to want to share my information. And why would I want to share the information that I have? It's either because I care about these people, or I want them to succeed, or I want us to succeed together.

I think it's actually quite fascinating – this border between the individual and the collective really shapes the success

of collective knowledge. And it's really difficult! I think the utopian understanding of collective knowledge sharing and generation somehow implies that the ego or the strong, individualized sense of self goes away, or kind of melts into the fold of the group. But in my experience, especially in a critical situation, it often rather gets intensified! Of course not always, but it is a really delicate balance. Sometimes we have to have one or two clear voices that are leading, and sometimes we can't always wait for the 75 individuals to cast their vote even though we decided we would follow a democratic model. I think one of the most critical things to remember in these spaces is that there needs to be constant evaluation, both of the self and of the group: do the goals we set out to achieve still apply, are our strategies working, if they're not, how do we shift to work better, etc? It's constant learning.

How to deal with that kind of situation?

I'm thinking about one situation in particular where we were working collectively, but it was very clear that there were certain agendas, and the spirit wasn't as shared as it was intended to be, or as it was pretending to be. So again, it comes down to the goals. Is this going to be damaging to my individual self if I participate in this? And if not, okay. I can go along with it. We can still share things, we can still learn things. But I might just end up learning different things than I thought I was going to learn.

Maybe it's because when you collaborate with people you grow close to that process, you stop controlling your ego so much. At least you don't feel the need to pretend anymore. You just act naturally. There are actually so many skills you learn through collective learning, also how to express yourself in a group.

I was just listening to a podcast where they were talking about how situational power and collectivity are related, and the dif-

ference between when it's just you and me sitting here in conversation, and when that shifts into an *us versus them* dynamic.

As humans, we have this natural tendency to treat everything subjectively. If you and I were in a room together, suddenly we would have this kind of shared connection simply because we're in the same room. And then if all of a sudden, there are two people on the other side of that wall, you and I now have an allegiance we didn't have before. There is an element of space and scale.

The underlying dynamic is that we are constantly forming groups and constantly categorizing, figuring out where we fit and where others fit, or don't fit. And it changes all the time. One person can be on the inside of a group in one situation and on the outside in another. It's contextual and fluid. And I think that's a really fascinating component of community.

So going back to your question, about expressing yourself, I think this is also related to what I mentioned earlier; it's super important to constantly be asking questions in these kinds of settings, to be self-critical (and self meaning both the individual self and the "group" self, the community "self"), because typically, the group naturally has more power than the individual because it is the collection of individual power acting together. So if some voices are not able to be expressed, or are drowned out, that's a problem. And some people are naturally comfortable being vocal and some are not, so there has to be space to accommodate all of this but also not to be swallowed up in the negotiation of it.

You mentioned the scale of collectivity, or the scale of knowledge-sharing and communities. How do you imagine learning collectively at a much bigger scale?

When you mentioned a bigger scale, I immediately thought of the internet and social media. The last time I was active in my art practice, about two years ago, I was working a lot with the internet, and how it has given power and freedom to people who were previously unable to participate or be part of collectives

in the physical, place-based world. My bias for a long time was to think from a very privileged, normative experience – an able-bodied, hearing, seeing population, one that shares a common language, that has access.

The internet also has this potential of a space where people who previously lacked access or power to participate can now do so in a different way. It is even more possible to have larger collectives, collective knowledge, knowledge pools, and spaces for learning through the internet and this kind of sharing. There is also the space of shadows – sometimes it is more powerful, more empowering, to be able to work in the space where there is blur, where there is some veiling. That's definitely a component of this, too.

What do you think about the idea of more open collectives—for example post-human collectives, collectives that could include non-human persons. I think this is a really interesting aspect because when we include different kinds of beings in a collective, we access completely different forms of knowledge.

This is certainly not my area of expertise (!), but I do think in general that there is nothing that we can't learn from. I mean, if we look at this project I mentioned at the start of COVID, where we



2025 FRINGE Warszawa organizational team photo after our weekend of events at the Museum of Modern Art (MSN) in Warsaw, where we held a series of discussions, an open-mic, and a collaborative exhibition featuring works that were shown in previous editions of FRINGE.

were looking at mycelium as a way to think about how to be more resilient as a community who had lost our primary modus of functioning. There are so many non-human resources that are absolutely critical. We can think about symbiotic, commensalist, mutualistic relations that we can observe in different species, and I think it's quite expected that these relations are inter-species, it's how a healthy ecosystem works. That's actually a word that hasn't entered our conversation yet but is one that for me is fundamental, absolutely critical. A community functions within an ecosystem, and a healthy ecosystem is diverse. We see it in nature, we see how human-manufactured monocultures are absolutely disastrous – just look at farming in the US, it's a completely dependent system that requires massive amounts of intervention just to have basic production. Of course scale is a massive factor, too. But if we look at biodiverse systems, the different organisms work together in balance to keep the whole system functioning. There is adaptation and resilience, aka knowledge accumulation, learning. This is critical.

This connects with what you said earlier: when we think about collectives, we tend to imagine a group of people who think in similar ways. But people who think differently are usually not your friends. So the real question becomes: how do we include those who are different from us?

That's a really tough one to answer, but I think at the end of the day it comes down to being willing and able to compromise. And again, to be constantly re-evaluating your actions, motives, goals. This is something that we discuss a lot as an organizing team of FRINGE, because we have a certain set of values that we want to uphold, but we also don't want to be exclusionary or exclusive. And, the people who have joined us might have very different interpretations of these values, but that doesn't mean they are wrong. So I guess the thing is you have to be genuinely open, not just performing it, or speaking it. It has to be authentic, and you have to be vulnerable.

What could be the future of collective learning?

I think at the end of the day, we need each other, and we need to be both generous and gentle, hopeful and curious. I'm sure this sounds naive, but I do believe it. I don't know if learning is possible without some level of humility, and I think that's what these characteristics, or qualities, ultimately signal to.

MARTYNA MILLER

Interdisciplinary artist, cultural anthropologist, and filmmaker, she studied in Warsaw and Sarajevo and earned her PhD in Fine Arts in 2022 from the University of the Arts in Poznań. She is a co-founder of the duo Polanki (2014-2017) and of the Tyna collective (2013 – present), as well as DOMIE in Poznań – an art project described as “an experiment in collective care”.

Since 2016, she has been developing the project *Sexinsitu* which gathers an archive of participants’ sexual and intimate memories, presented as immersive video installations. Since 2018, in the post-hurricane landscapes of the Tuchola Forest, where she partly resides, she has been developing the project *Brak Lasu* (The Lack of Forest).

Her works have been shown in numerous art, theatre, and research institutions in Poland, Europe, and worldwide, including Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (part of the collection), Arsenal Municipal Gallery in Poznań (part of the collection), Hongo Gallery in Tokyo, SDK in Dresden, Theater Nordkraft in Aalborg, Kampnagel in Hamburg, Nowy Teatr in Warsaw, and many others.

For years, she has maintained strong ties with the artistic scenes of the Balkans and Japan. She is a member of the research project *Creatures: Creative Practices for Transformative Futures* and a Paul Mellon Foundation researcher within the multidisciplinary project *In the hurricane*. On the land. Since 2024, she has been leading the Ruino Ruido Foundation, dedicated to exploring the intersections of art and trauma.



Brak Lasu (The Lack of Forest), meeting with the community (soil profile sampling), memorial site at the mound-sculpture by Lake Śpiewnik, near the village of Suszek, Bory Tucholskie, 2022. Photo: Anka Zajkowska.

CARES

CARES

A CONVERSATION WITH MARTYNA MILLER

The artistic and research activities you undertake arise from a thoroughly interdisciplinary approach that spans visual arts, film, performance, and community action.¹ You are part of DOMIE, a space informed by experimentation and concern. Your work often focuses on the body, memory, and nature as catalysts of transformational change. In projects like *Memory Carp*, *Intimacy of Waters* and *Sexinsitu* you talk about intimacy, healing and the community experience of the real, deploying hydro-activism as a strategy. In this context, I'd like to ask you how you understand collective learning strategies? What practices and relationships make it possible to generate knowledge collectively in your projects?

The project *Sexinsitu* is a kind of attempt to create a universe that is about the sexual experience and how it can be rendered visually or understood more closely. This wouldn't be possible without the input of all the participants. So it's a type of alternative economy involving the exchange of goods. I invite someone to something, and they give me something. Then, based on this gift, we both obtain some kind of information and we can talk about it.

With regard to generating collective knowledge, this project has been crucial to me because here I developed ways of working with the body that didn't exist before. So the participants, who number about 70 right now, are probably the only people on Earth to have had this experience. It's a unique repository. It's also an experiment, because through this process we are learning what

that experience feels like, we are observing whether it's having an impact on us, whether it's building connection or resonating with other people, and also where the boundaries of our comfort zone are.

I believe that art is an amazing tool and site of knowledge production. I view my own activities as doing art and research. I have a PhD in fine arts, I am sometimes a lecturer. Setting up places or situations that occasion deeper reflection on the real has been part of many of my projects. I have been conducting the project *Brak Lasu* (*The Lack of Forest*) in the Tuchola Forest since 2018, where I'm working with a community whose landscape has been rendered bare by a hurricane. I have been documenting this site for years, collecting local stories; with the help of local organisations I have also created the eco-monument and meeting place *KOPIEC* (Mound) – an area staked out in the production forest, commemorating the losses and featuring a land-art installation comprising about a hundred roots of trees uprooted by the hurricane. I strive to translate the everyday reality of no-forest into objects and artefacts using matter left behind by the hurricane – wood, plants, and soil from the area which I then return to the community as exhibitions – another pretext to meet and reflect together. It's a unique type of archive that will go down in the history of this place. The project serves as a sort of buffer to mitigate the impact of change, it's a form of short-term support. It also recognises the significance of the event in the emotional and regional realm, but also in relation to global environmental changes. Finally, it's also a way of establishing connection and practising exchange and mutuality, which are so important in my practice.

Meanwhile the project DOMIE arose in response to the lack of a mutual-support space at the University of the Arts in Poznań. We didn't like the fact that there was no space for collective work, nowhere to converse, that there was essentially only a master/student system in place, where you only talk to your professor

¹ For more on DOMIE, see the Radio Kapitał podcast, an interview with Martyna Miller and Katarzyna Wojtczak in SZUM magazine: *DOMIE — miejsce, do którego dążymy* and the publication *Acting Together / Współdziałanie* (ed. Z. Nierodzińska, J. Zwierzyński, Galeria Miejska Arsenal, 2022.)

– usually a man – which was also exclusionary with regard to feminist art or arts that don't replicate the structure of formal academic art.

There was only one female professor in my department, and she was dismissed when I was doing my PhD. And that was sort of the final straw. Both me and Kasia Wojtczak, with whom I embarked on this project, had lived abroad and done collective work in squats and on the anarchist scene within the framework of para-educational activities or working with local communities to prevent exclusion. We just had this feeling that “something's missing here and we want to create a space where people could experience reality differently, spend time together, and create according to their own rules”.

Initially DOMIE was supposed to be an art studio. There were five of us: myself, Kasia Wojtczak, Magda Starska, Diana Lelonek and Dawid Misiorny, and together we decided to set it up in an abandoned building on Dąbrowskiego street in Poznań. Only some people dropped out even before we got the building... So only three of us were left at that point (Kasia, Dawid and I), and then a few months later it was just me and Kasia. To be honest, it was lots of work. Work where you don't know if things won't get stuck or stalled somewhere and the whole thing's just going to be a waste of energy, or if it's going to be amazing in the end. It was really a big-time experiment. Actually, since the beginning we've been calling it *an experiment in collective self-care*.

In hindsight, what made it possible for us to develop the project and not lose track of the initial idea was our focus on the building rather than ourselves and what we wanted to do. The main goal was to prepare the building, to restore life to this ruin, this forgotten, unwanted and dirty thing. I felt that by reclaiming the place we could forge some kind of bond, not just among ourselves – a bond between a group of people and a place, a neighbourhood, an idea. Some people identified with this calling; they would simply enter the space and find themselves within

DOMIE's orbit. We wanted them to feel ownership of the space too. This is important to me. I think of DOMIE as a shared resource. We like to think about it as a commons. Of course the building is technically owned by the city, but as a result of neglect it doesn't really belong to anyone, and the city has done nothing to look after it all those years. In some sense it has now taken on the features of a common good that we are trying to bring to public attention and whose story we are trying to tell. We are working to create our own resource which we can hopefully eventually rescue from the capitalist logic of city property sales, and to secure the site for creative labour, hanging out together, and doing things with our neighbours. We deserve to have such a place.

Have you developed any strategies for gathering collective knowledge?

Collective knowledge, or, generally speaking, strategies, rules, principles, and practices emerge very slowly because there are so many variables. For a start, a collective is a community. Every person contributes a new quality or behaviour. Only after a series of different experiences can you evaluate them and conclude that, say, something was better, or “let's go more in this direction”, “we need to avoid that”, etc. We also need to factor in the group dynamics which involve constant negotiation. It's continual work, continual dialogue. Openness to dialogue is a precondition for being part of a collective. If people rotate, or if the place is only temporary and keeps changing, then some part of the knowledge is lost. You need to build things again from the ground up, differently. The problem with collective work is lack of continuity and reliance on people rather than procedures. This has its charms but also its consequences; often knowledge is lost if individuals leave. And because this type of work, aside from being unpaid and often very demanding, is very energy-consuming and requires a high degree of self-awareness, it easily leads to burnout. We know of many different collective initiatives or spaces that



simply ended, for a variety of reasons. And the knowledge disappeared along with them.

Once you've determined how you want to work with someone, and vice versa, and then this person goes away and three new people step in, you need to start all over again. We've seen such changes in our collective. We were two at the beginning and we were able to handle everything between the two of us, though not always perfectly. Now the association has four people, and soon there will be more. Each new situation reconfigures the relationships, so you always have to start from square one. Every new person who arrives has to go through all the stages; we can support them on this journey, but we can't influence them. There are no

shortcuts here because you simply can't explain something verbally without the experiential part. It's also hard to give someone responsibility if you can see that they need more time to get there. There's a need for lots of emotional and care work to understand what each person needs at a particular time and how we can cover the bases.

Our activities involve volunteering for specific tasks. We divide up the work ourselves. There is no boss supervising us, so we need to negotiate with each other to decide who does what. And considering that often there are no clear criteria, no wages or working hours and so on, this needs to be handled delicately without generating conflict. Because the worst thing that can happen is for one person to realise that they're always working more than the others.. The human factor is very important, purity

of intentions, knowing your boundaries and having a clear idea of the goals you want to achieve within the framework of the collective so you can both pursue your own path and give to the community.

Earlier, you mentioned that knowledge disappears when people drop out, so how can you preserve and store such knowledge?

I think it's possible if you create a shared story. I'm talking about articulating certain things, because sharing experiences and spending time together is one thing, and has unique value, but it's very hard to transmit this because things happen in the here and now and then they stop. That's why it's so important to construct narratives, to talk about specific situations, to work in line with the assumptions and categories we've agreed upon, to have quality evaluation and to make sure we can tell each other what we saw happen. If everyone agrees, we have a frame of reference. I think it's very important to have a sense of common experience, to articulate things, to talk, and then to write down these stories.

I'm obsessed with making an archive and creating documentation. I think this is crucial when it comes to collective knowledge. And not just having a bunch of impressions, a spattering, as it were. When working on *Widok z okna* (View From the Window), a project we did with our neighbours at my initiative, we wrote journals together. We agreed that after spending time together we would write down our impressions, whatever was meaningful to us, the feelings that came up, and the fears. I think that making this record was very insightful, especially as it was a difficult process on the personal level, since we were working with people going through life crises. The fact that at the end we could read our writing to each other and compare notes gave us motivation and tools to continue this work; it also shed light on what to avoid. At the end we combined all the stories into a zine-type book. The publication beautifully conveys the experiences of

the many people who took part in our picnics and in the *Widok z okna* project.

In DOMIE, storage occurs on several levels. There's the dialogue with the city and how we're creating a legal/political precedent. That's an important element. I can see over the years how our activities around DOMIE have really led to a change of policy at city hall. For example, within the framework of the programme *Lokal na kulturę* (Venues for Culture) we were able to negotiate a rent exemption for a period of over one year. First for ourselves, and then also for other initiatives. Since we were successful, why not help others? It worked. The city's Culture Department reached agreement with the ZKZK (Communal Building Stock Board). This example shows that making a gesture, bringing about a new situation, or simply articulating things that were previously common knowledge but not talked about publicly, can lead to real change.

The story of our initiative is also told by the letters and documents we've exchanged with the city. One of them, about repairing a leaking roof, even found its way into the collection of Galeria Miejska Arsenal. We negotiated tooth and nail to obtain aid, renovation-oriented and financial, until the building was brought to a safe baseline state. Legally speaking, the city as the owner is responsible for its maintenance and safety, but in spite of this the spaces offered for cultural and other non-commercial purposes are often handed over in a very bad condition. That shouldn't be the case, but at the same time it's difficult to enforce better standards. We need new policies to fix this. In our case, we signed a contract – or a pact with the devil more like it – in which we took on all responsibility and the city no longer had any. Then, during successive talks and negotiations we kept saying it can't be that way, that it wasn't fair. But it's a time-consuming and risky strategy; I don't recommend it to everyone.

Turning roof repairs into a work of art or successfully negotiating lower rent are turning points that can no longer be glossed over. Enter the story of the city, the history of city policy, which

is now documented and people will be able to trace it in fifty or a hundred years. On the one hand there is the official story, as seen in memoranda, agreements, minutes from meetings with the Mayor and the head of the Culture Department – that's one thing. And on the other hand we have a record of our thoughts, intentions, and problems that we created out of internal need. What am I starting a project with and what's there at the end? Where am I at? I think these elements build shared or individual narratives, which simply amounts to making history. And that's so important for a place because it informs its identity and means that the place is alive and responds to real needs. When this happens, people want to get involved, they want to be part of this living organism. We offer very little in terms of money, if at all, but what we do offer is a non-commercial, deep space and a place in our community which is open to newcomers, sharing our experiences and providing support. These are the resources we have.

What other collective learning practices that have come to the fore in your activities can you tell us about?

For example, we have this project, Poradnia (DOMIE Dispensary). It involves talking to people who run independent venues about their experiences and strategies. Asking how they handled it and what sort of ideas they had for those places. And we got several neat conversations going that are an excellent resource.

We were pretty sure we didn't want to set up yet another place that organised events. I'd already done that in the culture sector and didn't want to do it again. I made a big effort to explain – both in our applications to the city and in our mission statement – that it was supposed to be a place of creative work, not an event generator, that we weren't setting out to build a big audience, that it was something else, that we're trying to get funding and create a place where people can work in peace and have a safe base, even if it's temporary. For example, somebody's made a big sculpture

and they need to leave it in storage for six months. DOMIE needs to offer that kind of option. A lot of young people studying art are required to make impressive large-format works as part of their curriculum. But we're all members of the precariat and we have nowhere to store such works. We can't afford to rent our own studios either, and so on and so forth, so we wanted to set up these options to help young people engaged in creative work or activism.

At the beginning, when we started DOMIE, we wrote an application that the city just loved because it alluded to the idea of a home and stated that we want to create connections and closeness like in a family. Except this family would be more open, and more inclusive than a traditional “family”. It's not a romantic idea, it stands for a real need. A natural name derived from the word “home”.²

2 In Polish, the word “dom” encompasses both meanings: “house” and “home.”

Residency of the TYNA Collective at DOMIE, during the creation of a mural on the building façade, Poznań, 2019. Photo: Maciej Zakrzewski.



DINNER

ANETA ROSTKOWSKA

Curator, writer, and since 2019 the director of the Temporary Gallery – Centre for Contemporary Art in Cologne. Born in Szczecin, she studied art history, philosophy (M.A.), and economics (B.A.) in Kraków, Poznań, Heidelberg, and Frankfurt am Main, and completed the de Appel Curatorial Program in Amsterdam. Her interdisciplinary practice combines research on socio-economic contexts with artistic and educational activities as well as theory.

Between 2016 and 2018, she worked as a curator at the Academy of the Arts of the World in Cologne, developing projects addressing the colonial history of botany and contemporary tensions surrounding decolonial discourses. At the Temporary Gallery, she has initiated, among other things, an educational program for young people (curator: Paloma Nana), residencies in collaboration with Cologne-based institutions supporting artists with disabilities, and has expanded the concept of the permacultural institution, integrating ecological and social models of sustainable practise. Her essay *Towards Permacultural Institutions* (2024) is currently being developed into a book.

She curates projects exploring solidarity, collective agency, and alternative forms of communal life, including *Ines Doujak. Every Courageous Life is a Song to the Future* (2023), *Unruly Kinships* (2023), and *Blue Binding Ribbon* (2024). Together with Jakub Woynarowski, she co-develops *Gonzo Curating* – an experimental practice that challenges institutional hierarchies in the art world.

Since 2005, she has taught at universities in Germany, the Netherlands, and Poland, offering courses on curating and contemporary art. She has published over 60 texts and has served on numerous award juries and examination committees.

Temporary Kitchen in the Mauritius district, curators: Paula Erstmann and Lisa Klosterkötter, Temporary Gallery, Cologne, 2024. Photo: Lisa Klosterkötter.



DINNER

A CONVERSATION WITH ANETA ROSTKOWSKA

Your professional work involves philosophical reflection, curatorial sensitivity and the experience of working in institutions and beyond. For many years you've been creating venues that foster communal thinking and action, as seen in the Temporary Gallery Center for Contemporary art in Cologne, Germany, which you've been overseeing since 2019. What do you understand by collective knowledge? What does it mean to you? How can it be generated, transmitted and nurtured within institutions, collectives, and communities?

To define collective knowledge, one has to reflect on what knowledge is in the first place. When I was studying philosophy, we had an entire seminar dedicated to this topic – what knowledge is and how it is conceived of in different philosophical traditions. The tripartite definition of knowledge which posits that knowledge is a statement that is either true or false is a popular way of looking at the issue.¹ Somebody says that they know something and they have arguments to back up their claim. As we see in this example, knowledge is defined in discursive terms – as something linguistic, a statement or a set of claims. And I remember that there were also critiques of this approach that differentiated between “knowing that” and “knowing how”. “Knowing that” is knowledge in the classical sense, defined as a statement that is either true or false and has a justification. But “knowing how” is something else, for example knowing how to swim.

It is hard to describe this latter type of knowledge using language, although one can try. There are even books on how to

swim. I bought a book like that as a teenager, but it's complicated because we're talking about embodied knowledge that needs to be assimilated through practise.

And here we come back to the question, “what is collective knowledge”. This can include discursive things, knowledge in the form of agreed upon statements that we generate as a collective. Or it might be knowledge in the sense of doing something together and knowing how to do it, such as having discussions or acting in some manner within the collective. So these would be some very basic reflections concerning a possible definition.

Of course *collective* is another term that needs defining. What it means is that it's not produced by an individual, but by a group of at least two people. It's interesting to consider where and in what contexts such knowledge could be gained. If it's knowledge that we build together, then we've done away with hierarchy, like what we have in art schools or in schools in general – a setup in which knowledge is handed down by a teacher. In collective knowledge, we are talking about a shared process of learning, where the teacher also participates and grows together with his or her students.

I think that the problem in many educational institutions is that collective learning is not practised. Sometimes art academy professors complain that their students never attend the wonderful conferences they organise. But did anyone even bother to ask the students whether the subject was of any interest to them? The problem is that the structure of these institutions is not conducive to collective decision-making. Another difficulty is that people don't know how to collaborate. This is a fundamental problem because in neoliberal education it's essentially every man (or woman) for him(her)self. And cooperating with others is seen as difficult. At the same time, many institutions that provide financing for the arts issue calls for collaborative projects. Sometimes this leads to cooperation being instrumentalised. People try to artificially find as many partners as possible in order to get

¹ The tripartite definition of knowledge is a classical theory developed by Plato according to which knowledge is justified true belief.

funding. This has nothing to do with collective action or collective learning, it's just a tactic.

We also see the emergence of strange programmes, for example residencies where artists and curators who don't know each other are supposed to work together closely. At De Appel Arts Centre there were six women in my curatorial programme. We had never met before and all of a sudden we were supposed to live together, spend almost all our time together and make an exhibition together. It worked out well in my group because, as it happened, we liked each other; we simply got lucky. But other groups found the experience somewhat traumatising (thankfully the programme has changed since then; one edition was addressed specifically to curatorial collectives). The fact that someone comes up with these setups means that they have no idea what collective work is like, especially creative work, for instance making an exhibition together. That it's an organic process based on friendship and informal connections, and requires a solid foundation. For things to come together, there need to be shared values, a shared approach, and probably a similar sense of humour too. Creating an exhibition or an artwork is often a very intimate process.

So you've noticed that people are being forced to do collective work?

I understand that at some point in our lives each and every one of us has to work with people we don't like. And that's also something that we need to learn. But if institutions announce such programmes, they might as well reflect on how good cooperation happens. And instead of holding an open call for two different curators, they should do an open call for a curators' collective that already exists. Or provide funding for a longer stay during which curators can get to know each other and develop joint projects, but only if they “click”. I think the problem is that many people have no idea how to do this. At De Appel I had this private joke that

I wouldn't be surprised if someone actually murdered someone during the programme because there were many highly driven people there, with strong personalities and multiple ideas. Some people actually had panic attacks, the institution had to hire mediators to reconcile warring factions, etc. Things were simply badly designed. It should have been agreed from the first that collective work was just an option and people should have been given the tools (workshops etc.) to do such work (which should have been one of many and not the only option). I think that this is a major problem – how to create structures that actually support collective work.

I wonder whether collective work as such is difficult, or if it's that we simply don't have much experience in that field and that's what makes it difficult.

I think that a lot depends on the person, but society – the entire education system – is not geared towards it. I'm not saying it's all smooth sailing when you're working alone – you procrastinate, you're home alone and you want to go to a party, and you feel like you've had enough. Or you're always working with the same concepts and there is no inspiration from outside. And maybe in a collective someone would have said, “You know, you could think about this some other way”. The context in which you work plays an enormous role.

What collective learning strategies and tools have been developed at the Temporary Gallery?

We have quite a few projects that involve collaborative work. You could say that the very structure of the Kunstverein, the artistic association, is collective. The idea of the Kunstverein is that it has members, and some of the Kunstvereins that have been around for many years have up to several hundred members. Often, however, membership is limited to purchasing artworks once a year to support the association. Rarely do we see collective processes un-



folding in such communities. The Temporary Gallery is a young Kunstverein, so it doesn't have a lot of members.

From the beginning I have been wondering how to elicit this collective, communal aspect in my work. First, I devised a new idea of membership that would boost engagement, for instance by having members prepare an annual event at the Temporary Gallery. Unfortunately, this didn't work out. Yes, we did get new members, but they did not get involved in gallery work, mainly because of lack of time.

Right now we are trying out a new model: groups of people have sprung up organically around various gallery projects, either contributors or regular participants. For instance, a group

of artists worked in a community garden in Cologne, where they documented various types of wild plant species and collected their seeds. The seed bank and the garden-inspired artworks led to a very neat exhibition. Another example is artists who work with textiles, who have been meeting regularly at our gallery after the *Blue binding ribbon* exhibition on textile techniques in art and collectivity. As part of another collective undertaking, a group of people met for regular sessions with Dr Danie Meyer in order to learn Narrative Exposure Therapy. The aim was for culture staff to overcome their isolation by sharing problems and practising active listening.

When I was at Documenta Fifteen, I had this fantasy that maybe one day the Temporary Gallery could be managed by an artistic/curatorial collective. We have a group of people associated with the gallery who could undertake this task.

Can you tell me more about Narrative Exposure Therapy?

Everything started in the winter of 2022, we organised a few meetings and a weekend retreat to a cottage in the woods. This involves longer sessions during which someone recounts an event from their life. For instance, we talked about “positive events that happened to you recently”.

The person telling the story gives a very detailed account of what happened. There is a specific structure to the process – first we learn what happened just before the event, or what the weather was like that day. It's like looking at a movie frame by frame. Then everyone writes down what the person said and relays it back to them, and the person corrects it.

You can do this with positive or negative events. It's a good method if someone's been through trauma. It really makes a big difference after a few sessions. And it can also be moderated by someone who's not a professional psychologist. A lot of it is experimentation.

Is Dr Danie Meyer still involved with your group?

We are taking a break right now because I'm on maternity leave, but I think we will resume our meetings. We are planning to write texts on our experience of working with this method and we would like to share the practice with other institutions.

If you want to do collective work and start off with a narrative session in which people tell their life stories to each other, then you can really get to know one another so much better. And then you don't have the same reaction when someone does something weird because you know the story behind it. It's a method that collectives could successfully employ at the beginning. Sometimes people get to know each other through informal conversations, but this is a more systematic approach.

I hope that something political will come out of our efforts, and that we will do something together. Or at least we'll have more motivation in our daily work, and that's also an OK result.

So in this context the stories you share with one another are the collective knowledge?

I would say that it's more that we are learning about this therapeutic modality together and sharing our thoughts about it. Of course we get to know each other and exchange our personal stories. But the main focus is on learning the skill of active listening.

And what do you imagine collective learning will look like in the future?

I think that if approached seriously, this form of learning has truly revolutionary potential. Collective projects take more time, a collective must first emerge, which requires changing the way art is funded, with more funding in advance of a project idea being generated. With regard to art schools, this might mean students having more involvement in running the school.

I often hear the same story – there is a joint project, students do an exhibition together, and those who are less vivacious get totally marginalised and everything gets dominated by one person. So if we embrace collective learning, it's very important that we educate ourselves and identify experts in collective work. And invite them so they can share their experience.

And of course, if an academy or university is asking students to do collective projects, then it needs to provide them with the right tools. Activists often work in collectives and you can invite someone to do a workshop and brainstorming session on how to make collective decisions.

We can also learn from collective initiatives that have been around in the art world for quite a while. In 2022, the Temporary Gallery hosted a meeting with Kunstverein kjuh (Cologne), b2 gallery (run by artists from Leipzig), and station urbaner kulturen/nGbK Hellersdorf.² I really liked the model kjuh uses, since it is based on a high degree of trust within the group and is

² The recording (in German) is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MG5huh-q0k>

relatively easy to implement: the seven-person collective meets once a year and every member organises one annual exhibition.

Also when watching some collectives during curatorial projects, I noticed the same type of fine balance. Somebody may be down in the dumps, going through a crisis, but the group sees it and the others temporarily step in and carry the load. But there's no complaining because the same could happen to anyone. The collectives that thrive over a long lifespan can somehow do this organically.

When I moved to Cologne I spent two months living in a flat with two other people. The rule was that whatever was in the fridge belonged to everybody. At first I was shocked and thought, "Oh dear..." But then I realised this was great because, for instance, there was always some milk. And whenever I used any, I always made sure I left some for the others. We developed a sort of nuanced cooperation. It created a sense of community. Such a simple decision. Of course I'm not claiming it always works, but it was an interesting experience.

I was intrigued by something you pointed out, namely that collective work requires not just acting together, but creating conditions for being in relationship and being together.

The projects I do with other people usually begin with friendship and talking, and an idea for a project simply arises out of these interactions. But it may be that someone approaches the Temporary Gallery and wants to collaborate, but hasn't been to a single event at this institution. It's hard to engage in collaboration in such cases. Most of the time with good cooperation there is a period where we're just spending time together and it's not goal-oriented. We simply like to spend time together and then something comes out of it.

I often see how doing something together turns into something functional: "an hour on Zoom and see you later". Those who do this have no idea that collective work requires totally different

conditions. That people have to have dinner together every once in a while or just hang out in one room, give it time and talk about totally unrelated things.

It's really interesting that you mention this because people often forget that there is a different rhythm to collective work.

Yes, exactly. Maybe for a good collective to emerge it needs to be preceded by a phase of just being around one another in a casual sort of way. But there's more to it. I think that collective action could become much more widespread if we fight to change the structure of the art world to make it more collective-friendly. And that is something we can only do collectively. That's why I keep persuading students to organise and exert pressure, to join student associations and art organisations. Because without proper structures in place, collective work will be crushed by the liberal system of art. That's why we have to talk about it openly, how we want to work within these organisations, because their voice carries so much more weight than our individual voices.

But I also see, especially when talking to the younger generations, that they want to be part of groups where they feel safe and accepted. And I think that there is an aspect to collective learning where a sort of wider family emerges and you get a lot of support and positive feedback that way.

I noticed that younger generations prefer to support each other instead of tearing each other down. My generation, especially when I was studying philosophy, was often very judgmental. And it was too dogmatic and aggressive. I think that younger generations prioritise something else – being together in the safe haven of the collective. The world has simply become too hostile, with the ongoing wars, the climate crisis... collective action is gaining prominence because we simply feel we must have some kind of support network, otherwise we won't make it on our own.

Open Workshop for the Production of Carnival Costumes, in collaboration with M* Treff Alte Feuerwache, ROOTS & ROUTES Cologne e.V., Ruffront Fastelovendsbund e.V., and artists, costume makers, and mask makers, curator: Lisa Klosterkötter, Temporary Gallery, Cologne, 2025. Photo: Lisa Klosterkötter.



CAMILO PACHÓN

Camilo Pachón is a Colombian multidisciplinary artist, curator, and educator working between Bogotá and Berlin. His practice explores the intersections of art, spirituality, and technology, and is rooted in ancestral knowledge and traditional practices. Through installations, performances, masks, and community-based projects, Pachón reimagines human and ecological relationships, challenges hegemonic narratives, and envisions art as a vehicle for healing, memory, and social transformation.

In 2025, Pachón continues to expand his intercultural practice as Fellow Coordinator at the Künstlerdorf Foundation in Germany, fostering transnational dialogues between artists, researchers, and local communities. His recent exhibitions include *The Future is Indigenous* at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum (Cologne, Germany) and *Reconocer la Máscara at Espacio KB* (Bogotá, Colombia). He also presented a performative workshop as part of the exhibition *Hypercreatures – Mythologies of the Future* at the Max Ernst Museum Brühl des LVR (Brühl, Germany). Pachón has been selected as artist-in-residence at ZK/U Berlin (2025); he is the recipient of the Urbane Künste Ruhr Healing Complex Fellowship (2024) and the co-curator of the Making Worlds program at Stiftung Künstlerdorf Schöppingen (2024). In 2022, he was one of ten Latin American artists selected for the Third Biennial of Art and Design at UNAM (Mexico) and has been awarded grants from the Colombian Ministry of Culture and the Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá (2018, 2019).

Pachón has initiated various creative platforms to engage diverse audiences, including Crispr Bogotá, an artist-run gallery in Bogotá; AMA (Ambulante Más Allá), a nomadic filmmaking training program for documentary films in underserved and rural communities across Colombia; and Carnaval Digital, the first trans-local, networked space connecting artists and carnival collectives worldwide.



Meeting of local knowledge holders and collective participants from the Inga, Kiyasing, Siona, Awa, Naza, and Kemtsa indigenous communities of Colombia, as part of the project *El Gran Malo*, presented at the Third Biennial of Art and Design at UNAM (Mexico, 2022) – *Intangible Resistance: Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, 2022. Photo: La Isla Fantasma.

COMMUNITY SERVICE

COMMUNITY SERVICE

A CONVERSATION WITH CAMILO PACHÓN

Camilo, you are always involved in a lot of interesting, open projects. I know you worked as a visual artist and curator in Colombia and now in Germany, you explore community-based practices and you work with the concept of a mask as an ancestral technology. You've also created platforms like Crispr Bogotá, AMA (Ambulante Más Allá), and Carnaval Digital, all of which are focused on collective and trans-local processes.

To begin, are there any tools or strategies for collective learning that you've encountered or developed, something you believe could be valuable for others to know about?

My empirical approach to collective processes is, actually, quite similar to your practice now: learning through action, living inside the process, working directly in the field with people, and asking questions along the way. I simply began by wondering: *How can I work collectively?*

At first, I placed my artistic skills at the service of community-based and sustainable projects. Only a few years ago did I begin creating spaces within the contemporary art context that bring together all these lessons, spaces that aim to put into practice the methods and experiences I've gathered along this path, always in collaboration with communities.

But I must say that collective work is not necessarily easier, nor is it meant for everyone. It requires an ongoing commitment that is respectful, humble, and empathetic toward both the process and the people involved. It demands a motivating force and a spirit of resistance that resonates deeply at a personal level.

The struggle here is structural, it requires both individual and collective forms of resistance. It's not so much an exercise of the *I*, but rather of the *we*, and that must be embraced with everything it entails.

In this sense, as artists, the ones who sense, translate, and narrate the stories of the world, we must, now more than ever, reclaim the importance of our practice within our communities. We must use it to connect, to care, and to counteract the hyper-individualization that seems to devour our time. For me, working collectively is, in itself, a political act. The art world still operates through deeply colonial ways of thinking. If there is one field that truly mirrors colonial logic, it is the art world itself, where authorship and economic value are inseparably tied to individuality. The dominant modern belief that the artist is a kind of exceptional being, someone who channels their personal power into the world and expresses it through a unique vision, is still actively at work today. This way of thinking naturally creates hierarchy: someone always stands above others. Within such a system, collective expression seems to have no space. It turns people into competitors, generating subtle forms of rivalry and struggle. This is why working collectively within the arts is not an easy task.

I have always had a conflict with that way of understanding art, and it never resonated with me. For more than a decade, I've been trying to understand how we can truly work together. For me, collective work has always been both refuge and salvation in times of difficulty. In moments of crisis, when it felt as if my life was falling apart, working with communities restored my faith in the world and gave deeper meaning to my artistic practice.

I remember that by the end of my bachelor's studies, with few references to guide me, I kept thinking: perhaps this is it, the notion of community, of art practices and processes, is what Latin America can contribute to the history of the arts.

So, how can we transform the hegemonic perception of the

arts and include expanded notions that already exist and function profoundly within communities across Latin America and the Global South? *Está realmente preparado el contexto artístico para este giro epistemológico?*¹

That's why, for me, the most valuable thing that *Documenta* offered in 2022 was precisely the chance to bring these questions and tensions to the table. When you start working or thinking collectively, you must be prepared for disagreement and discussion. You have to cultivate a mindset open to receiving input from others, while also being willing to negotiate shared goals, placing those goals at the centre. That process requires time, patience, and compromise. Many of the processes that some critics dismissed that year as "not art".

Earlier, you mentioned working with community-based projects. Could you tell me more about these practices?

My personal journey exploring collective practices began by placing my artistic skills at the service of community-based initiatives. I worked as a documentary filmmaker alongside farmers' associations involved in community agricultural projects, peacebuilding efforts within Colombia's peace process, and initiatives focused on protecting river basins in the rainforest. Later, with a group of friends, I co-organized a documentary film festival that not only sought to democratize access to cinema but also created conditions for community learning, sharing filmmaking tools with underrepresented communities in remote and rural areas. Only in more recent years have I begun creating spaces within the arts that weave together these accumulated lessons, aiming to influence the artistic community, the community I consider myself a permanent part of.

This focus on working with others emerged after a life-defining crisis that led me to live outside Colombia for the first time. I had to reflect on the direction my path would take and realized

1 Is the art world truly prepared for this epistemological shift?

that what truly moved me was collective work. Few things motivated me as deeply as shared causes with humans and common goals: projects capable of positively impacting reality, rewriting established narratives, and offering a glimpse of hope for change within Colombia's social structures.

After half a year, I returned to Colombia with this vision, and projects began to emerge, each bringing lessons that profoundly transformed my understanding of community-based work. A key lesson came from the remote Caribbean island of Providencia.

Following a maritime border dispute, Colombia lost sovereignty over a vast part of the sea and the traditional fishing grounds of the people of Providencia Island.² When the president visited to acknowledge the state's mistakes, at least symbolically, young people and a broad group of cultural organizers highlighted music as one of Providencia's cultural pillars. They requested support to strengthen musical production by providing the island with tools that could professionalize its rich sonic traditions, which until then had been transmitted mainly through oral and communal practices. The goal was to transform tradition into opportunity.

This led to the creation of The Midnight Dream, a fully equipped theatre with music production rooms, a professional recording studio, audiovisual creation spaces and tools, and a basic infrastructure for concerts. In addition, Sound Setters, a residency programme, was established to activate local capacities

2 Providencia is a small island in the Colombian Caribbean, known for its exceptional marine biodiversity. It is part of the Seaflower Biosphere Reserve, home to one of the largest coral reefs in the world and an extraordinary array of marine life, including countless species of fish, corals, and seabirds. The local community, composed mainly of Raizal people, depends on these ecosystems for its livelihood, particularly through artisanal fishing. In 2012, the government of Colombia lost sovereignty over more than 75,000 square kilometers of maritime territory surrounding Providencia, one of the most remote and singular areas of the Caribbean. This decision by the International Court of Justice, which redefined the maritime borders between Colombia and Nicaragua, had devastating consequences for the island. The sea around Providencia, once home to the region's highest fish concentration, had sustained generations of Raizal families.

through learning by doing, foster alliances with the island's creators, and consolidate the knowledge necessary to professionalize Providencia's music production.

I was invited to document the process. In a studio overlooking the Caribbean, we witnessed magic. Elkin Robinson, an exceptional local musician selected through an open call, and his band composed of island musicians who were also fishermen, friends, and community storytellers, worked alongside some of Colombia's most visionary producers, including Diego Gómez³ and Richard Blair,⁴ to produce six tracks that expanded the horizons of Colombia's musical landscape.

In addition, together with community members, local artists, producers, creatives, journalists, cultural managers, and industry experts, they collaboratively created all the accompanying materials, including music videos, communication strategies, visual identity, and the artwork for *Come Round*, an album that redefined the sound of the island.

Those of us who were there lived a collective dream on a paradisaical island, working with a multidisciplinary community of local artists, all overflowing with emotion and hope. We witnessed the creation of a record that captured a corner of Colombia, a powerful, unique, and highly professional process aligned with the histories, sounds, and aesthetics of the people of Providencia. From our perspective, everything that unfolded felt epic, transformative, and profoundly meaningful, an endlessly captivating dream come true.

But once the process concluded, the community expressed deep disappointment. The community's main concern, beyond the fact that the new studio was unsustainable within the island's limited budget, was that the entire production process and its

structure went against their own understanding of collaboration. For them, working together means doing things for the community, not having the community work for someone else's success in a top-down way.

Although we had tried to design the production process from a community perspective, integrating local knowledge, people, sounds, aesthetics, and traditions, we still operated within the methodologies of the music industry, methods that were clearly misaligned with the social fabric of Providencia's Raizal community. Some of its leaders even argued that the project had disrupted their communal logic and weakened the island's collective structures.

At that point, I realized something essential: we can have all the good intentions in the world, but if we lack tools and methodologies truly rooted in community practices, we will inevitably fall back into the very hierarchical structures we seek to transform. This lesson became fundamental for everything that followed.

A few years later, I had the opportunity to direct *Ambulante Más Allá Colombia (AMA)*, a nomadic documentary film training program for underrepresented communities in remote areas. We quickly realized that teaching documentary filmmaking through a traditional framework could reproduce the same pyramidal logic of conventional film, where everyone works for the director.

So we turned the pyramid upside down and placed the community at the top. The most important element was the community's voice. All our knowledge and tools became instruments in service of a collective goal. The methodology involved forming groups around stories: we decided to expand the timeframe, dividing the groups by departments. Participants chose who was best suited for the different roles, including directing, cinematography, sound, and editing, but they worked together from the very beginning on the story their community needed to tell. They identified the issues their communities wanted to address, as well as the characters and narratives that could best bring those

³ Diego Gómez, co-founder of Llorona Records, a Colombian music label dedicated to preserving and reinterpreting ancestral roots music.

⁴ Richard Blair, a British musician, DJ, and producer, is best known for his pioneering work in Colombian electronic cumbia and for his collaborations with Peter Gabriel at Real World Records.

voices to life. It was about building something bigger than all of us. The films were produced, post-produced, and screened within the communities, making the community the first audience.

A beautiful example of this process took place during a discussion about one of the films, which featured a female community leader and her daughter as potential protagonists. Initially, everyone pointed to the mother as the expert and central figure. In the midst of the conversation, one of the strongest yet quietest participants, who had chosen to work in the sound department, intervened and said:

“In my community, we need young people to understand that they must be part of political processes, and it’s time to get involved. I think it would be more valuable for the protagonist of this story to be the daughter.”

After a moment of reflective silence, everyone embraced this perspective, and the film took a completely new direction.

Through that process, we could see how important it is to deconstruct established structures of knowledge transmission and how, if we adapt those structures to the needs of the territory and its people, the process can generate a far greater and genuinely positive impact on the community. For several years, AMA became a laboratory of collective experiences, continuously teaching us new forms of collaboration.

Finally, after the pandemic kept me away from working in the territories, a new question surfaced: to which community do I truly and permanently belong, and how can I contribute to it? I realized that the only community I am continuously part of is the community of artists. From there, I have approached this community through the lens of the collective work I have practised, actively engaging in rethinking knowledge production and developing new structures that can create spaces, institutions, and opportunities benefiting everyone who is part of it.

In this process, I explore new ways of approaching collective work through projects such as Making Worlds, a program

I co-curated with Julia Harman at Stiftung Künstlerdorf Schöppingen. It includes workshops and a Summer School rooted in holistic and relational learning. I also initiated Distrito Naranja, a platform in Colombia focused on supporting artists who, despite contemporary challenges, remain deeply engaged with artistic practices rooted in regional contexts, and Acción Colectiva, an effort to establish a collective copyright management society.

Thinking about your ideas on co-production and how roles are shared in collective projects, how can a group deal with the different levels of knowledge or experience that people bring ?

The first step in any collective process is to establish a common goal that everyone shares and understands in the same way. Once that foundation is set, the challenge is to balance different levels of knowledge and recognize how each person can contribute uniquely.

You need to observe the people involved and ask: what perspectives, skills, and knowledge do they bring, and how can these be used in the collective creation? It’s like making a film, you can’t have five directors and no one handling the sound. If everyone wants to be an actor, who will record it? Identifying the distinct strengths each person brings and using them in service of the shared goal is essential for a successful collective process.

At the same time, every community has many examples of managing complex situations, they are experts in their own right. If we pay attention and remain truly open to understanding how these communities work, we can learn a great deal from them. They need to be included in the process of finding solutions to all kinds of challenges.

One thing that particularly surprised me is how leaders act as regulators of communal energy, maintaining horizontality among personalities and aligning collective energy. I first observed this in the Colombian Pacific, where two collectives, one from Nuquí,



a rural area surrounded by the sea, mangroves, and tropical jungle, and one from Buenaventura, one of Colombia's toughest port cities, were exploring the impact of port development projects on their communities.

We were working on *Postales del Futuro*, a project with Más Arte Más Acción that eventually premiered as part of Documenta 15. The goal was to create a dialogue between a community in Buenaventura, historically affected by an existing port, and a community in Nuquí, where entrepreneurs were planning a new port in an almost untouched natural area.

The two collectives met in Nuquí to explore a new phase of the documentary series we had begun a year earlier. This time, we invited a participant from Buenaventura who had worked in film for years as an actor and had also developed projects as a director and cinematographer. Although still learning, his technical skills were stronger than many of his peers. When we opened the conversation about which stories could be addressed collectively, he presented a radical idea:

"I know what movie we should make. I have a name, and I even drew the poster."

Despite his experience, he hadn't consulted the group, and as the discussion unfolded, he kept trying to push his individual story above the community's needs. Tension began to rise until Yerson, a young leader from Jurubirá, tall, strong, and muscular, yet incredibly gentle, spoke up:

"Man, this is a process of learning and producing collectively, and it's about the stories of this community. I don't know why you're fighting against the idea of creating a story together. There's no reason to generate conflict. And if it's about fighting, let's do it as friends, with boxing gloves, outside."

The radical filmmaker, smaller and thinner than Yerson, immediately backed down. From that point on, he stopped insisting on his idea. In these contexts, it is common for the "winner" to reclaim power, but Yerson demonstrated something else: how a leader can regulate energy and strong personalities while elevating quieter voices.

During a break, he approached him privately and said:

"You are a very important person in this community now. You have a lot of knowledge, and you're crucial for our team. But you're not our director. You cannot tell us what to do, because it's not about finding a story for yourself—it's about building a collective story that includes everyone. But we need you. We need your knowledge to create this story. You are so important to us."

In that moment, the leader met him in the middle, in a truly horizontal way. The stronger participant, who had been ready to dominate, became caring and regained the trust and motivation he had lost just minutes before. This experience showed me how communities possess profound knowledge for conflict resolution. Some people can read the energy and intentions of others, bringing them into the centre. It's about intention, energy, and collective feeling. Tools are needed both to move dominant voices toward the centre and to elevate quieter ones.

It was a powerful lesson. Two very different communities found a space to be together, navigated their differences, and developed a collective approach to their stories. Together, they built a film, embodying the true essence of collaboration.

How do you understand collective learning, especially in community settings?

I understand it as a fundamental shift, both in process and in purpose. We're not just changing how we create knowledge, but also redefining what kinds of outcomes or "objects" we even aim for. In a homogenous community, this process has a certain ease. People are often focused on developing tools to talk about them-



selves, and because they share similarities, it's simpler to find a common language and a unified direction.

However, the dynamic changes entirely when you bring together people with completely different backgrounds and ways of thinking. The complexity multiplies. Here, you can't rely on pre-existing commonality; you must actively find, or build, a collective purpose. This often means putting yourself in uncomfortable situations, because it is genuinely difficult to centre others, to consciously place your own subjectivity at the service of something bigger.

That is where the idea of reciprocal contribution becomes central to a communal way of thinking. When you start thinking beyond yourself, you offer your intentions and ideas to the group, and this act itself becomes a form of mutual giving. It's not primarily about personal creation or production; you have your whole life for that. But you only get a few, precious chances to truly do something collective. And when that alignment happens, the work absorbs more perspectives and becomes infinitely more powerful.

How could you define collective knowledge, especially in contexts where people come from diverse backgrounds and must actively construct a shared purpose rather than rely on pre-existing commonalities?

One way to define it is to say that all knowledge is created collectively. Someone writes something, and then others respond to it. We keep adding layer upon layer, building a bell-shaped

structure, a huge construction of ideas. That's how knowledge is created today. Therefore, we should have the opportunity to discuss these vast repositories of knowledge.

A good example is a way of thinking about decolonization that suggests all the knowledge we've accumulated since colonial times is rooted in the colonial mindset. So that means everything we build on top of that has the same foundations. Let's throw down this wall and start thinking in another way.

Meanwhile, at that same historical moment, some people were deeply connected with nature, understood its importance and lived in relation to it. They were preserving it. And that was, and still is, some of the most beautiful knowledge we can look to now, especially in the kind of difficult situation we're in.

Because it's always about reclaiming the top. When you're working more horizontally, you face a lot of challenges. You have to ask: Are we willing to accept that our idea isn't the only one, or the one that should be placed above others? We need to keep inviting more ideas, more ways of thinking.

So again, the way of thinking that colonialism brought us is still working. Capitalism tells you: *"You are so special. Don't think that you are similar to the guy next to you. Don't talk to anyone else. We have products for you. Let's build your own walls."* And then you're isolated—and that's how they keep control over all of us. The craziest thing is that when people fight against dominant ways of thinking, like *"Okay, let's fight for the rights of the gay community, the Black community, the Latino community, the Indigenous community"*, in some ways, they start thinking only about themselves. And they build huge walls.

Identity politics should not divide us or create new differences; it should instead unite forces to confront the common evil that has once again appropriated racial, communal, and grassroots discourses and everything that belongs to the collective.

That's something I learned after meeting a community leader in Colombia during our fieldwork. He's the president of

a community often referred to as a “nation”, locally called the Enga Nation. But he’s not ethnically Enga. He was part of another community, but he grew up in this one. He started thinking and working for the community, and he became the president of this nation. He put in a lot of effort.

Then, when he became the governor, he said, “*Communication is really important for our community. We should create a kind of collective media to talk about the topics we are thinking about.*” This community had a collective region, and then over the years, they started losing parts of that region, where there are more than ten other Indigenous nations.

What can we do to protect this area? One option is to reclaim the area as our own. We could fight against the other communities. Or, we could find ways to connect with other nations through Indigenous thinking, become more powerful, and create intercultural nations with the power to save this place.

Looking ahead, what strategies or directions do you think we should consider for the future? Where do we go from here?

From my experience, there are two key aspects that I consider essential: working with communities and understanding how that logic operates within the framework of the art world. I’d like to take this moment to emphasize that community work should not be understood as an act of extraction, but rather as an exercise in community service. It’s fundamental to recognize the real needs of the communities we wish to engage with and to understand that our role is to contribute to their processes, to their internal dynamics, and to their worldview. We must approach our work from a place of empathy, seeing ourselves as equals while remaining sensitive to their needs, challenges, joys, and sorrows. From there, we can develop tools and processes that allow us to accompany their struggles, open spaces for the exchange and visibility of their concerns, amplify their voices, and co-create proposals aligned with their visions. These should always be developed

hand in hand with their leaders and in accordance with their social structures, which often differ from our own.

It’s equally important to anticipate and prevent any negative impacts our actions might generate within those same communities. Because the truth is, many of the world’s catastrophes have been built on good intentions. You would never walk into someone’s home and start telling the family how they should see the world, demand their knowledge, rearrange their furniture, or set new routines and diets for those who have kindly welcomed you. It may sound obvious or even unnecessary to mention this here, but believe me, experience has shown me that many institutions, artist collectives, and even well-intentioned individuals have approached communities in exactly that way, telling them who they should be and how they should do things. Sadly, this remains a reality in many processes managed from central institutions in Colombia, or by artists driven more by ego than by genuine social commitment, who now conveniently “ride the wave” of community work.

My second reflection lies more within the context of art itself. In tune with the epistemological shift of our times toward a less Western-centric understanding of what we consider art, I propose that what we currently call the art world could instead be understood as the art community. This subtle shift in language might seem small, but it has the power to change how we understand our relational dynamics, and how the very structures that define that “world” might begin to transform from within.

From there, we can begin to ask ourselves: What does our community need? How can we strengthen the bonds that connect us? How can we open spaces for dialogue, for finding common ground, for creating shared territories where we can meet and recognize one another? How do we invite more people to take part, to draw closer, to belong? How do we define our value in the face of the traps set by the market? How do we grow, evolve, and build common goals that can improve the conditions of our

sector, increase the visibility and social impact of our practices, and ultimately open new spaces to imagine ourselves through the lens of collectivity?

I think that every single step you can take toward developing a collective way of thinking is important. And I think this conversation and your project are important too. For example, the way you decide to include people in the text, or include their perspectives. I think the future is about realizing that we can't think as individuals anymore. We should think collectively to shape the future, even though it's really hard.

And in that future, the very concept of community has to evolve. It should change. Because in the past, community was often something that cancelled out the individuality of those within it. We need to build new communities and collectives that make space for subjectivity, bringing individual strengths and perspectives together in service of the collective and of shared knowledge. The challenge is to nurture communities capable of embracing the uniqueness of each member while working toward common goals.

NEIGHBOURHOOD

Guided tour with plant sharing, listening exercises, interventions and singing. Photo: Art Basis.



MARY MIKAELIAN

Artist based in Yerevan. Her practice spans different media to explore the politics and potentialities of actual, bygone, imagined, and possible spaces, structures, and practices. Working through methods such as archiving, storytelling, documentation, and fiction, she investigates how memory and knowledge – fragmented, uncertain, and often imagined – can shape new forms of imagination and possibility. Her research focuses on invisibility in relation to geography, the relationship between knowledge practices and artistic production, and the construction of presence through multiple pasts and histories. Her recent work explores how modernization policies have reshaped land, ecology, and communities in Armenia. Alongside her artistic research, she is involved in self-organized artistic and curatorial initiatives.

NEIGHBOURHOOD

A CONVERSATION WITH MARY MIKAELIAN

Your work spans multiple media and engages deeply with the politics and poetics of space, like in your recent project *Bustasan* which involved a video installation, prints, and drawings. Through archiving, documentation, but also storytelling and fabulation, you investigate how memory, knowledge, and imagination intersect. Your interest in multiple histories is visible not only in your artworks but also in your independent artistic and curatorial projects.

I'd like to ask about your experience related to creating and shaping the residency space in Gyumri, Armenia. In what ways do you work with the community and what kind of collective strategies can emerge through the artist projects organised there?

The idea was to organise a residency within a social housing setting in which the art residency spaces were constructed as part of residential buildings. The residency studios are located on the top floors of two buildings.

We started this project by inviting artists from different countries, but also local artists, and giving them the space to live and work in. Because the four studios are located in residential buildings and in a specific neighbourhood in Gyumri – Mush 2 – we also needed to think about how it's possible to do something with art in that kind of space. Because it's not in the centre of the city; it's on the outskirts, and it has a specific context. We are talking about residential buildings with families living there who received housing recently, probably around the same time we got the studio spaces.

The community that moved in are people who didn't have homes for decades. There's been a long waiting list for many years,

following the earthquake in December 1988. Since then, different governments have proposed different housing projects. It was, and still is, a big problem to solve the housing crisis caused by the earthquake. These buildings were designed specifically for that purpose.

The neighbourhood itself was built in the 2000s and early 2010s as part of reconstruction efforts in the disaster zone. At that time there were many questions about the quality of the construction work. This district, which is separated from the central part of the city, has its own context, and that was our starting point to think about how we can work there and create something meaningful, knowing the people, the history, and the environment of that area.

Who are the people living there? Are they mostly families or elderly individuals? Do they know each other? Are they a close-knit community, or more like separate, individual households?

They are families. They became neighbours. Some of them know each other and do these neighbourly things. In Armenian, we have the expression *հարևանություն անել* which means *to do neighbour-ing*. It describes these kinds of everyday social interactions. Of course, there are also people who are more on their own. But the buildings are shared. Different families live there. They all come from the same context, and they moved in around the same time, so there's already something that connects them. And since the buildings are new, they're in contact with each other, and also with the fund that provided the housing. So there's already a special social fabric among the families.

Sometimes, when you're going up the stairs, you see people coming out of their apartments. It's a place where interactions happen naturally in shared spaces like stairways. The buildings themselves are kind of closed in structure, but very open in terms of visibility. When you are an artist resident there, everyone

knows you're there. You have to take that into account, you're living together with them in the same building.

That was part of our thinking when organizing the residency: how to make sure that the artists who come here also understand that, even if they stay for a short time, they are becoming neighbours. So we had to think about very basic things like sharing things, sharing coffee in the morning. I heard from many artists that they were often invited over for coffee by their neighbours, even if they didn't speak the same language. People would offer them fruit, for example. These small, everyday neighbourly gestures. And then there are also things like noise, or little conflicts in the shared spaces – how to keep them clean, how to be respectful. These simple things matter.

We also tried not to limit the project to the buildings themselves, but to open it up to the wider district. We wanted to engage people from other buildings nearby and to think more broadly about the neighbourhood. Some projects extended into public spaces in the district and tried to work with the surroundings, the environment, and the people living there.

Can you give an example of one of those projects that invited the whole district?

In March 2025, we organized an event in the central square of the district. We invited all the residents. We put up posters around the neighbourhood, and the event was open to anyone who happened to be in the square. People often go there in the evenings to walk and sit on the benches. So the event took place there.

Every artist contributed something. For example, Yevheniia Moliar from Ukraine did a plant-sharing activity. She set up a desk and prepared plant seeds and soil. She gave small gifts to anyone who took a plant. The idea was also to create an exchange so people could bring their own plants and swap them. She also wrote little letters addressed to different people. The desk was a very busy spot during the event.

Right next to her was Marie Yevkiné Tirard from France, of Armenian origin. She had created an installation with sound and weaving. It was possible to use it to weave a kind of carpet while listening to Armenian lullabies. Her research focuses on Armenian lullabies and forgotten songs from the region. She had been collecting them, and people were able to participate in the weaving and listen to the sound coming from the “carpet”. This was happening right next to the plant-sharing desk.

At the same time, Edka Jarzab was giving out flowers and asking people to share their dreams – asking what they were dreaming about. This later developed into a beautiful sound walk through the neighbourhood. She had selected different spots in the area and created a kind of soundscape. So the walk began in the square and eventually passed through the whole neighbourhood. Many people joined at different stages and engaged in different ways.

And during the research period, the artists also visited different places, starting with the bakery next door, speaking with the women who work there, then the conservatory, the music school, and even a tennis club where young boys were playing. So besides the public events, there are also many things happening throughout the residency – micro-interventions or small actions that maybe wouldn't be visible in a typical art context, but involve a lot of interaction with the neighbourhood.

How can we approach collective learning and collective knowledge through neighbouring?

I think that we imagine the space and we invite artists to imagine it as a place where they can invite local residents from the neighbourhood to share time, knowledge, and practices. It could be as simple as cooking together, having dinner, sewing, or participating in painting workshops. And even though we call them workshops, they don't necessarily have to be labelled that way; it can simply be about inviting people into a space to exchange



something through whatever practice the artist feels comfortable with.

We like to think of the space as something that can be offered to the people who live there, a space to meet, to be together as neighbours, and to spend time together. It becomes a kind of community space informed by the presence and initiative of each artist. Sometimes, for example, artists who work with sound or music come, and the space turns into a music workshop. Kids might start learning something, like how to play an instrument.

If an artist works with drawing, the children and others learn how to express themselves through drawing. So, using different media, and depending on the artist and the occasion, people of different generations are invited to share the space, to exchange knowledge, skills, and ideas – and simply to spend time together.

This happens alongside the fact that each family lives in a separate apartment and is dealing with its own issues, work problems, daily pressures, all these isolating things. We try to imagine this shared space as a place where they can come together and do something outside the boundaries and routines imposed on them.

Do you sometimes receive feedback from neighbours or the people living there? For example, do they enjoy having the resident artists around? Or do they ever complain?

The artists often share what feedback they receive, because they are the ones who live there and engage more or less closely with the people. And yes, we have very positive feedback from families, especially those with children or young adults, who are very interested in the guests and enjoy spending time together in the space. This happens both with the artists, and independently as well, and involves learning small things, painting, drawing, making music, or engaging in other activities offered by the artists.

Of course, it's not ideal. It's a kind of difficult balance to maintain because we know it's not an easy thing to do. Everyone has their own problems, and sometimes issues arise about accessibility, who gets access, who is present. There are also different dynamics between the people living there: who wants activities, who doesn't, who is interested, who isn't.

There can be complaints about noise, for example, but we try to find a way to balance the needs of the residents with the possibility of doing something meaningful. We also can't be overly restrictive, and that's sometimes hard to explain. The residents knew from the beginning that the buildings included these shared spaces, that they were part of the design, and they moved in with this knowledge. So there was always the idea that the space would be used in different ways, depending on the project.

But as I said, the context is not an art context. And sometimes questions arise, like: what are the expectations of people who are completely outside the art world? People who don't deal with these "artsy" things might ask, "What is happening? Is this connected to art?"

So yes, sometimes it's difficult for people to understand the openness of what each artist brings, whether it's body movement, dance, sewing, or something else. It can be very diverse. And for people who are used to more traditional ways of thinking about everyday life and what's acceptable in shared spaces, some of these things might seem strange.

But that's exactly the dynamics we are working with. The artists need to be aware that the people they are engaging with are not from arts-related backgrounds. And at the same time, we try to remain open to a wide range of artistic practices, so that people's views can shift over time. Things that may not have seemed possible in a studio space, like dancing, or even drawing on the walls, can happen.

So the artist-resident is not automatically treated as a neighbour? Is it something that has to be earned?

I don't think so. It's an ongoing process. There is a strong culture of hospitality in the area, and people do treat others with warmth. The artists always say that they feel very welcome. But when you live there, it's never something that's settled once and for all. It's a constant process, how you interact, how open you are to engaging, to learning something new about the people, about yourself.

For each person who arrives, different spaces and interactions can open up, depending on how open they are to being in that district. So I wouldn't say it's granted. It's something that develops over time. It's not one-sided either; it also depends on the other residents. a kind of social structure that evolves over time, depending on many factors: economic, political, even the weather.

And looking back at all the projects that have taken place in the residency space in Gyumri, could you offer a kind of work-in-progress definition of what collective knowledge is?

I think there is no recipe. Each time, the strategy is created from scratch, based on what is at hand, what is there at that moment. By this I mean: what are the experiences that are shared? What does each artist bring with them in terms of their own state of openness, their willingness to interact collectively? And also, what are the experiences of the other people who are there, those who want to participate, and those who don't?

So, you can never assume that if you invite people to join an activity you're offering it is automatically going to work. Each time, you begin from scratch. And that's what I think is also interesting about art: that art gives us the possibility to rethink, each time, how this collective sharing or collective knowledge can be created at that very moment and with the very people who are present. The outcome is often connected to personal relations, personal histories, and a shared openness to try and imagine

something together. I would say that each artist creates their own constellation based on their knowledge and on the present moment they shape.

I would say that collective knowledge is, in a way, reinvented with each new offering of collectivity. There isn't a fixed number of people who join in. Yes, there's the district in which we work, but when you're doing something in the context of art, you usually know your audience more or less. If you're offering something or inviting participants, you tend to know whom to expect, or how many people. But here, it is never guaranteed. You have to be inventive and imaginative about how to be interesting and how to offer something meaningful to the people who live their lives there. You are offering them the chance to come and spend their time with you, and to share what it is you're proposing. So it is always a reinvention of collectivity, a reinvention of the constellation of people with whom you're working.

And how do you see the residency spaces in the future, especially in the context of collectivity and community-building?

It's not easy to realise it in practice because a lot of small questions always come up, very basic needs that everyone has. But I imagine the spaces developing into something more self-run, into a space for the community, independent of whether artists are present or not.



Guided walk combined with a plant exchange, listening exercises, interventions, and singing, Mush-2, Gyumri, Armenia. Photo: Art Basis.

We are still in the process of working toward that, but ideally, the spaces would be run by the people who live there. In the best-case scenario, they would take part in organizing the space, managing their time there, and forming groups themselves. That's how I imagine it, ideally.

That's really interesting because it sounds like you would be stepping back from the curatorial project, taking yourself out of it and giving control to the people who live there.

Yes, of course. It could also be a combination. I don't expect people to do all the work, because it is a job, it takes time and effort. There could still be a curated part, a part that oversees the invited guests and artists who come from other contexts. Residents don't need to deal with that. That part can remain a curatorial responsibility. But I imagine the space could also have a life of its own, parallel to the residencies.

ALESSANDRA SAVIOTTI

Curator and art educator living in Amsterdam. She wrote a PhD at the Liverpool John Moores University – School of Art and Design on how alternative education models framed as Arte Útil could be successfully implemented within the institution of education, fostering sustainability and hacking the institution itself. Her main field of interest is socially engaged art, collaborative practices, and Arte Útil. Her work aims to realise projects where the public becomes a co-producer in the spirit of usership, and considers collaborative processes where cooperation is foundational in undermining the notion of competition.

Since 2014, she has been collaborating with the Asociación de Arte Útil, especially aiming to emancipate usership around the Arte Útil Archive. She is a curatorial advisor for UNIDEE – Residency Programs at Cittadellarte – Fondazione Pistoletto in Italy, and an associate of Art Workers Italia.

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ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MAGIC

Owen Griffiths and Alessandra Saviotti, Tablecloth as Toolkit (Manchester Version), The Whitworth Gallery, for Economics the Blockbuster, Manchester 2023. Photo: David Oates.

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MAGIC

A CONVERSATION WITH ALESSANDRA SAVIOTTI

Considering your long-standing involvement with socially engaged art practices and collective learning, and your efforts to open contemporary art institutions to untrained audiences, how do you understand Dave Cormier's "the community is the curriculum" – an idea you mention in your doctoral thesis *Hacking Art Education: Arte Útil as an educational methodology to foster change for curriculum planning*?¹ In what ways has it shaped your approach to curriculum development or collective knowledge production within the contexts you work in, such as UNIDEE at Cittadellarte – Fondazione Pistoletto or your broader international collaborations?

The idea that you approach the community as a group that can actually provide you with material to write a collective curriculum is something that I find quite interesting because it implies that a curriculum is a process. When I found this definition or this formulation, "the community is the curriculum",² I thought that it described quite well what I was already doing.

A community might be a group of people who share some interests. It does not necessarily have to consist of people who come from a particular place, for example. So there is no fixed configuration of identity. It could be a group of students, for example. I am also very practical in my approach, and I have always tried

- 1 Saviotti, A., *Hacking Art Education. Arte Útil as an educational methodology to foster change for curriculum planning*, Doctoral dissertation, Liverpool John Moores University, 2023. Available at: <https://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/22729/>
- 2 Cormier, D., "Rhizomatic education: Community as curriculum", in: *Innovate: Journal of Online Education*, 4 (5), 2008.

to find some way of materializing this idea of the curriculum in the university or art school context through practice.

For me, it is not interesting to have the idea of a programme or curriculum as a fixed structure which I could give to the students and they just follow it. It is more interesting to have a draft or a sketch that the community or group of people can complete together with me. I am aware that there is still a kind of power imbalance because if I am asked to teach a class or a curriculum, I am starting from a position of power. But the idea that we can have a collective discussion about what is interesting to unpack in the curriculum I am proposing is a way to come together. It is also very useful for me because I can always learn something new. After experiencing the idea that "the community is the curriculum", there is enrichment on both sides, not just in terms of theoretical ideas or thoughts but also personally. Because, obviously, if we think about creating a community, it means that other aspects are implied, not just theoretical ones.

When you said you try to materialize the curriculum, was that also related to the Undercommons, which you also refer to in your thesis, or did you mean it in a different sense?

The Undercommons, as formulated by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013), is a very interesting concept because it pushes us to really imagine another system. The Undercommons suggests acting clandestinely at the centre of power structures to undermine and dismantle them. Therefore it explains that in order to change, we need to imagine a new way of approaching education. It affirms that what we currently have is basically wrong because it excludes racialised and marginalised people such as black people, indigenous people, queer and poor people. It does not respect minorities, for example. In this case, education follows a trajectory that has existed for a very long time and empowers a specific group of people because it was designed by a particular group to the exclusion of others.

What is more interesting for me in the theory of the Undercommons is the idea that learning happens all the time through what Harney and Moten call “study”. Study doesn’t only happen at school or in a classroom when a lecturer or teacher explains something to you. It also happens in informal conversations, for example, the one we are having now. If I think about the experience we shared together when we were walking in the mountains during the UNIDEE residency in Biella, when we went to the Sanctuary of Oropa, or when we were viewing the ex-voto gallery,³ learning also happened there. It happens when we have a one-on-one conversation. It happens when we have dinner together. There is a social aspect to study as proposed by the Undercommons, which highlights the spontaneity of lived experience.

Though nowadays I am a little critical of the idea that we have to dismantle everything. I think there is a tension between the idea of the Undercommons and the responsibility that comes with it. If you think about Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, who formulated the theory, they are both important and established professors. So when you say to students that in order to create change you must dismantle the system, the students are in a different position. They do not hold power. I think it is quite dangerous if the only proposed path to change is by destroying the system, especially when the people promoting that idea hold positions of significant power.

This is just my impression, because of course they can always say it is only a theory. And again, we come back to this idea of theory and practice. But nevertheless, I think the Undercommons approach is valuable and interesting to bring into the conversation. It also highlights that sometimes it is truly impossible to

3 The ex-voto gallery in the Sanctuary of Oropa is a unique devotional space containing thousands of votive offerings left by pilgrims in gratitude for divine intervention. These ex-votos include paintings, photographs, and objects which together form a powerful visual archive.

infiltrate certain institutions. These institutions may claim they want to change, but they do not actually question the concentration of power that resides within them.

When you said that dismantling institutions may not be the right approach, I recalled that in your doctoral thesis you also refer to the concept of exodus or engaged withdrawal. You suggest that it is not the most effective strategy to overcome institutional constipation. Although, I still find the term “engaged withdrawal” really compelling. Could it be considered a strategy of collective learning?

Yes, I think so. In my thesis, I refer to withdrawal as theorised by Paolo Virno,⁴ where the multitude actively opts for mass defection – in his case, from the state – rather than protest. It puts into question the assumption that institutions, or in some cases the government, are the only entities that can speak and hold power. The multitude does not aspire to become a majority precisely because it refuses to become the government. But actually, if we use the idea of active withdrawal as a collective strategy, it means that we are not alone. We create another possible way of doing things. So even though I have sometimes been critical of this approach, I think it could be interesting if it were used more consciously. I am also thinking about it in relation to the strike. Most social movements, for example – or to address the situation in Palestine right now – involve calls for boycott. If you actively disengage or withdraw from institutional power, it can be a way to weaken that power. The more people join, the more impactful it could be. It is a refusal to participate in the existing structures while simultaneously building different forms of life and organisation.

However, I do not want to speak in terms of success. I was thinking more about the idea of creating pluralities. Not in the

4 Virno, P., “Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus”, in: Hardt, M. and Virno, P. (eds), *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minn, 2010.

sense of “us” versus “them”, but rather “us” as many, many, many, and “them” as many, many, many more. In this way, there is a real multiplicity of thoughts, a plurality of approaches. There is more space for everybody. Here I turn to the concept of *exodus* developed by Toni Negri and Michael Hardt, even though it is more utopian when they imagine a mass movement of the multitude that both escapes and prefigures a new political order.

From a practical point of view, I think that conflict, in theory, is less harsh when there is a multiplicity of thoughts and approaches, and different ways of collective learning. These always put us in negotiation with one another. Negotiation is different from conflict. It suggests a different way of approaching disagreement – through dialogue, for example. If I think about how things are going right now, I feel that we are no longer used to the idea of collective learning in many contexts. Collective learning is demanding. Having many people in the same room who need to negotiate their positions within the group is more difficult than having one person decide for everyone.

But I think it is also a useful strategy. If we come back to the education context, collective learning becomes interesting because it gives us the opportunity to change the timetable and how things are organized. If we want to truly learn collectively, it means we need more time. This goes against the current tendency where everything has to be done from one day to the next. Otherwise, something bad might happen. We get stressed. There is burnout. And so on. We often do not think about this, but I really believe that “stretching time” could be a very valuable way of supporting collective learning.

Stretching time and also, at the beginning, you mentioned coming to a workshop or study environment without a concrete plan, with only a sketch or a draft. Are these areas connected to the idea of the Not-Yet that you also mention in your doctoral thesis?

The concept of the Not-Yet is quite interesting. It comes from Jeanne van Heeswijk, who is a Dutch artist. She has been working extensively with the idea of collective learning. This is also very connected to another concept put forward earlier by Tania Bruguera, which refers to art and education as spaces where we *train for the future*.

For me, both of these approaches are important. The work of Tania is different from that of Jeanne, but both are deeply engaged in institution-building and in imagining other ways of living together, to put it in simple terms. The ideas of the Not-Yet and training for the future are powerful because they bring together the potential of pedagogical or educational practice and the power of art. One of the powers of art is to *imagine the world otherwise* (which is another quote by Charles Esche, former director of the Van Abbemuseum, whom I had the privilege of working with).

Tania Bruguera often speaks about the role of artists in thinking about new configurations of reality, and about how these ideas can be implemented through an artistic approach. She comes from Cuba, a place where imagination and art have been used extensively by the government as propaganda tools, but also a place where there is no freedom of speech.⁵ Artists there have always had to imagine new ways of creating work that would not be censored. If you want to criticize the government or take a clear political position, you need to think about something that does not yet exist. If you do that, it means that people encountering your work for the first time don't know how to react, because it is new. It also means that there is no law that forbids it. So you can do it. It is a way of putting something very theoretical into practice. But to become aware of the Not-Yet, it is also important to be conscious of what was there before.

5 For an extensive review of the work of Tania Bruguera see: Saviotti, A., “Tools of Renewal – Tania Bruguera and Arte Útil”, interview by Florent Delval in: *Faire Mondes*, N.2, 2021. Available at: <https://fairemondes.com/florent-delval-outils-de-renouveau-tania-bruguera-et-arte-util/>

Art that brings together artistic and educational approaches creates very fertile ground where imagination can arise and where it is possible to envision something that does not yet exist, but that can still be put into practice. When you put imagination into practice, it becomes a powerful force. It can genuinely change the world. I know I sound very hopeful today, but from my experience, I have seen that art projects can have a real impact. We cannot deny that the imagination of some people has changed the condition of others, even through a small gesture. The power of these practices lies in the fact that they can transform something for a small group of people. It is also important to document these processes because others can be inspired by them and apply similar methods in their own contexts, environments, or situations.

That is actually a great introduction to the idea of Arte Útil. Would you like to explain this concept and say how it might connect to collective learning strategies?

Arte Útil is a term that was conceptualized by Tania Bruguera, starting around the year 2000, as part of her long-term project *Catédra de Arte de Conducta*. However, when Gemma Medina and I, along with curators at the Van Abbemuseum (Annie Fletcher, Nick Aikens and Charles Esche) conducted research together with her, we discovered that other artists had used the same term before in Italy, Argentina, Mexico, and the United States. The phrase was often translated into those local languages, but the meaning remained similar.

The starting point was always the idea of using art as a field or method to change reality in an effective way. Tania has been working with this concept for more than twenty years, promoting the idea that art can be a real tool for change. I think this is important because it places art back at the centre of the conversation. In my experience, there is often a kind of scepticism about art. People sometimes say that art is nice, but that it does not really do anything.

However, when I was involved in the *Museum of Arte Útil*,⁶ an exhibition conceived by Tania Bruguera at the Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven, Netherlands) in 2013, my role was to put together an archive of practices that used art as a tool for real change. These were not symbolic or metaphorical changes. They involved tangible outcomes, for example in law, healthcare, or architecture. The emphasis was not on a specific artistic medium, like painting or sculpture, but on the process. And in most cases, the process was a collective one.

In order for these practices to be effective, there always needs to be an initiator, an artist or a group of people who begin the process, and users, the people who activate and carry forward that process. In the Arte Útil Archive, we have around three hundred projects. Some of them were initiated by individuals, but even in those cases, it is difficult to claim that they were not collective practices because they necessarily involved others who shaped and transformed the work through usership.

The power of this archive lies in its ability to place these practices on a historical timeline. It shows how this approach, which started at the end of the nineteenth century, has developed into a growing number of practices up to the present day. It also challenges the notion of art as something practised only by individuals working alone in studios. That can still happen and produce valuable work, but it is no longer the only valid approach.

To sum it up, for me Arte Útil – and you can see this in the cases I have described – is a methodology rather than a movement. It is a different way of approaching art and education, or art through education, as a means of collectively learning new things that we can apply in our lives, in reality, and across disciplines.

6 See: Saviotti, A., *Arte Útil and the attempt to change the world*, Van Abbemuseum Kitchen Blog, Eindhoven, 2014. Available at: https://www.alessandrasaviotti.com/uploads/1/3/2/3/13234002/vam_kitchen_blog_%C2%BB_alessandra_saviotti.pdf

I was particularly interested in the project you mentioned in your thesis, in which John Ruskin invited his students to build a road connecting Upper and Lower Hinksey. I found it especially relevant to discussions around collective learning strategies, as the students were required to engage with knowledge and skills not directly related to art, yet the entire situation has all the hallmarks of an artistic process. Perhaps not only because it was initiated by an artist, but also due to the inherent strangeness of the situation.

To start from the end, I have learned that art can sometimes be used as an excuse or an alibi. If we consciously use the fact that, as you mentioned, art is something strange or unusual, then we can do a lot of things because it is art and it is supposed to be strange. This idea of using art as an alibi or as an excuse is really important because it gives us a lot of agency. We can play with that, both for good and for bad. But I would say it is quite powerful, especially within institutions.

Because art is a space of imagination and possibility, it also means that everything is possible. We need to negotiate with that. Returning to the Ruskin Road, I find it quite fascinating. If you think about the context in which he proposed it, one of his students was Oscar Wilde. It is amusing to imagine Oscar Wilde standing in the rain and building a road. I suppose the other students came from similar social backgrounds and were not used to physical labour like road building.

This episode is quite compelling. Ruskin was teaching at Oxford and was deeply engaged with the Arts and Crafts movement, which emphasized bringing art into everyday life, often in a decorative way. But in this case, he took it very seriously. He asked his students to build a road because it was the most useful way to put into practice what they were learning together. I find this very interesting because it was a way to create something new that was also genuinely useful to others. It was a lesson on the practicalities of social change, transcending class and social norms. That is also meaningful because it connected places that

were previously unconnected, Ruskin's aim was to promote joy in manual labour where aesthetics played a crucial role, as the objective was to create the most beautiful road adorned with wildflowers and so on. We do not know what happened later as a result. Maybe the students understood the pedagogies behind this process, maybe they did not. But part of the road remains. Ruskin is not widely remembered for this. I was not aware of this story, and when I found out about it, I thought it was very inspiring.

I'd really like to imagine what kind of skills or knowledge the students had to learn in this project. From the skill of digging the ground to understanding how to make themselves useful to the communities. Above all, it was actually necessary help because the two villages were really lacking a connection because of a huge swamp separating them. Sometimes when you take a group of people out of their regular context, you can create something deeply meaningful. Earlier you also mentioned the art archive, and I wanted to ask what your definition of collective knowledge might be. Could you also refer to your experience working on the Arte Útil Archive?

For me, collective knowledge is something that exists in order to be transformed. As I mentioned before, there is often an assumption about what we know and who we are. The moment those assumptions are put into question, they generate something new. I believe this is transformative both on a personal level and on a broader, global level.

It is also a very interesting way to move beyond the idea of competition. This is connected to how we approach the economy, which is something very important to me. It is simply not true that there is only one possible way of understanding or organizing the economy. There are many alternative models that work quite well, and in the Arte Útil Archive there are many examples. For me, collective knowledge is a kind of encyclopedia of magic that can be deeply transformative. It must be taken seriously. It can also be joyful to navigate different forms of collective knowledge, but it is

essential to reflect on what each of us contributes to this collective pot. Practices that emerge from collective knowledge have a real impact on the world and on the people who engage with them. That is why we should approach this seriously, considering both the how and the what of what we contribute.

Regarding the methods of gathering and contributing to collective knowledge, I would like to ask about the website *Hacking (Art) Education* which works as a tool for experimental pedagogies, and how the concept of hacking can function as a strategy of collective learning.

First of all, *to hack* means to cut a hole, a space through which things can leak out of the structure you have disrupted. I like that idea, especially when applied to education. By creating this kind of hole, everything can flow outward, and then it can be redistributed. For example, you do not need to formally be part of a school programme in order to learn something. Hacking means that anyone can gain access through this kind of leak in the system. It is also interesting because hacking has become part of our everyday lives, especially in relation to our approach to technology.

When I was thinking about how to hack education, and more specifically art education, I wanted to create something that was not one hundred percent approved by academia or educational institutions, but that everybody could use. More importantly, something that everybody could adapt and transform. I created a website called *Hacking (Art) Education*. It was the practical part of my PhD. I thought of it as a way of composing a curriculum based on the Arte Útil Archive. The archive is freely available online. It also gave me the opportunity to focus on specific locations. I took some projects from the Arte Útil Archive and included them in that curriculum. One example is *Homebaked*, a project in Liverpool (UK) initiated by Jeanne van Heeswijk, the artist who developed the concept of the Not-Yet. Her project is a bakery. That means if you want to learn about it, you need to go there and eat a pie.

While I was researching in Liverpool, I discovered a laundry shop called Kitty's Launderette. It was named after Kitty Wilkinson and it is also a centre where people can learn about her history. She is the only woman to whom a statue has been dedicated in Liverpool's St. George's Hall. She was the only person in her neighbourhood who owned a boiler and she helped during a cholera epidemic in 1832. She washed the clothes and bedsheets of those in need, which helped prevent the spread of disease and saved many lives. When I visited the laundry shop, I discovered that the people who run the business are artists. I talked to them because I thought the project was a perfect fit for what I was working on. For them, the framing was a little different. They told me that for them, the project was not an art project. For me, however, this situation shows how something that does not yet exist can be imagined and then put into practice.

There are also other exercises on the website I created, inspired by some of the methods used in the case studies included in the Arte Útil Archive. These exercises are adapted and properly credited. For example, there is an exercise called *The Choir* that I reworked from a method by Augusto Boal. The exercise is an adaptation from Boal's *Games for actors and non-actors*⁷ and combines individual and collective perceptions of a place to understand how we react to our surroundings.

The website was a way to put into practice some of the methods presented in the projects included in the Arte Útil Archive. This was also a way to think about how these methods could be adapted in different contexts. The fact that I created a website means that anyone can access and use these exercises. Anyone can also use the different syllabi, since I have included all the readings, links to videos, and other resources.

One of my favourite exercises is *A Capitalist Reading of our Usual Breakfast*. I created this exercise together with the artist Owen

7 Jackson, A. and Boal, A., *Games for actors and non-actors*, London: Routledge, 2005.



Griffiths. We were working with a very broad group of people, including students from many different places, and we needed to find a common element. Since we did not know the group very well, we thought that breakfast might be something everyone shares. Even if someone only has coffee or tea in the morning, it is still a point of connection. We proposed the following: check your usual breakfast and try to find out where the ingredients come from. We asked the students to either record a short video or take a photo of

their breakfast, and to list what they were eating. We also asked if they could trace the origin of the ingredients. This was an opportunity to introduce a conversation about the economy, the global economy, and political economy. It worked very well.

It is quite interesting, because if you do this exercise you can think of the breakfast as something that becomes part of your body. It becomes something very concrete. It is not abstract anymore, but part of your lived experience. You begin to ask, where does the coffee come from? Where do the ingredients on your plate originate? This exercise gives you the chance to embed the concept of economy in a direct way. Often, the economy seems like something distant. But here we are talking about things that are physically inside you at the moment of discussion. It is a very nice exercise to do together.

This reminds me of your project *DPE Decentralising Political Economies*. Could you explain how you worked with that concept? Could you explain how you worked with that concept?

Decentralising Political Economies was also a very interesting opportunity for us to rethink the Arte Útil Archive as a resource for creating new content. In this case, we focused specifically on

the economy. The exercise I just mentioned came directly from that research.

We began with the idea that the economy often feels distant from everyday life, especially if we think about the financialization of the economy. But in fact everything we do is shaped by it. We go to work to earn money so we can eat, pay rent, and travel. So we asked ourselves, why not use the Arte Útil Archive as a starting point for exploring different economic systems or ways of surviving within the current system, especially when you are not associated with one of the centres of power?

Together with Poppy Bowers, who is chief curator at the Whitworth Art Gallery, and John Byrne, who is a professor of useful art at Liverpool John Moores University, we began researching alternative approaches to the economy. These were often developed or implemented by artists. We did this while commissioning texts, but we also developed a section called the toolkit, where different resources are available for further exploration. It was a very interesting research process because it was also a way to make that process public. When I say process, I mean the research project that led to the exhibition focused on the economy and art, organised at the Whitworth in Manchester, titled *Economics The Blockbuster: It's not Business as Usual*.

We believed it was important to share this publicly, especially because we were in the middle of the pandemic. The project launched in October 2020, and we continued the research up to the opening of the exhibition in 2023. We spent a significant amount of time researching the economy, using the platform not only as a tool for sharing, but also as a kind of open notebook. Then, when the pandemic restrictions were eased, we were able to meet again at the exhibition in Manchester. It was quite meaningful to see how this collective research process had evolved and how it eventually materialized in the form of an exhibition. Some of the outcomes of the *Decentralising Political Economies* project are still ongoing.

After the exhibition ended, the Whitworth Art Gallery invited Owen and I to keep the work *Tablecloth as a Toolkit* on display for another year. This extension supported the development of educational programmes with different groups, particularly with children. This returns to your earlier question about the power of collective knowledge. When you begin a research project, or at least when I do, you may start with a question, but the process often leads in directions you could not have anticipated. This was the case with *Decentralising Political Economies* as a research platform. It was especially meaningful for me because I am not an expert in economics, but I was able to approach the topic through the lens of art and I learned a lot.

I have encountered many projects that rethink or create new economic models or alternative ways of surviving within capitalist structures. In that sense, everyone has some knowledge to contribute. My own approach is grounded in art, but the research opened up many other directions. That is why this was such a powerful example of turning collective knowledge and collective research into something public.

What collective learning strategies should we use more of in the future, or how do you imagine them developing?

I would say that collective knowledge really happens everywhere. Even when sharing a recipe, or learning a language, for example; it is all part of what we can become. We mentioned the Undercommons, and I truly believe in it. Collective knowledge exists because it is created by a group of people, and it can happen anywhere. What happens in one place can also happen elsewhere.

This is important because it means that knowledge does not obey a hierarchy, at least not for me. What you learn by talking to people at the market, or speaking with farmers, is as valuable as what you learn at a university. For me, it is always a matter of how you use the knowledge. What do you do with it? Can it lead to something that does not yet exist? Can you have an epiphany

while shopping at the market? For example, when you see where the tomatoes come from, what does that tell you? What can you do with that?

So for me, the future of collective knowledge must be truly collective. It cannot be isolated. It has to exist in a group, through conversation. We should not be afraid to say things that might sound obvious, naive, or even stupid. Everyone can learn from everyone else.



CERVOX

SARA BURAYA BONED

Sara Buraya Boned is a cultural worker, transfeminist, and network weaver. She works at the Museo Reina Sofía, where she started as assistant in the Collections Department (2009-2011). She is responsible for the Museo Tentacular (Tentacular Museum), a department in the Direction of Study, where she has been working in different roles, sustaining cultural programmes, public activities and collaboration networks in different ways since 2013.

Between 2020 and 2023 she was also the project leader of the European confederation of museums L'Internationale.

Since 2018, she has also been a member of the editorial board of L'Internationale Online, where she co-edited the publications *Towards a Collective Study in Times of Emergency* (2024), *Stories and Threads: Perspectives on Art Archives* (2022), *Degrowth and Progress* (2020), and *Feminisms* (2018). As part of her political and cultural practice, she is a member of the Institute of Radical Imagination and the Museo Situado assembly. Along her path, she has been part of autonomous projects and collectives like *somateca*, *Calipsofacto*, *Archivos Comunes*, and *Chantal*.



Collectives at the door of the museum during the Picnic del barrio of Museo Situado, Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2023. Photo: Javier Baeza.

CERVIX

A CONVERSATION WITH SARA BURAYA BONED

Focused on institutional transformation, your work includes involvement in public programmes organised by the Museo Reina Sofía, where you are part of the Museo Tentacular Department, currently situated within the Directorship of Study. You have also participated in major cultural initiatives, such as Creative Europe projects. I would like to ask: do you think a museum can serve as a tool for collective learning?

Yes, I do think the museum can be a tool for collective learning. In fact, I think it should mainly be a tool for collective learning! My perspective comes from the institutional practice I have been developing for many years, especially since 2013, when I started working in the Public Activities Department of the Museo Reina Sofía. Before that I had been working in the Collections Department. I started as a student, and in the meantime I was also part of very formative political experiences outside the museum, such as the 2011 Indignados 15-M movement in Spain, which for me was a political school of collective practice and collective learning. At the same time I was learning how to be a museum worker, working with collections. But there were also very important structural changes in the whole institutional project. I had the privilege of living through the fifteen years during which Manolo Borja directed the museum and of working with the many people who, across those years, were part of the team. I always insist that what we created at the Reina Sofía was a very collective process.

In 2013 what was already taking shape was a strategy of working with networks and with collective entities who brought different knowledges, knowledges not expected to be found within

a contemporary art institution. I am referring to international solidarity networks, local activisms, and a myriad of diverse entities with their own experiences and perspectives. We began working with collectives, networks, and cooperatives in a sustained way, and this practice has, over the years, become a central part of the institutional project. Many important transformations of the very idea of what the museum is, or could be, occurred thanks to these collaborations, this openness to negotiation, co-production, and engagement with non-institutional partners. What turned out to be the key to enhancing certain transformations in the museum was precisely the specificity of working with others. Others who were not identified with the museum in the conventional sense, but who made a kind of crack in the very idea of the museum. Of course, this is not unique to the Reina Sofía; it emerges from the broader practices of institutional critique developed since the 1960s, in different waves and moments, including the very significant debates of the 1990s.

In 2017, we created a department whose aim was to address questions of institutionality and assess the possibility of transforming the institution through contact with others, with unexpected partners, or with partners not usually anticipated in the context of a contemporary art museum. The department was called Museo en Red, a term that is untranslatable and significant because it carries a performative dimension. It is not easily captured in English, as it may imply different senses. It could mean: a museum that is part of a net, a museum that produces nets around itself, or a museum *in [a] net*. It is not clear which position is assumed, and this uncertainty, or the possibility of strategically shifting positions, is essential to its meaning. This department is the one I continue to be part of today, and since 2023, with the arrival of Manuel Segade as the new director, it has taken on a new imprint, with metaphors of the non-human and the possibility of establishing tentacular relationships that broaden our approach to contact and collaboration. At the same time, there is a line of

continuity with the past as seen in our ongoing commitment to these ideas of what a museum can and should be.

In the history of the museum as a locus of power there have always been tensions and disputes that push museums to redefine their role in society. I always emphasize that changes never come from within the institution, but the other way around; it is the people who demand changes, and push for them, who ultimately make them happen. The institution, whether a museum or another type of organization, must listen and respond to what people – citizens, artists, and communities – are asking for.

We have witnessed such shifts, for example, away from the idea of the museum as a space designed for collecting, disseminating, and producing knowledge for an audience, toward a new conception that emerged in the debates around the redefinition of the museum within the ICOM¹ commission responsible for this task. For example, the museum was now asked to address questions of social justice, global equality, the sustainability of ecosystems and life on this planet, and the distribution of power, working *with* communities rather than *for* an audience that simply assimilates what the museum declares. This has been our focus over the years, through careful listening and collective thinking, proposing by way of practice, and paying attention to the learnings gathered from these experiences.

Earlier you mentioned the desire to work with unexpected partners as well as the role of uncertainty within institutional practice. Both seem to challenge the idea of the museum as a rigid structure with a clearly defined direction. How can unpredictability and uncertainty function as strategies of collective learning?

I think that one of the tasks that has never been clearly defined for museums, and that to me is key, is not to make statements or to organise and disseminate knowledge, but rather to listen.

1 ICOM is the International Council of Museums, a global organization that brings together museum professionals.

By uncertainty I mean that often in order to do something meaningful with the community around you, it is more necessary to listen carefully and to develop cooperative strategies than to be at the centre, proposing things people may not need.

Of course, planning is still required, since there are resources and timelines. First of all, to rethink and transform an institution, you must first have one – and there are countries where there is simply no institutional framework to transform. There are others where it is being undermined and destroyed. I am a defender of public institutions. We need a public sphere. At least in Spain, public institutions (museums, schools, healthcare, etc.) still sustain life. At present, with the rise of the far right, we see the dangers, and the distinction between transforming institutionality and erasing or dismantling it altogether. This is what we see happening for example in Argentina under Javier Milei, who is dismissing academics, or in Poland (2015-2023), with repeated attacks on cultural institutions, or currently in the second Trump administration in the United States, where institutions and democracy are being demolished on different levels, while museums are being attacked and censorship is flourishing. That is not transformation but destruction.

Change has so often taken place because of the struggles of the people, which have pushed institutions to move in new directions. Yet institutions can also adopt a different position if they are grounded in methodologies and strategies of listening, feeling, understanding, and being more responsive and tentacular, attentive to the needs that underpin their central tasks. Uncertainty, in this sense, means leaving space for things to happen. Listening is about being present, being in contact, open to others. You don't necessarily know what is going to happen next.

It is truly fascinating to realize that uncertainty and the anticipation of what may emerge can be filled with listening — listening to other people and to the environment. In this

context I would like to ask how can we imagine the future of the museum and the future of collective learning strategies?

For me, a crucial issue in current debates on the role of museums is the need to question the very idea of preserving objects for the future at a time when a future is no longer certain. We are facing urgent challenges and crises, like climate change. Over the next thirty years, climate conditions will change across the entire planet. And we may be asking ourselves: what future are we preserving these artefacts for? Perhaps we need to focus all our artistic thinking and cultural knowledge on the possibility of having a future at all.

Preserving the history, memory, and legacy that collections represent is of course an extremely important responsibility. Yet we also need to think beyond artefacts in order to activate the memories, narratives, histories, and knowledges embedded in collections, and put them to work with and for the people in order to build a future.

Referring to what you said about the future, I would like to mention the publication *Degrowth and Progress*² that you co-curated. How, in your view, might collective learning strategies be applied to the concept of progress?

That was a very meaningful exercise I engaged in as a member of the editorial board of L'Internationale, the European confederation of museums, art institutions, and art networks. I co-edited the publication with Ida Hiršenfelder. It was a collective project in the form of a trilogy addressing three pairs of concepts that could be seen as antonyms: *Austerity and Utopia*,³ *Degrowth and Pro-*

- 2 S. Buraya Boned and Ida Hiršenfelder (eds.), *Degrowth and Progress*, L'Internationale Online, 2021. Accessed September 16, 2025. https://archive-2014-2024.internationaleonline.org/d2tv32fgpo1xal.cloudfront.net/files/internationaleonline_degrowthandprogress_epub_2021.pdf
- 3 Nav Haq, Pablo Martínez, Corina Oprea (eds.), *Austerity and Utopia*, L'Internationale Online, 2020. Accessed September 16, 2025. <https://archive-2014-2024.internationaleonline.org/d2tv32fgpo1xal.cloudfront.net/files/internationaleonline-austerityandutopia-2020-web.pdf>

gress, and *Class and Redistribution*.⁴ Its central aim was to rethink the language. The notion of progress, and the symbolic weight it carries as seen through a Western, nineteenth-century, positivist lens with its classifications of what is developed and what is primitive, has put us on a reckless path to destruction. The question was whether we might think differently about progress, and likewise about growth. Could degrowth be seen not as moving toward having less, but toward a more profound, healthy, and joyful life? The limits of the earth are well known. Today we are shifting into what is called “sustainable development”, a term that I also find highly problematic, since capitalism once again adapts to it, with new green energies and electric cars that transform landscapes while generating new forms of extractivism across the globe.

Regarding *Degrowth and Progress*, it was an invitation to embrace the possibility of reinterpreting both of these terms. There was a beautiful text about Ursula K. Le Guin that Ida Hiršenfelder wrote. That approach brought speculative thinking and feminist speculative practice into the publication as a methodology. Every author we invited approached the subject from a different position and perspective. But it was very much the same as I was saying before about the need to imagine the future. What culture and the arts can do is create spaces for collective thinking and radical imagination to exist and to develop. These are changes we need. We need to use the position, the power, and the resources we have to create such opportunities. Sometimes the results are brilliant, sometimes not, and that is okay. The point is how you can contribute with your work to that. And this has nothing to do with what I, Sara, have to offer the world as an individual, but what we can build together.

We come from different contexts and different historical backgrounds. You are from Poland, I am from Spain. I, however,

- 4 Farah Aksoy, Meagan Down, Corina Oprea (eds.), *Class and Redistribution*, L'Internationale Online, 2021. Accessed September 16, 2025. https://internationaleonline.org/site/assets/files/7221/llo_classandredistribution_2021.pdf

was raised in an environment of individuality, within a framework shaped by neoliberal capitalism. Collectiveness was absent. I learned it later in my personal and militant life, in spaces such as squatted social centres in my city, and in social movements. I believe there is a great deal of learning there for the arts and for institutions as well, and it is this kind of transfer of knowledge that we are trying to bring into our practice.

After learning more about your unique projects that explore new areas of cooperation, I'd like to ask you about the word experiment. What does it mean to you, especially in relation to creating a collective learning environment?

I can recall a moment that was a real turning point for me in my practice and in my life. In 2019, we invited Paula Pin, a visual artist, and Laura Benítez, a researcher, who were collaborating on the idea of a bio-trans laboratory for experimenting with the practices of punk gynaecology.⁵ This initiative had grown out of the experiences of feminist wet labs and similar spaces. It was conceived as a laboratory with an open call, designed to experiment collectively with practices of biological self-exams. One of the exercises involved creating microscopes with a five-euro computer webcam, following open-source instructions to assemble the microscopes using small pieces of wood. With these small microscopes we learned together how to explore our own bodies, our vagina and cervix and the uterine cavity, and how to observe the cells of the tiny organisms who live in our fluids.

We spent five days together at the museum, in the workshop room, engaged in collective processes and a constant exchange of knowledge. We were introduced to knowledge from thinkers I had not encountered before, such as Lynn Margulis and Karen Barad. The artists brought their experiences into the workshop in a way that was not only horizontal but also fluid, while the participants

contributed other forms of knowledge, such as how one relates to one's body in daily life, or what kinds of food one prepares. In the end it became something like a witch club, sharing forbidden, non-commercial knowledge related to our bodies, but also to our subjectivities, affects, and feminist militancy. Within the span of five days a new collective body was created. It was truly transformative for all of us. On the final day we were naked, examining one another's cervixes, collecting cells, and exploring them with the microscopes we had built together.

We could see our own body's cells on the screen. This is something one would never imagine happening inside a museum, within the regulated space of the white cube. Yet such an experience became possible when it was grounded in trust and in a temporary autonomous community that shared both witchcraft and scientific knowledge about their bodies. It was also a technique designed for people who don't have access to public healthcare, a way to prevent cervical cancer, or to identify possible infections. At the same time, we questioned our relationship with gynaecology as a science, which is very patriarchal and casts the female patient in a passive role with regard to her own experience of her body and its health. We shared our experiences of gynaecology, reflecting on how medicine separates the subject being observed from the doctor, and how it often forbids us from engaging directly with our own bodies, even by prohibiting the use of the speculum on oneself.

For me, this particular case demonstrates how a space can be created for collective knowledge to be shared, produced, and developed. We learned many things from one another, and there was no legitimized body of knowledge or single authority. For example, in this context we invited Helen Hester, who was part of the project. Helen Hester is a philosopher from the United Kingdom, she is a co-author of *Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation*,

5 <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/activity/bio-trans-lab-0>

and she came to give a theoretical lecture⁶ that incorporated reflections on practice, and then all the participants from the lab presented the outcomes of their experiments. This form of xenofeminism proposes a take on how technologies can play a role in feminisms. It was 2019, a moment strongly marked by the fourth wave of feminism. It represented a way of moving beyond the idea of knowledge as theory, or as something produced exclusively by those legitimized by academia or by the museum.

How can feminist ideas and practices shape collective learning?

When I first began working, while still at university, a curator was seen as a legitimized figure who possessed knowledge, developed a thesis, and then relied on many other staff, assistants and coordinators, very often women, who did the reproductive work needed for the project to happen, while themselves remaining invisible. The same applied to designing public programmes. I have seen this change in my lifetime, and I believe that the feminist wave had a great deal to do with it. It has challenged the social structure as a whole and the art system in particular. It has destabilized figures of authority in knowledge production and has allowed us to see and to recognize that knowledge is elsewhere and that it is always situated. From my perspective, we have been ignoring many forms of knowledge for far too long.

I remember the first time I heard Natasa Petrešin Bachelez, a Slovenian curator who had worked in Paris for many years and was part of *L'Internationale* some years ago, referring to herself as an "interdependent" curator. She explained how she used to call herself an independent curator until she realized that she was not independent at all, but completely interdependent on other agents of cultural practice because she cannot do anything alone. I feel the same. I can do nothing without others. I am always

6 <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/activity/helen-hester>



working through connections and relations, in interdependency with people from institutions, with artists, and within broader networks.

Going back to the project you carried out together with Paula Pin and Laura Benítez, it is a beautiful example of how technology can be creatively hacked. In the fifth edition of the Archivos del Común realised by the Reina Sofía, we can learn about a practice started as TV Tamix,⁷ where the community from Tamazulápam del Espíritu Santo Mixe in Oaxaca learned all the skills of video recording and video production in order to make their voices heard. Would you like to explain the concept behind Archivos del Común in more detail?

Archivos del Común began as a seminar we organized together with Red Conceptualismos del Sur, one of the networks we collaborate with.⁸ This is a network of researchers, curators, and artists based in Latin America and Spain, working to influence the critical dimension of artistic, archival, curatorial and social movement practices, guided by the idea that research itself is a political act.

7 TV Tamix was a pioneering audiovisual collective from Tamazulápam del Espíritu Santo, Oaxaca, active in the 1990s. It used radio, video, and local television to document Mixe community life, creating a counter-narrative to external representations and laying the groundwork for an ongoing practice of collective memory and self-representation.

8 <https://redcsur.net/>

Archivos del Común evolved into a recurring gathering, usually held over three days, in which we invite archival initiatives to participate. These are not institutional archives but archives created by individuals, communities, or collectives who seek to preserve the memory of something. It might be a place, an event, a collective, or a community, and they do so in their own way, autonomously.

These archives emerge from the commons. They do not follow official archive regulations, they are not institutionalized, and they do not have access to the same resources. Our aim was to create a conversation about the politics of the archive: how to activate archives, what kinds of circulations of affects and relations does an archive generate, and how it relates to researchers, to the future, and to materiality. We organized the first edition and quickly realized how necessary it was. With the support of Red Conceptualismos del Sur, which has long been engaged with archival practices, we then developed a methodology of working together. Every two years we organized a new edition, and next year we will hold the sixth edition of Archivos del Común.

Over time we have incorporated new questions and frameworks. For example, the fifth edition was dedicated to fungi. We asked how we might think about archives through the lens of fungi, looking at different dimensions: the spore dimension, the symbiotic dimension, the mycelial dimension, or the fermentation dimension. All these natural metaphors resonate with how we want to create knowledge and reflect on our practices. In this way Archivos del Común has become an informal network of archives. It is not institutionalized, but we are now working to create a website to gather all the publications and interventions from different years.

We have also created an archive of Archivos del Común, because participants bring materials when they come to the seminar, and we gather them here, collectively creating another archive. What I mean is that all of these initiatives have slowly emerged over the years, starting from the museum's intention to

build networks of relations around the institution. What these relations would look like was not pre-defined. Our aim was not to work within project-based temporality but rather within a temporality that allows things to happen, without having everything planned in advance. One needs to listen to what is happening and to see where it leads. For us, this has meant becoming a kind of membrane of the institution, attuned to different temporalities, at times more urgent, at times slower.

I had the pleasure of attending your lecture organized by Citadellarte. I was particularly inspired by the Reina Sofía Museum's public program, especially by the way this project created a learning space for for the residents of the Lavapiés neighbourhood. It responded directly to their needs and listened to their concerns. For example, you offered Spanish lessons for migrants, and even introduced courses on how to manage artworks, drawing participants more deeply into the structures of the museum. Could you tell me more about your approach?

By having contact with others we could be more specific. One example is Museo Situado,⁹ an assembly we hold with 28 collectives from the neighbourhood of Lavapiés, where the museum is located. Museo Situado meets once a month and serves as a space of governance and decisionmaking. Together, we have carried out many different projects with various collectives, and at times with all of them, such as the Picnic del Barrio, the annual festival we organize collectively. There are also different lines of collaboration with specific groups. Each collective brings its proposals for projects or actions to the assembly, and the assembly decides whether or not to implement them.

This process ensures that decisions are not taken by the institution alone but emerge by attentively listening to where people in the neighbourhood are struggling and what they need. Our role is to build a bridge between the curatorial and artistic work

9 <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/museo-tentacular/museo-situado>

of the museum and people and communities who are not the typical audience of an art institution.

These include LGBTQIA+ collectives, undocumented migrants, migrant domestic workers, local feminist collectives, families, and children. What unites them is the shared aim of transforming their neighbourhood and fighting for their rights, while also navigating institutional boundaries, not only those of the museum, but of institutions in general. In this context, one learns continuously from many different people and perspectives, and it becomes necessary to reconfigure one's own position constantly. This is crucial, because through these encounters you change, you mutate, and you come to see beyond the perspective of the museum.

One example is Voces Situadas, which is not only a line of programming but also an assembly and gathering created to engage with issues we consider urgent to learn about. For instance, we organized a debate on the new European Pact on Migration and Asylum recently signed by the European Parliament which is already having severe consequences for the lives of many migrants arriving in Europe or already living here.

We also debated the law concerning trans identity and trans rights before the Trans Law was passed in Spain in 2023. Participants themselves propose areas where more knowledge is needed. We invite participants who are not experts or academics, but who are dealing with these issues in their own lives. They bring situated knowledge: for example, they may have residency papers and can speak about their situation; they may be struggling at the border of Melilla and Ceuta in southern Spain; or they may be trans activists who know how their lives will be affected by the new law. They are involved in practice, and it is through that practice that they possess knowledge. This is a neverending process. People are always eager to learn and to share knowledge.

I also would like to bring the Schools of Museo Situado¹⁰ into the conversation, concerning the challenge of rethinking the school as a structure. What we are doing is reversing the way school as an institution has been traditionally based upon a hierarchical system of power. I am not suggesting that we are inventing anything new, but for us engaging with the idea of school has been very enriching and productive. Importantly, this initiative did not originate in the museum but in the collectives themselves.

Back in 2020, Red Interlavapiés, one of the autonomous collectives in the neighbourhood, was already organizing a school of Spanish for migrants, specifically for undocumented migrants in what is called an "irregular administrative situation". Being considered illegal, they cannot access the public services that provide Spanish language courses for foreigners. Without language you cannot exercise any rights; you are completely lost and abandoned. During the pandemic the organisation asked us if they could use the museum's rooms to continue their work, since the neighbourhood spaces used by the collectives were all very small.

After that, we also started hosting another initiative called the School of Rights, dedicated to questions of access to rights (political, sanitary, reproductive, housing, etc.) for migrant people. Both schools are coordinated by and draw their knowledge from

10 The Schools of Museo Situado comprise a space of horizontal and collaborative learning that arises from the need to share different forms of knowledge and art-making between communities in Madrid's Lavapiés neighbourhood. Therefore, the Museo Reina Sofía and different collectives that make up the Museo Situado network work together to create new forms of learning which yield useful, critical and affective knowledge for community life. This has led to the creation of: the School of Rights and the Spanish School for migrants, conceived by Red Interlavapiés; the School of Situated Mediation, driven by Museo Situado and the Museo's Education Area in collaboration with Hanan Dalouh Amghar; and the Course on Handling, Packing, Transporting and Installing Cultural Heritage Artefacts, coordinated by Red Interlavapiés in collaboration the Museo's Conservation-Restoration and Artwork Registration Departments.

Red Interlavapiés and different activists who collaborate with them. Later we (the Museo Tentacular team) proposed the School of Situated Mediation, which trains people with migratory life trajectories to become mediators of the exhibitions and the museum collection for their own communities, in their own languages, while also introducing their experiences and perspectives on art into the mediation process. More recently we established a school dedicated to the transportation and handling of works of art.

The experiences people share in these collective spaces are often devastating because of the violence migrants have suffered on their way to Spain, but their stories are also full of life, resilience, empathy, and hope. This has been an immense source of learning not only for the participants but for the museum itself. And it has resulted in a powerful change in the subjectivity of the team involved. It has changed us. What I mean is that these schools have allowed us to connect with many people who would not otherwise have come to the museum. Our effort has been to think about how to connect with them through exhibitions, the collection, and the work of artists, and how to place that work at the service of their schools as a tool. Now, five years down the road, the schools have become very large and convene several times a week. The way knowledge is shared within them corresponds closely to the idea of “study” proposed by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney. Study is not what happens in academia or the university classroom. Study is what happens when we come together, sit, think, share, and talk. And this is precisely what happens in these schools.

During your lecture, you mentioned being very attentive to the economies of the people who participate in the school – they are paid for their involvement. Could you explain how this approach works?

This is how it's handled at the School of Situated Mediation, but not the School of Spanish or the School of Rights. It is important

not to impose institutional ways of working on autonomous collectives. They work as activist structures. The School of Spanish, for instance, has sixty students in three different classes that take place at the same time, Monday and Wednesday from 6 to 8 p.m. in the museum, and there is another class in a community centre nearby. So there are four groups that meet twice a week. The people who go to the School of Spanish are more regular participants, but they are newcomers. The School of Spanish is a stepping stone to other opportunities.

The School of Rights is bigger, but it only meets once a month, and the people there do not need to commit in the same way. Many of them live in precarious conditions, having been rendered vulnerable by the system. The School of Situated Mediation is a next step that we propose as the museum. It was organized in collaboration with the anti-racist migrant activist Hanan Dalou Amghar, who brings knowledge of the political struggles of migrant voices into the conversation, while we bring knowledge of mediation and art, assisted by the museum's Department of Education. The participants also contribute their own knowledge in this exchange. There is a selection process, the participants commit to attend and to begin mediating exhibitions and visits for audiences.

We decided to pay remuneration for each session they attend as students. It is a different format, one that requires more commitment. If, for example, you need to stop your Spanish lessons because you get a job, you can come back the following year. But in this case participants are offering their time, so we must compensate them. Afterwards, when you become a mediator, you are also paid for every mediation you do at the museum.

Do you have a definition of collective knowledge based on your experiences and your practice, and how do you see collective learning practices in the future?

I was thinking about the importance of working with people from outside the art world. To put it in terms that the art world

might recognize, I would point to Documenta 15. Documenta 15 exemplified what art is for me, or what I think art should be. When you arrived at Documenta 15 it was chaotic, you saw empty spaces that had previously been full of people, and you saw traces of what had happened. Many people were angry, saying it was like arriving at a party after it had ended.

It is not about creating narratives or artworks with our super-brilliant intellectual minds and then disseminating them, but about inhabiting the spaces in which these things happen, together. Of course, knowledge and artworks play a role in those spaces. But to me, the art world right now should be more about the space we can inhabit with creation, cooperation, and imagination, rather than a space where all this is only organized and presented.

In a way, art has too often dealt with things as topics instead of struggles or practices to be developed with others. I think that any present-day institution that is not addressing migration, housing, feminism, or anti-fascism is not fulfilling its purpose. We need every space we have to create critical thought and artistic work. If we are only presenting these topics on walls, instead of making the museum a place where they are discussed, we are missing something. And we need to move beyond the idea of experts on a public panel organized by a public programming department. That is one approach, but there are many other possible approaches and many voices and ideas to be heard, not only those that the system authorises to sit on a panel. I believe this is something that should be practised more in the future.

How can museums make this happen? Not immediately, but by creating opportunities for collective knowledge to emerge, to be shared, and to be acknowledged. Finally, there is something special about institutions in their capacity to legitimise knowledge. Over the years, through the many learning processes we have undertaken with different people, we have accumulated a great deal of experience and knowledge. We are very fortunate

and privileged to have had these experiences. Yet when I think, for example, of writing a doctoral thesis myself, I feel tension between the knowledge I hold and the way academia expects knowledge to be objective. This idea of objectivity is no longer valuable or useful; it has already been challenged. Still, many researchers want to come to Museo Tentacular and interview the collectives we have worked with for years, as if they were objects of research. This will never end as long as academia demands this way of validating knowledge through supposedly objective interviews. Yet these people are not paid for their time, nor are their causes supported. In this manner, academia imposes rigid rules that delegitimise other ways of knowing.

So we created a new role: the participatory research resident. We propose that those who want to get to know these practices should not come to research us, but become one of us for a time. They should stay for a period of three to four months, be present, support the processes, join the workshops, prepare materials, and offer their time and labour to the collectives they want to come in contact with. This is a way to really get to know people, and knowledge then takes on a different form. It passes through your body, through your senses. You become part of the community



Moroccan concert at the Picnic del Barrio, Museo Situado, Madrid, 2022.
Photo: Román Lorés.

instead of researching the community. This also runs counter to the extractivism of academia, which never seems to end. We need new ways of redistributing the privileges of academia more widely. We urgently need to propose what we want for the institutions of the future.

Collectives enter the museum during the Picnic del barrio, Museo situado, Madrid, 2023. Photo: Javier Baeza.



SPACESHIP, FIRE AND BEAVER

EWA CIEPIELEWSKA

Painter, performer, activist, altruist, and nature lover. She was born in 1960 in Wałbrzych and graduated in painting from the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław, where she studied under Prof. Konrad Jarodzki. In 1982, she co-founded the group *Luxus*, one of the most important Polish art collectives of the 1980s, with which she continues to collaborate to this day. In 1997, she founded the *Volans* Association, supporting young artists.

For the past 15 years, she has spent a large part of each year on the Vistula river, sailing a traditional wooden boat called *Solny*, and since 2024, a new boat named *Flow*. As a result of this engagement, in 2015 she initiated the project *Flow/Przepływ*, which aims to use artistic methods and tools to help preserve the river in its natural state. This cyclical, non-institutional project of mobile boat residencies brings together artists, musicians, performers, curators, and other activists. The outcomes of these journeys have been presented in exhibitions at Galeria Arsenał in Białystok (2025), Vleeshal in Middelburg (2024), Quinta Alegre in Lisbon (*Liquid Becomings*, 2024), Galeria EL in Elbląg (2024), Hamburger Bahnhof (2018) and Alter Hafen (2017) in Berlin, Gdańsk City Gallery (2016, 2018), Austrian Cultural Forum (2019), and Pamoja Razem Foundation in Kraków (2017, 2018).

Ciepielewska has also exhibited her works in solo and group shows at institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, Strykejernet in Oslo, and John Hansard Gallery in Southampton.

Her works are part of both private and public collections, including the Jerke Museum in Recklinghausen, GMU (Gallery of Modern Art) in Hradec Králové, Wrocław Contemporary Museum, and the National Museums in Warsaw, Wrocław, and Kraków.

Beyond painting, she is interested in social and communal artistic situations, as well as in exploring non-institutional forms of togetherness in response to social and ecological crises. She combines a conscious artistic practice with a clear political stance, expressed through vegetarianism, pro-ecological activism, and support for freedom-oriented initiatives. In 2020, she was awarded the title Knight of the Vistula River Order by the river community “for her significant contribution to promoting the idea of a wild Vistula”. She is also the recipient of the Katarzyna Kobro Award (2019) and the Allegro Prize (2021). She is a member of the Save the Rivers Coalition (Koalicja Ratujmy Rzeki).



Open-air workshop in the riparian forest, Kraków, 2025. Photo: Ewa Ciepielewska.

SPACESHIP, FIRE AND BEAVER

A CONVERSATION WITH EWA CIEPIELEWSKA

For the past few years, you and Agnieszka Brzeżańska have been organising the residency FLOW/PRZEPŁYW in the form of a cruise on the Vistula. You are often involved in activities that deploy art as a tool of activism and eco-resistance. You have been part of the LUXUS collective, one of the most prominent formations in Poland, since the 1980s. I have to say that I'm a great fan of your highly sensitive painting style.

What forms of collective learning have you encountered on your artistic journey?

I don't have any theoretical background in collective practices. The only preparation I have comes out of LUXUS. For me, that was my first collective practice. I have always enjoyed collaborating and doing things with others. Because the other person always brings something to the table. They become a driving force, a mirror, someone to bounce things off of, a partner to dialogue with. Of course you can talk to yourself, but that's totally different.

If you want to do something with someone, you have to attune to the other person, adjust. Often one of you cheers the other on. Sometimes you might have a vision and someone says, "No, that's no good, that's not going to work". Then, if you care, you make your case, you try to see it from their perspective, identify what it is they don't like and why they're so opposed. The idea is to look through somebody else's eyes, to stop being self-focused, and to allow in other currents. It's very therapeutic.

**How did you as a group learn from different phenomena?
What was it like for you to learn new things?**

First of all, with regard to LUXUS, there was a specific moment when we came together as a community, we formed something in response to the events around us – martial law had been declared in Poland. It was at that point that we decided to start publishing *Magazyn Psychoaktywny Grupy LUXUS* (LUXUS Group Psychoactive Magazine) which was supposed to broadcast our independence and sense of community despite the oppressive political situation. We somehow couldn't identify with any of the political opposition groups or the official communist worldview. We had our own opinions, a different perspective. We wanted our reaction to be funny, in the practical-joke kind of way; cheerful, and sarcastic rather than heroic, full of pathos, or religious.

Can psychoactivity be a collective learning strategy?

I think that collective action can be psychoactive in and of itself, even if you're not using any substances. In deep altered states, like after taking mushrooms, LSD or even smoking marijuana, acts of transcending everyday perception together lead to greater closeness and connection. It's the same in other situations: when you take part in an activity, or you weather a storm in the mountains together, or you go through a difficult experience. It brings people together, one naturally seeks proximity and support. A need for mutuality, mutual attraction, emerges.

Psychoactivity means clearly felt emotional states or states of consciousness that enrich our relationship with the world, and vice versa. Strong feelings like fear or joy often show up. I think that emotions play a huge role in this strategy. And it's not even about experiencing something extraordinary. For example, we're in a boat together, we're in a flow state, and then a storm hits, or heavy rain. We need to hide, everyone's looking for their tent, we put them up, we're running around and helping each other.

Someone's anxious. These are very high-intensity moments. Then everything calms down, and boom – catharsis comes. This moment of tension followed by release creates very strong bonds. You're left with the memory of the situation, the people, and everything that happened. This shared memory takes your relationship to a whole new level in the future.

In the context of FLOW/PRZEPLÝW, how do you collectively learn new skills or new ways of being together?

For example by making a campfire. Some people know how to do it and get to it right away. A division of labour emerges naturally. But the person who knows how to make a fire isn't always around. Sometimes somebody else has to do it. Recently, we didn't have a gas stove, so in order to make coffee someone needed to get up early and make a fire. I always get up first, so I did it. I love doing it.

Doing things together also brings us closer and makes relationships harmonious because someone's doing one thing, someone else another, and both people feel good about it. For example, during our last outdoor painting excursion to a riparian forest in



Przegorzały in Krakow, everyone lay down on blankets and I read out the names of all the bird species that live there. There are over one hundred. It's a small area, one of the last riparian forest refugia in Krakow. It's going to take a fight to keep it safe from real estate developers. There is a wealth of birds, a true bird kingdom there. Then we also talked about the plants that

grow there. There are many native species, but also quite a few invasive ones. And as we were leaving, someone pointed out that our group of twenty had initially seemed big – so many people walking. But by the time we were leaving, the feel of the group

was different, as if it had tightened and become more compact. Someone else said, “We're leaving the forest as different people”. Something had changed. We didn't talk much, we watched birds and plants, people did different things or did nothing, but what mattered most was that we experienced the place and one another together. It was no longer unfamiliar and irrelevant. We grew closer together.

I wanted to give these people some knowledge so they would remember at least some of the bird names, like “fieldfare”, “grebe”, or “swan”. The participants later told me that it got them interested in preservation and touched them deeply.

Even if people don't remember all the names, just realising the sheer number of species is a new type of awareness. And what you've said about the activity also relates to scale. You entered as a large group, and left as a smaller one, and maybe part of that space had been filled by birds.

A certain type of metamorphosis occurred, a transformation that you couldn't pin down at first. But then wonderful new artworks came out of it, as we ambitiously got working with watercolours, battling the wind and the cold, and light rain here and there. Everyone was fully engaged.

Nature and the natural world certainly played a major role in this activity. How can one identify collective learning strategies within this broad area of experiencing nature? Of course we learn biology in school, but that hardly compares to learning *in nature*, alongside others, as in your visit to the riparian forest.

Because that's what matters – that you're experiencing the environment together, this immersion in nature, that we're there together and we know, feel, and see, and it all relates to us directly. It's not theory. In my practice, I always start by going somewhere, looking around, watching, looking at plants. And then after, I pick up a book and go, “Oh, that's what it's called, okay”.

So contact comes first, followed by descriptions and theory. The same thing holds for people, the other companions on this journey. It's like travelling in a spaceship because anything can happen if you're going somewhere you've never been before and you have no preconceptions. It's also important to be willing to watch and to participate.

Often, the presence of others itself is significant as well as the fact that someone else is also interested in the same phenomenon, they're looking at it with you and you're experiencing the plant, the animal or the situation together. You can see a beaver together. We're on the boat and all of a sudden a frightened beaver tumbles down the embankment and falls into the river. It was insane. All of us, all eight of us who were there, will always have this etched in our collective memories. You can't unsee it. We all have that experience, the whole crew.

During the workshop Ogród Balsamiczny III. Połączenia (Balsamic Garden III: Connections)¹ conducted by Kuba Falk, Kamil Cebula, Eunji Lee, and myself, at the end we prepared a performance involving older women at the river delta where the Czarna Przemsza joins with the Biała Przemsza. It's a historic site known as the Three Emperors' Corner, where the three parts of partitioned Poland touched. The senior women came up with all the elements of the performance themselves. There were several components: making mandalas out of plants, cookies and watermelon, passing watermelon in a circle, reading an apology to the river. We had prepared little baskets out of Korean paper that Eunji had shown us, to put the mandala materials in. My grandmother made a large boat on a support which we filled with different elements from the mandalas. We then decided that we would symbolically float this boat on the river. Looking together at how the boat first floated near the shore and then, all of a sudden, out to the middle of the delta, where there were whirlpools, was incredible. We all looked

1 The project *Ogród Balsamiczny III. Połączenia. Warsztaty dla senierek i seniorów z Mysłowic i Tychów* (Balsamic Garden III: Connections. Workshops for Seniors from Mysłowice and Tychy) carried out by Fundacja Otwarta Przestrzeń Mysłowice within the framework of the GZM Metropolis programme Spójnik.

on with excitement – will it get past the whirlpools? This continued for about 15 minutes, until the boat disappeared beyond the horizon. It was an extraordinary experience of watching together, and for me it was a totally psychoactive state. I don't have the words to describe it, just that we stood there together looking at the boat.

These are subtle processes. They don't need to be spectacular, they're not fireworks. They are quiet, but they do happen. What matters is that there is no thinking about specific outcomes; no one has a prior assumption that they will gain or achieve something.

Although one does gain something.

Of course one gains something, but that's not the goal. The goal is to experience the process. It's a sort of transcendence – allowing yourself to open up. And that's the therapeutic aspect because at some point we stop being self-conscious and curating our behaviour. In everyday life we often feel we don't want to lay all of our cards on the table. But when there's shared enchantment, people simply act spontaneously and openly manifest their emotions.

I read in one of your statements that swimming and the Vistula cruise can also be an erotic and love experience. This connects to being in nature. I wanted to ask you, how can it become a strategy of collective learning?

When I travelled down the Vistula for the first time, I finished at Gdańsk, and one of my colleagues said, "You're interested in the Vistula? Here, have this book". The book he gave me was *Geologia Wisły* (The Geology of the Vistula). I had never been interested in geology to the point of actually reading an academic book about it. But this was love at first sight. And when it's love, you want to know everything there is to know about your beloved. So I learned about all the types soils and embankments. I don't remember it all, but the book read like a poem to me.

It's also that when we go in the water together, often we're naked, and it's not erotic at all. If someone doesn't want to get undressed, they don't have to. I go into the water naked to unite with it. And not just the water, but also the wind and the sun. I feel so connected in those moments. You feel that you *are* the river. The fact that we are bodies of water² is not some crazy idea at all, it's our physical nature. We are made of water, built by water, it's the prime matter of our existence. That's why in those moments I feel relaxed and laid back, like in an amorous embrace.

Of course different processes occur. There might be conflict or disappointment that someone did or didn't do something. It happens. But when everything is so extraordinary – because being immersed in nature is extraordinary – the disappointment, egotism or sense of hurt are dispelled at once. You think, “God, I'm being so petty again, I need to get a hold of myself!”

Although it's true that during the Vistula cruises we don't talk about it much. The conversations are more practical, or we weave stories. That's also a collective learning method, because when we're sitting by the fire and coming up with a story together, that's a collective learning process. It happens through play, through spending time together. A lot of different stories come out of this process, and it all happens effortlessly, although there is some effort involved, since we need to provide a measure of comfort in difficult conditions. Sometimes the weather isn't great, you might be annoyed that your tent is leaking. These inconveniences are also an exercise in foresight, looking after yourself. They play a big role because they help us get to know each other. You discover who's willing to help you, offer an extra blanket, for instance. This is what it means to bring relief to someone who's in trouble so they can enjoy themselves and be just as happy as you. It's also a kind of test.

2 A reference to A. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, London 2017.

And can shared happiness be a collective learning strategy?

I think it's probably the best strategy. When you're surrounded by happy people everything seems easier and the world is beautiful! If we allow ourselves and others to be happy, everyone opens up to the world. We are part of this world, and from it we draw strength and knowledge. Knowledge doesn't sit in our heads, it's all around us.

I'm not just talking about learning in the sense of acquiring knowledge, but about learning to be together, living together on this planet. If you love something, then you'll do anything to protect it. You'll be very distressed if it's getting hurt, disappearing, being depleted.

Do you have a definition of collective knowledge, your own working definition, or one that comes out of our conversation just now?

I think that collective knowledge comes from going through things together, experiencing something; it's a process with its own dynamics, unfolding and getting deeper over time. Also, such knowledge has been part of us since prehistoric times, it's in our DNA. It binds us into an inter-species network of interdependencies, and equips us with relevant knowledge. But you need a key to unlock it – meditation, psychoanalysis, conscious dreaming, psychoactive substances, all kinds of methods.

My final question is – what shape should this task take in the future, what sort of strategies should we develop, or how should they evolve?

I used to always think that it would be great to take small groups of schoolchildren on short trips down the Vistula for a couple of days. It would absolutely change how they approach nature and see their place in it. Just as they go on compulsory trips to Krakow, Warsaw or Auschwitz, they should have mandatory boating trips as part of their curriculum, so they can experience it. Technically,

scouting does this, but not everyone belongs to scouting or a similar organisation. But something that's part of the school curriculum would provide a framework for learning about what a river is, what land is, and who we are.

It would also be a form of community-building, socialisation, practical training. The fact that you might get wet, you might get cold, and it's not going to kill you, you can warm up by a fire and nothing bad will happen – on the contrary, you'll build resilience.

I also think that an experience in those conditions would be the best thing that could possibly be given to people from juvenile correction facilities or prison inmates. The same for persons with addictions.

Students from our studio Sztuka w działaniu (Art in Action) did a project consisting of doing workshops with inmates devoted to working with plants. We noticed that plants are completely banned in penitentiary facilities. The way they justify it is that the inmates could pass information to one another in flower pots or in the soil. That's why the prison yard is all concrete with no living growth. There's concrete inside, concrete outside. Not a single plant in the cells. In the semi-open facility they at least have a small garden. Our students Maja Owczarz, Ania Rumin and Alicja Kozik did something amazing as part of the project *W miejscu wzrastania* (Place of Growth). They brought all kinds of flowers and asked the men to make mandalas out of the petals. The participants also made symbolic drawings and wrote personal stories about trees they identify with.

That sounds like a very neat, a very tender idea. And tenderness is what's missing in those facilities. I feel so sorry for them. This should definitely change. To my knowledge, rehabilitation and social reintegration isn't done properly and in a way that actually works. How is it supposed to work if nobody trusts anyone?

In another project, Kasia Kubak brought fabrics and proposed to the inmates of a semi-open facility in Wojkowice to build a bridge together. The idea emerged during an earlier

meeting with them. I took part in that workshop, and we braided fabrics together to make an incredible suspension bridge. It was really spectacular. And yet when you embark on an activity like this you can come in with a lot of baggage, a lot of stereotypes.

Exactly. My dream is for that to change. So we can reintegrate inmates and others in a way that actually works and isn't a complete failure. Reintegration that's based on trust and the premise that people *do* change. That one isn't a criminal for life. Because if that's the case, why bother at all?

It's also about not having hierarchy. Not thinking, "I'm better and this person lost the game". These are very painful issues and they determine how successful reintegration ultimately is. Because reintegration is about bringing someone back into society, into the community. It's society that's holding the return ticket. Of course it won't happen by itself. There needs to be a systemic base. And of course through work, through these workshops, what you're doing with your students now, there's a chance that it's going to succeed precisely because of the shared experience, doing creative work together.

CLOUDS

Workshops carried out as part of the project *Art-therapeutic Work Inspired by the Phenomenon of Bioluminescence as a Way of Supporting Oncological Patients*, Voivodeship Specialist Hospital in Częstochowa, 2025. Photo: Artur Pławski.

JOLANTA JASTRZĄB

Professor of Fine Arts, affiliated with the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice since the beginning of her career. Coordinator (on behalf of the Academy of Fine Arts) of the interdisciplinary, interuniversity Art Therapy program (a collaboration between the University of Silesia, the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice, and the Academy of Music in Katowice) from 2016 to 2024. Together with Dr Agata Szymanek, she runs the studio *Art in Action / Social Therapy / Drawing as Communication*.

As a visual artist, since 2010 she has been developing art projects within therapeutic contexts, including *Art as a Tool of Social Therapy*, a series of art workshops involving women serving prison sentences at the Correctional Facility in Lubliniec.

Her works have been presented in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Poland and abroad. She is the author of several art projects, including *Zakłète w lodzie* (*Enchanted in Ice*), *Szuflady* (*Drawers*), *Zapach dzikiej róży* (*The Scent of a Wild Rose*), *Osiem* (*Eight*), *Skatepark*, *Crazy Julka*, *Kalendarz kobiety* (*Women's Calendar*), *T-shirt*, *Qurilla*, *Obserwator/ka* (*Observer/I*), *Burnout*, *Chodźmy pojeździć rowerem po księżycu* (*Let's Ride a Bike on the Moon*), *MAMaZy*, *LOVE*, *Gra* (*The Game*), *Wolne dni* (*Days Off*), *Pinezki i kreski* (*Pins and Lines*), *DOMS*, and *Ściana* (*The Wall*).



CLOUDS

A CONVERSATION WITH JOLANTA JASTRZĄB

Combining artistic practice with social engagement, you carry out art therapy projects, work with diverse groups, and create art that is attentive to people's needs. Together we run the Sztuka w działaniu (Art in Action) studio at the Katowice Academy of Fine Arts and try to support socially-minded and participatory projects.

Recently, together with Katarzyna Krasoń and Magdalena Hyla, you published your research in *W podróży. W poszukiwaniu codzienności artfikowanej* (On the journey. In search of an artfied everyday life),¹ which might serve as an interesting point of departure for our conversation. In the book you lay out an original art therapy method grounded in the notion of artification. What is artification?

Artification is a moment or process whereby something that isn't normally perceived as art can become a focus of artistic observation and can then be appropriated or transformed through ways of thinking that are typical of artistic practices. It's a more nuanced way of working with our emotions and with how we perceive reality.

A few years ago the Katowice Academy of Fine Arts talked me into applying for a grant to design a social innovation for seniors. I developed a working method that wasn't based solely on artistic production. I proposed doing workshops at Hospicjum Cordis in Katowice and Hospicjum Dar Serca in Częstochowa. I wanted to do something to empower seniors not just by making a "pretty" artwork, but by finding a way of relating to the everyday through observation, mindfulness, and self-awareness.

¹ K., Krasoń, M., Hyla, J., Jastrząb, *W podróży. W poszukiwaniu codzienności artfikowanej*, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Katowicach, Katowice, 2025.

Artification comprises situations and processes which, though not initially a creative endeavour, do become such an endeavour by intentionally drawing on artistic ways of thinking and acting. Artification needs art as a store of ideas and activities; as a result, different areas of everyday life acquire artistic connotations. This allows us to identify "hidden artworks" in the fabric of our daily lives. It's a way of looking at our mundane surroundings through the lens of beauty and uniqueness. This means that anyone can perceive and create their own reality, becoming a sensitive creator.

This idea became the springboard for my subsequent pursuits. Ellen Dissanayake, who studies artification, argues that it makes an artistic approach to everyday life accessible to anyone and that the ability to perceive things artistically is part of our inborn apparatus. It is natural to us. That every single person is a creative being and that we can creatively interpret reality around us. The notion of artification, so an active process that we are in at all times, and in which we creatively develop our reality, became the backdrop of my work with a group of seniors – primarily oncological patients – who have motor problems and difficulties working with their bodies. They are not able to do certain things, but they can think creatively and tell stories, essentially empowering themselves to create using the reality around them as their material.

To me this is an extraordinary prospect. Because even sitting here right now, I can see things all around me that could be the start of a creative process. And it was that sort of attentiveness that I tried to teach the participants. I invited educator Katarzyna Krasoń and psychologist Magdalena Hyla to work with me. Once the project got a green light we began thinking of using artification as our method.

How does artification affect the collective learning process?

Artification has a huge impact on forming interpersonal connections. We work in small groups of usually no more than 10

people. Before we start, it is important to give an overview of what artification is and to explain the role participants will play as creators. Also to reassure people that everyone has the right to think artistically and that it's part of our genetic and evolutionary endowment.

It's important to get people involved in discussing and sharing about their reception of artworks, such as those shown to them during the preliminary presentation to inspire them. We make reference to participants' personal impressions and ideas because all ideas and observations are valuable in this process. No thought or association is wrong, there is no value judgment (no activity, artwork, idea or execution is seen as pretty or ugly, right or wrong). Instead of evaluating, we allow participants to focus on what they are feeling; we want them to open up and freely articulate their fantasies, associations, and thoughts within a safe and non-judgmental environment. During this process, we provide space for group members to introduce themselves, state their expectations or views, and we draw up a group contract. Every artification activity should conclude with a wrap-up session to give participants a sense of closure and achievement.

It is equally important and interesting to invite participants to engage in a process of observation that's grounded in the here and now – a precise moment in time and space – taking note of the objects around them, the colours appearing, the light. In *W podróży*, we invited people to experiment with their immediate reality, including light and shadow, spatial composition, or scents.

I think that this exploratory, methodological stage is very important for understanding artification and getting a good grasp of it. Our aim as a research team was to prepare a handbook² and an instruction video for therapists who might want to use our

2 J., Jastrzęb, *Artyfikacja jako strategia aktywizacji twórczej seniorów*, Dobre Innowacje programme, e-book, 2022. Accessed: 27 July 2025. http://www.jolajastrzab.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Innowacyjna-w-skali-kraju-metoda-aktywizacji-tworczej-seniorow-w-oparciu-o-artyfikacje-99_podroze-99cznik-1-3.pdf

method to design their own activities. In the handbook we talk about the group work context.

In the book *W podróży* you focus on case studies and discuss elements that might lead to transformational change for the individual. How does this process work in the group context?

When it comes to group work, I think that artification as a method is a great way of establishing connection within the group. Group work was very important to us. We worked with individuals, so with each person individually, and this mattered to us. But the whole process was embedded in group work, in the relationships that emerged and were informed by the personalities of those who were part of the group.

Within the framework of our collaboration with Hospicjum Cordis in Katowice we proposed a series of workshops involving the observation of nature in a nearby park. We launched the workshops on 21 March – a symbolic date, first day of spring. Together, we listened for the sounds of birdsong, we looked at the first plants sprouting in the garden, we became aware of what was happening around us. It was incredible. The participants talked about how they experienced themselves in nature – this was an individual activity, but at the same time it sprang from the group multivoice. So the individual perspective was related directly to the collective experience. That's a very important aspect.

The research we relate in *W podróży* is based on case studies, but that doesn't mean that we focused solely on individuals. Throughout the process, our attention was focused on every person and we continuously observed the relationships and interactions between participants. Here, through collective work, work in relationship, we have the opportunity to examine certain behaviours. And this is very precious for an educator or a therapist because it provides insights into how a given person functions.

For me, certain observations, in particular during the first project – *Z sobą i o sobie. W poszukiwaniu strategii diagnozy i weryfikacji*



w działaniu arteterapeutycznym przez sztuki wizualne (With oneself and about oneself: In search of strategies for diagnosis and verification in art therapy through visual arts) – which Katarzyna Krasoń and I did at the Clinical Psychiatric Hospital in Rybnik, were truly eye-opening. The most common diagnosis among those participating in our sessions was schizophrenia. Many of these people were not verbal. They were withdrawn, but wanted to be part of a group, and they cooperated. I was astounded that even when these individuals were engrossed in their personal rituals or suffered from the effects of their disease, group work still proved fundamental to them. They wanted to be part of the team. Working with artification and designing activities in this vein improved relationships, a fact that was clear to see. Engaging in creativity helped some people improve their communication and relational skills. And to me the fact that such changes can be brought about by art, by creating together, is just phenomenal.

How do you understand collective learning in this context?

As sharing experiences and as a sort of discussion. For me, after all these years of observation, it's absolutely extraordinary how art moves us to seek solutions based on observations that go beyond a simple “yes” or “no”. These are not evaluative observations; they can't be reduced to categories like “good” or “bad”. Even in our current activities as part of the project *Praca arteterapeutyczna inspirowana zjawiskiem bioluminescencji jako sposób wsparcia pacjenta onkologicznego* (Art-therapeutic Work Inspired by the Phenomenon of Bioluminescence as a Way of Supporting Oncological Patients)³ we refrain from any value judgments. Thanks to this the patients, who come from very different life experiences, begin to share their stories. That's why I'm really fighting to bring art into these places. I see that it really does have a very liberating and helpful effect.

Do you see this chestnut? There was a gentleman in the project we did at the Clinical Psychiatric Hospital in Rybnik who didn't say a word to me during the ten meetings we had there. He did not communicate verbally. But during one of the final workshops, when we went out for a walk in the park and talked about making a map he approached me and simply handed me this chestnut. He opened my hand and put it there. That's it. That was his way of communicating that he was with us. It was incredible. That's why this chestnut has become a symbol for me. I've made a painting about it.

In *W podróży*, we wanted to highlight the personal perspective – our perspective, having conducted workshops at various institutions. We're often asked about how we deal with these situations. And we are in them all the time. We carry these experiences over into our lives and our practice. When studying artification, we particularly value creating and collecting researcher narratives, telling stories about doing, experiencing and living the artification process. That's why we naturally went for phenomenography – a research method that relies on our observations and personal experience as researchers rather than pretending to be objective.

In *W podróży*, we wanted to highlight the personal perspective – our perspective, having conducted workshops at various institutions. We're often asked about how we deal with these situations. And we are in them all the time. We carry these experiences over into our lives and our practice. When studying artification, we particularly value creating and collecting researcher narratives, telling stories about doing, experiencing and living the artification process. That's why we naturally went for phenomenography – a research method that relies on our observations and personal experience as researchers rather than pretending to be objective.

- 3 The project *Praca arteterapeutyczna inspirowana zjawiskiem bioluminescencji jako sposób wsparcia pacjenta onkologicznego* (Art-therapeutic Work Inspired by the Phenomenon of Bioluminescence as a Way of Supporting Oncological Patients) carried out by the research team: Jolanta Jastrzęb, Edyta Nieduziak, Artur Pławski, Agata Szymanek, in collaboration with Górnośląska Fundacja Onkologiczna (Upper Silesian Oncology Foundation) and Wojewódzki Szpital Specjalistyczny (Voivodeship Specialist Hospital) in Częstochowa.



We used poetry, images, and metaphors. We all contributed our own artifications related to the case studies. In this approach, the findings themselves became art forms. Magdalena Hyla found lyrical material in the statements of the participants she studied and wrote her own poetry. I made my point by painting portraits of participants. Katarzyna Krason interpreted her experience using metaphors to create a review of an artification event. This also highlights the collective action dimension. Because for me collective action also includes collective research work.

Did any other collective learning strategies emerge during your activities and workshops?

Each topic that I propose is meant to spark group discussion. This exchange of thoughts, reflections, and experiences is what matters most to me. During the research project *Z sobą i o sobie* (With and About Oneself) we looked for evaluation, diagnostic, and verification methods in visual-arts-based art therapy. Each of the workshops, starting with creating a self-portrait, through building a sort of *self interior*, ended with a joint discussion. This is very important to me – this moment of shared reflection, sharing what happened in the here and now by speaking your thoughts, feelings, and conclusions out loud.

Meanwhile in the project undertaken within the framework of *wŁĄCZNIK* at the BWA gallery in Katowice, to which I was invited by Aneta Zasucha, we used clouds as a metaphor for individuality. Clouds provided a pretext to look for one's own portrait in their shapes.

The art of Urszula Broll, which centres on man's relationship to nature and the metaphysical realm, provided the inspiration for these workshops. Broll's artworks taught me not only to appreciate

the visual aspect of clouds, but also to use them therapeutically. The structure and shape of clouds and the way they cover the sky overlaps with how we

tend to talk about the way we feel and perceive the world. Looking at the sky, which continually affords a new cloud image, quiets our minds and helps us build mindfulness.

The workshop was attended by adults with intellectual disabilities from the W Pełni Sił (Fully Able) Association for Persons with Disabilities who were accompanied by their assistants and young people from the M. Konopnicka High School in Katowice. The high school students not only took part in the activities but also supported me at every stage of the process. The meeting began with a presentation of art by Urszula Broll, especially her watercolour landscapes. This would serve as a reference point. Importantly, we talked about the paintings in quite a bit of depth. We also identified metaphors describing the artist's life and work in her landscapes.

I planned for us to begin the workshop with a short walk to observe and draw clouds. But the weather wasn't great for going outside, so we decided to start working on the balcony. The sky was completely overcast that day, there were no distinct clouds, but we gradually began to imagine ourselves as *heads in the clouds*.

I had made the preliminary assumption that we would be looking at clouds. We were going to describe their appearance, shapes, the distances between them, trying to decide if they are downy and delicate, like milky balls of silky yarn or wrinkles, or maybe dense cumuli shaped like hills or copulas, and consider how they are lit by the sun. Paradoxically, the lack of discrete clouds made the participants think metaphorically and symbolically, and so already at this early stage they began to artify.

The next stage involved looking for one's own cloud, based on the sketches people had done on the balcony. We put a long sheet of paper on the floor inside the gallery, and this became our shared sky. The participants drew their own clouds and created shared cloud-objects. At some point, they began to draw the contours of the shadows they were casting on the paper, and these were incorporated into the drawing.



Everybody really liked this new sky. This laid the foundation for constructing a shared space and helped the participants experience a different dimension of creative work. By looking at our clouds, we could talk about relationships and the modern world. A single cloud could represent an individual, an overcast sky the entire society. Questions were asked about whether co-creating and collaboration are the essence of being in the world and whether the point is to produce value for everyone or to lead a separate life. Is it more important to strive for the common good or the individual good?

On the other hand, in *W podróży*, you describe an activity in which you asked the participants to collect shells in a mindful way. This way of working with an object, where each person could touch a shell and share her impressions, is all about exploring simple sensory gestures. Could you tell me more about it?

This was a task during the workshops held at EMAG Institute. Katarzyna Krasoń proposed sensory activities based on relaxation and the participants imagining they were on a beach. She brought some shawls and shells, among other things. Starting with some relaxation and breath work, followed by working in pairs, the participants proceeded to explore shells using sight and touch. The tactile, sensory aspect was crucial here. By touching the shells, participants could metaphorically access the experience of being at the seaside.

We employed sensory elements in other projects, too, for instance moulding clay or touching plants. At Hospicjum Cordis, the seniors planted plants of their own choosing and looked after them. The activity was not merely practical – it was also symbolically and emotionally engaging.

Plants are everywhere we go, even in concrete city spaces. Somewhere at the edges of this paved surface is a blade of grass and other green formations, pushing through the smallest cracks. The life force and the resilience of these delicate sprouts and

stems is astounding. The vitality of plants gives us an almost physical boost when we see them grow, flourish, and bear fruit. It's a miracle. It is no surprise then that working with plants, especially in a garden, does so much to relieve pain and dispel fear. It restores a sense of inner balance and safety, and helps us deal with the chaos and anxiety brought on by illness, disability, and dysfunction.

It's not just mental health that gets a boost. Handling gardening tools and touching soil and plants provides sensory stimulation. Garden therapy, especially in treating diseases of civilisation, is today generally considered an effective auxiliary treatment, mainly thanks to its potential to improve well-being.

Interacting with plants fosters connection and collective learning because we experience them with nearly all our senses, and this multi-sensory experience invites interaction.

What would you call the type or types of knowledge that arise during your workshops? I mean the collective knowledge that emerges among participants. You already mentioned that discussion is at the core, but how would you describe the knowledge that emerges?

It's hard to say exactly what it is. I see it as something that we are continually expanding. We learn from one another, we look at one another. It's extremely capacious. I like the word "total". It's something total, something we gather and connect, something fluid and open. My opinion is that the workshops I design – for very different target groups – all show that it's not a one-way transmission in which someone – a therapist or educator – conveys something; we are talking about a two-way exchange. I would definitely describe this knowledge as a form of exchange, a meeting. I think that what matters most to me is the fact that at some point boundaries get blurred, something becomes shared, open, creative. If I was to give an even more precise definition, I'd say that it's definitely this form of open exchange.

I find the metaphor of knowledge as a greenhouse very fitting – a greenhouse in which different personalities can grow collective knowledge together through discussion.

Your project was based on three voices, it grew out of three completely different perspectives. And this informs the unique space of your publication.

It's extremely important to us that as part of this research team we are also being creative. It's not just something we're ticking off, "we're done, that's it, we can go home now". This need for creative teamwork was already in evidence during the project *Z sobą i o sobie* (With and About Oneself), and it became especially clear during the project *Innowacyjna w skali kraju metoda aktywizacji twórczej seniorów w oparciu o artyfikację* (An Innovative Method for Creatively Activating Seniors Through Artification), where the final result was the outcome of the efforts of many, many people.

Aside from the research team, consisting of Magdalena Hyla and Katarzyna Krason, we had a whole team of artists working with us. Dominik Ritszel made a film, Barbara Wójcik took photographs for documentary purposes, and Anna Kopaczewska designed the handbook. When making the film, Dominik carefully followed the entire process. He had to really understand and get to know it. The same with Barbara Wójcik, who wasn't just a documentary photographer on site, but a team member in her own right. It's important that all these people took part in the process from the very beginning and that we regularly shared our perspectives. Also, before we commenced any research work, the entire team met with the staff, carers and therapists of Hospicjum Cordis.

Speaking of collective action and doing research as a team – this is not a simple undertaking. There was some tension because each of us defended our own approach. Exchange is a very worthwhile thing, but at the same time we grow attached to our compartmentalised view of things. It's not because people need

to dominate, but because we're all convinced that what we bring is invaluable. And sometimes you need to compromise. And there are people who find this very hard. I still have relationships that don't really click, which I am not continuing. This must also be taken into account – that collective action requires a huge amount of openness.

I often wonder how far one should go to defend one's position. At some point when working on *W podróży*, the book, there were tensions within the team. Some people said: "I'm removing my part, I don't share these conclusions".

But aren't we talking about a collective effort? So when you hear "Okay, I'm removing my part", you might ask, "what part is that?" There is no "my part" because we've done it together. It's indivisible. Every element emerged from a shared process. I was able to run the workshops thanks to the knowledge I had gained by working together. And here we come to the question, how much compromise is justified.

Collective work isn't something that we are used to. It's difficult, it requires time, talking, and patience. The results of collective work might lead us into completely new territory, but sometimes it's not worth getting into a joint project if we can be hurt.

I'm at a point in my life when I'm thinking a lot about compromise. It's something that we all grapple with. Maybe it's not always a struggle but more of an attempt to understand relationships.

Compromise also has a lot to do with letting go. I recently came upon this phrase: "cut yourself and others some slack", which I am trying to keep reminding myself of, especially as it's easy for tensions to arise when you're an academic. Can compromise be a collective learning strategy?

Yes, compromise can be a collective learning strategy. However, I'd like to define what I mean by compromise. First and foremost,

it's about understanding and seeing the other party, which – from this standpoint – also leads to learning something new, seeing something in a different light. That requires effort, sometimes it's hard, and it often forces us to step outside of our comfort zone. But it's necessary when formulating new thoughts, new knowledge. It's what I'm learning. It takes a different way of looking at things, which in itself is a new experience and the opening of a new path. For me, however, compromise should never entail a limitation of my freedom or my openness.

What collective learning strategies are worth developing?

The art therapy context, which we are activating across different areas, shows how important it is to broaden existing blueprints and trajectories. We see that knowledge is frequently compartmentalised, categorised; medical knowledge is separated from knowledge about art, and that approach is fast becoming anachronistic. Knowledge has to be complementary. We live in a time when we can no longer compartmentalise it. Knowledge, i.e. the set of information we have, must be gleaned from different sources in order to build and create something new.

Only how do we talk about it? I think that if we really want to change institutions that help people we have to activate different dimensions of knowledge. It shouldn't be that if an artist walks in, he or she has no awareness of other areas, or a psychologist only works within their specific domain.

You know, it was an incredible experience for me when I recently took part in examining Art Therapy master's students.⁴ Just being on a committee comprised of people representing such vastly different fields was an extraordinary experience. A question is asked, and the people from the social sciences steer the

4 Second-cycle Art Therapy Studies are offered by the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice in collaboration with the University of Silesia and the Medical University of Silesia.

conversation in a completely different direction than those from the health sciences. But the mix gives rise to a whole new perspective. And new solutions can be articulated.

To be honest, sometimes it made me laugh to see how different these perspectives were. But I think that now is the time to come up with these solutions. We have to think about how best to use the total knowledge at our disposal. But that requires attentiveness, openness, and not cutting oneself off. I think we have to listen to one another, try to have conversations, be mindful, be attentive to the other person. To develop tolerance for different approaches without categorising and compartmentalising.

Workshops carried out as part of the project Art-therapeutic Work Inspired by the Phenomenon of Bioluminescence as a Way of Supporting Oncological Patients, National Institute of Oncology in Gliwice, 2024. Photo: Artur Plawski.



LEIGH BIDDLECOME

American writer, curator, and interdisciplinary facilitator whose work spans artistic, academic, and social change in Europe. Her writing and translations from French and Italian have been published in Europe and the US, and she is currently developing a facilitation methodology for use in academic research and artistic residency contexts, building on embodied techniques from dance, investigations in non-verbal ways of knowing, and social-relational practices from the field of “inner development”. A generalist at heart, she holds a B.A. (Hons) and Masters in English Literature from Stanford and Oxford Universities (2008, 2009), respectively, and an Erasmus+ funded Joint Masters in Cultural Heritage and Development from EHESS Paris and ELTE Budapest (2021).



Leigh facilitating a small group at the Realisation Festival, England, June 2023.

BODY

BODY CONVERSATION WITH LEIGH BIDDLECOME

I'm really happy we met during the UNIDEE Residency.¹ I was immediately intrigued by the way you move between roles, as a writer, facilitator, and interdisciplinary consultant. Your ability to bridge intellectual and embodied ways of knowing, and to connect different cultural, linguistic, and disciplinary contexts, seems especially relevant in times of complexity and uncertainty.

In the article you edited and curated for *Perspectiva*, “If this is a metacrisis, what do I do on a Monday morning?”² you touch on many approaches. There is the theme of the metacrisis itself and how we can cope with it in the current moment. Then you examine it through a practical lens, asking “what one should do on a Monday morning”. There is also an element of gathering collective knowledge, as you invited a group of people to respond to your question. How do you see collective learning strategies in this context, particularly in relation to crisis and the inclusion of multiple voices? I had the impression that many of the answers were more poetic than practical. But maybe that is the way of doing things in the reality of the metacrisis.

I was interested, as an initiator and curator of this piece, in how I could bring together as many perspectives as possible on this subject. Usually in the writing about “metacrisis” and “polycrisis”, there is one person, often a man, who presents a set of ideas that

- 1 UNIDEE Residency Module “Unfolding Ecosystems: Institutional Practices from a Networked Perspective” mentored by Fabiola Fiocco and Alessandra Saviotti and organised by Cittadellarte – Fondazione Pistoletto in Biella, 2024
- 2 L. Biddlecome, “If this is a metacrisis, what do I do on Monday morning?”, *Perspectiva*. Accessed July 27, 2025. <https://perspecteeva.substack.com/p/if-this-is-a-metacrisis-what-do-i>

are entirely his own, and they tend to be very abstract. I felt that in the majority of the literature there was a disconnection with the actual lived experience of being “in a metacrisis”, and a lack of questioning of whether this really is a “polycrisis” or something else entirely. I wanted to explore what we could learn by bringing together ten or fifteen people who are all experiencing “crisis” in different ways, what other strategies of response exist, and where an “artistic” or “creative” response fits here.

And yes, these strategies could be poetic, as you mentioned. That was interesting to me, how many people wanted to share a poem or a song, whether they had written it themselves or found it elsewhere. There was also the approach of bringing in one’s material, lived reality, and what it means to oscillate between modes, such as with Tom, who described getting his children to school and *then* trying to focus on his writing for a few hours. How to balance the need to survive and earn a living and one’s creative pursuits – also essential for sustaining oneself through a period of overlapping crises – and the multiplicity of approaches to this quandary? So yes, I tried to edit the piece in such a way to reflect the range of responses and the value of gathering them collectively.

How do you understand the fact that so many people responded in a poetic way?

Personally, it makes a lot of sense to me because that is how I also want to respond to the multiple crises we see in the world. Yes, I want to have some form of activist engagement and do something practical, whether that is voting or staying involved in politics in my home country (the United States) and wherever I am living (now in Berlin, after a few years in Italy).

But then there is this other side, which is the question of how to make meaning of what is happening. For me, the only way to do that is through dance, writing, engagement with other art forms, and ideally through being and creating with other people.

If you try to do it alone all the time, it can feel overwhelming in the face of a crisis. That is why the idea of collective voice feels essential to me.

It is like what we experienced while developing the deck of cards during the UNIDEE residency.³ That, for me, was the perfect example of a practical tool that we could put out into the world, experiment with, and modify. That is one of the key qualities of the poetic or artistic response that I aim for: modifiable, with the possibility to keep evolving. That is very different from a bombastic, fixed pronouncement like “*these are the three things you need to do in response to the metacrisis*”. That kind of directive leaves little room for experimentation, and frankly, feels rather boring to me...

What we created (with the cards), without wanting to overstate it, holds a lot of possibilities. It is practical, but at the same time we were having a pretty joyful time playing with the process of creation as a group. That process would not have had the same affective quality if we had each been sitting alone in a room trying to create something similar by ourselves. So perhaps what matters is the affective quality, the play, the joy of experimenting together. These things can become a kind of immediate antidote to the obvious set of economic, environmental, and political crises we are facing.

I do not want to romanticise the crisis itself, but today I came across a text that described crisis as a form of chaos which, when perceived in a certain way, can also become a space for experimentation, a space for beginning to do things differently. Crisis is not something fixed. It is dynamic and fluid. The term metacrisis itself involves this sense of complexity and movement. Do you know of any other collective learning strategies for navigating the metacrisis?

3 *Everything of You Inside of Me Is Nice: Ecosystems of the Erotic* seeks to refocus attention on the body within institutional contexts, fostering reflection and dialogue. The project features a deck of cards with icons, verbs, and a guide containing instructions, quotes, and poetic context. Developed by Kevin Bellò, Leigh Biddlecome, Rose Brander and Agata Szymanek.

For the last 18 months I’ve been part of a small 8-10 person telegram group, the “Creative Quandary Clinic” which has been a real psychological anchor and source of reflection and learning for me. The group grew out of conversations with one of the co-initiators (and dear friend), Bryan Kam, who wanted the support of a regular, asynchronous learning group with “creative cadence” to which we could pose our creative and/or existential quandaries. Each week one member of the group (we’re a mix of writers, film-makers, scholars, and other “creatives”) leaves a voicenote with a question, to which the rest of the group responds (also with voicenotes).

By the end of each cycle of about 8 weeks (depending on the size of the group), we’ve sourced a rich set of responses to a variety of questions. I definitely think of this as a form of collective learning and group-sourced wisdom, and the format of shared voicenotes adds a more personal, spontaneous, and warm affect to the learning (as opposed to, say, written or text responses). It could be interesting to experiment with this in a fine arts pedagogy context and open up the response formats to multiple media types.

Also, recently I did an interview with the artist Cassie Thornton and one of her collaborators, Florence Freitag, who developed a practice (and book) called *The Hologram*,⁴ which explores how to collectively meet one’s physical, mental, and even spiritual health needs through a small group of three other people. I thought it was very telling that Cassie only agrees to do interviews collectively with other members of the Hologram organizing group. The project is practical – it focuses on how to have your health and spiritual needs met by a triangulated group. And at the same time, there is an evolving, fluid nature to it: they are experimenting in different locations, and they offer trainings both online and in

4 C. Thornton, *The Hologram: Feminist, Peer-to-peer Health for a Post-Pandemic Future*, Pluto Press, 2020. <https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745343327/the-hologram/>

person. The boundaries between what is an art project and what is a socially engaged or political project are blurred. In fact, Cassie's theory about the polycrisis is that what we are experiencing is actually a crisis of care.

That reminded me of the work we did with the deck of cards, because in a way, that was also asking how we can think about arts institutions as places that might provide a different kind of approach to care that acknowledges the whole human, whether a student, administrator, or teacher. I think there is something powerful in this idea of care being at the center of so many different issues. There is also an affective dimension to it. When we are in collectives where care is foundational, we can feel the difference. I also think that if a shared sense of genuine care guides all interactions, the collaboration becomes more durable.

While creating *Everything of You Inside of Me Is Nice: Ecosystems of the Erotic* we were not exactly a pre-existing collective. We were formed in a group quite spontaneously, out of an exercise. And then something very interesting happened. We connected our competencies in a way that felt unexpected and effective. Do you have any thoughts on that, especially regarding learning together? I believe we learned a lot from each other.

I do not want to sound overly nostalgic, but it truly was one of the best experiences I have had working in a group, especially within such a short time frame. I remember that both Alessandra and Fabiola, who mentored the program, commented afterward that they had felt the positive energy in our group and they had noticed how we were all supportive of each other's contributions and open to our different styles and ways of working. Somehow it all came together.

I have so many thoughts about why it worked. One of them is something very basic but essential. Alessandra initiated this process by asking each of us to write on a post-it note outlining the central question or theme we wished to explore in the practical

project, and then we were grouped according to our fields of interest. I think that moment was important, because all four of us were already interested in something related, so our pathways converged around the themes of care and re-centering the body within the institutional context. That shared orientation helped shape what followed.

I think that very simple exercise was such an effective way of bringing the group together and I will definitely consider using it in other workshop contexts (I also think it's healthier than other methods of group formation). Aside from sharing a common interest, I believe part of our success also came from the fact that our personalities aligned well. I think we all genuinely cared about respecting each other's perspectives and unique gifts, and that was evident in how we treated each other throughout the process. I have been in spaces where people talk about "care", but their actions do not always reflect it. In this case, I truly felt that we all wanted each person to make their unique contribution to bring the project to life in a short amount of time, but without creating pressure.

That absence of pressure was very meaningful. And then it just happened that you brought in the initial structure of your drawings, the skeleton of what we could build upon, which was fundamental. Having one person bring in something she has been working on, even if it's not fully developed, and saying, "this is where I am with it, how can we build upon this together", was extremely important. Agata, your artistic and visual contributions really sparked our collective imagination. Sometimes you need a physical or material starting point – at least for me, that makes a huge difference because it gives me something to respond to creatively. If you start without something tangible, it can be more difficult to move forward in such a short creation period (3 days). I also appreciated how we moved back and forth between discussing what we wanted to do and then actually doing it. There were moments when we each took a corner of the table,

and worked separately but alongside each other – so you were drawing more cards and imagery, I had my facilitator/pedagogue hat on coming up with instructions for potential applications, Kevin was working on the beautiful layout he designed for the instructional page, and Rose was writing this poetic, enigmatic introductory text.

At some point I realized that Rose and I were both writers by orientation in this project, but there was no competition between us: she was drawn to writing the introduction, and I was more interested in the applications of how someone might use the cards in a classroom or workshop setting. That division of focus happened naturally – overall we each gravitated toward what we were drawn to, and it worked beautifully.

Coming out of that residency, it sparked a lot of thoughts for me about how to design these kinds of collective learning experiences. I started to imagine how one could design a residency that is only one week long (like ours was). How do you bring people together in the kind of coherent way that we experienced in our group? I do not think it is always possible because it depends heavily on the chemistry among the participants. However, I also think it has a lot to do with the structure and the tone established by the facilitators or organizers. I started thinking about how

to bring in some of the psychological and relational tools that I know from other work I have done, and apply them to what I would call “group process work”.

It is not very common in art residencies to begin with intimate forms of sharing or to implement practices aimed at authentic communication. There are, however, many established

methods for fostering deeper listening and sharing right from the start. These include what are sometimes referred to in the context of “inner development” and “adult development” as “authentic sharing” or “circling practices”. These form part of a whole set of tools and strategies focused on helping people connect on a deeper level quickly.

Alessandra suggested that I develop a clear methodology for facilitation and design that could be applied to residencies, and that’s what I’m working on now. I am particularly interested in how learning continues after the residency ends. How can we help participants integrate what they have learned into their lives and work afterwards? Often, once the residency is over, there is very little support. People leave inspired but are unsure how to apply what they experienced.

Artistic residencies are often highly selective and difficult to access. For example, some residencies receive over 1,000 applications for a single spot. Thinking about remodeling residencies, have you ever considered ways to make them more egalitarian or accessible?

That is a really good point. I think that the application and selection processes do not always result in the most “deserving” individuals being selected (whatever “deserving” might mean in a given context). Who gets selected might depend more on who has done the most to self-promote, who is most effective on social media, and who presents themselves best in a portfolio context, rather than on someone who might genuinely benefit from the experience and go on to undertake more meaningful or innovative work as a result of the learning during the residency, or who might contribute to group dynamics in a relationally supportive way (and here I’m circling back naturally to the element of care!).

I have not served on a committee responsible for selecting residency participants, although I have helped select scholarship applicants for a Masters scholarship, so I’ve reflected a lot on the



← UNIDEE Residency at Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella, November 2024. Photo: Marianna Stefanitsi.

politics, ethics, and philosophy of academic accessibility. If I were given the opportunity to select for a residency context, I would try to consider how some of the existing biases might be removed. For instance, how might we select people who are perhaps earlier in their careers or who have recently refocused? Although I hesitate to frame it only in terms of age, as I believe it is very important to include people of all ages. In fact, the presence of participants ranging from their early twenties to their fifties was, in my view, a significant strength during our residency in Biella.

However, the bigger question is: aside from trying to make the selection process more egalitarian, what else can we be doing beyond these small-scale residencies? What other types of learning opportunities might reach more people? That is where it would be interesting to experiment further. For instance, could some of the learning design methodologies I am interested in be applied to online contexts, where more people could participate? I do think that something is lost in the online version, however, if the goal is to reach more people, it is possible to experiment with different modifications. For example, you could gather one hundred participants and divide them into twenty breakout rooms of five people, each group receiving very specific instructions. That requires smart design and careful facilitation, but it is feasible.

When I was running events for the Perspectiva nonprofit organisation in the UK, we sometimes had one hundred or so people join online, and after a larger group session would split everyone into smaller rooms and provide specific reflection/learning questions. What we discovered was that many people wanted to stay in those rooms much longer than we expected. This showed us that there is a real hunger for personal connection, especially among people who are more isolated, live in rural areas, are older or have limited social contact.

I would like to ask you one more question arising from the context of our project *Ecosystems of the Erotic*. When I started

working at the Fine Arts Academy in Katowice, the issue of the body being absent in the academic environment became immediately obvious to me. The idea of reintroducing bodies into institutions could serve as a strategy of *infrastructure destabilization*, a concept I took from your essay “Beyond Sustainability: Adapting the ‘Degrowth’ Theory to the Art World”.⁵ How can degrowth and *infrastructure destabilization* be applied as a strategy for collective learning?

Despite that idea having been watered down by the editor of that essay, I still believe in this idea of *infrastructure destabilization* – perhaps this is my rebellious side coming out. How does that fit in with the collective learning idea, though? In a way, there may be one answer, which is similar to what I just said about how to create access to learning environments that are choosing participants based on very different criteria than those that have traditionally been used. In other words, *destabilizing* the collective learning environment.

It reminds me of working within bureaucracy or institutional systems in places like Italy or France as an immigrant, where it is almost impossible to survive alone. You have to figure out who can help you navigate the system as a foreigner. I think that a certain approach to immigration and being an outsider can destabilize institutions, as our presence raises questions and reveals the limits of those systems. You are forced to find ways to overcome certain obstacles, and along the way, if you have a certain privilege (as I did during these processes as a white American woman), you can speak out to those internal to the systems and advocate for change.

Perhaps a better comparison is with the idea of de-financialization. That is something that Cassie (from the Hologram group) talks about. It involves creating non-monetary commons. In other words, instead of having all of our interactions based on the

5 L. Biddlecome, *Beyond Sustainability: Adapting the ‘Degrowth Theory’ to the Art World*, Art Düsseldorf Magazine. Accessed July 27, 2025. <https://art-dus.de/leigh-biddlecome-sustainability-art-essay/>

exchange of money or time for money, all to the ultimate benefit of shareholders and companies, their approach is to ask how we can potentially live outside that system by providing care to one another and meeting our needs through the collective.

That can only work through a learning process. It is not possible to move overnight into a non-financial system, but it is possible to experiment with different models. In Berlin, for example, there is a space called the Casino for Social Medicine. They are operating as a nonprofit organisation and bar/café where all events are free and offered voluntarily by participants. However, it is not simply about showing up and consuming. The idea is that everyone also contributes with their own event, their knowledge, or whatever skills they can offer to the collective.

They already have around two thousand people on their Telegram channel, and they only began in October. This is another interesting experiment in what is possible and there is real collective learning happening, because they are figuring it out as they go. They still have to pay taxes and rent for the space but everyone working there is a volunteer. There are all kinds of events and workshops, from someone offering acupuncture, to someone else providing information on navigating the German immigration system, someone hosting a poetry reading, etc. So I think that perhaps collective learning can support a movement toward degrowth when it happens in a mutual aid context rather than through traditional systems of consumption and exchange.

In the essay “If this is a metacrisis, what do I do on a Monday morning?”, you mention the text written by Jonathan Rowson “Prefixing the World”⁶. He was referring to Paulo Freire, which actually brings us back to pedagogies, but also to your dissertation that was reflecting on the concept of authenticity in the context of cultural heritage. Paulo Freire in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) wrote:

An inauthentic word, one which is unable to transform reality, results when a dichotomy is imposed on its constitutive elements. When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating “blah”. It becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action.

Yes, Freire’s conception of inauthenticity in the context of language is that there needs to be some form of action resulting from words, otherwise acts of denunciation remain hollow, or “inauthentic”. It’s interesting to think about authenticity in this way, focused on language. Freire has us reimagine authenticity as having a kind of “thickness” thanks to a commitment to action that follows from the language – in contrast to inauthenticity which has not just emptiness but also “idleness”, as he puts it. Now that you mention Freire, it actually relates to the piece “If this is a metacrisis, what do I do on a Monday morning?” because I think some of the answers that came through while editing showed that action can mean multiple things. It does not necessarily have to be a monumental, “paradigm-shifting” act in the world: it can also mean the act of creation, or the act of reflection, or the act of collective listening. And on that last point of “paradigm shifts”, I recently interviewed the transdisciplinary designer (and friend), Engin Ayaz, who pointed out that an over-emphasis on creating “paradigm changing work” is not only problematic from a personal perspective (because it leads to both presumptuousness and a lack of humility), but it can also obscure some of the more mysterious or even mystical aspects of change.⁷ Also, I would add in the context of this conversation, an over-focus on individual “paradigm changers” neglects the collective aspect of transformation.

6 J. Rowson, “Prefixing the World”, *Perspectiva*. Accessed July 27, 2025. <https://perspecteeva.substack.com/p/prefixing-the-world>

7 L. Biddlecome, “Finding Coherence in ‘Steady State Resonance’”, *Emerge*. Accessed 5 August, 2025. <https://www.whatisemerging.com/opinions/finding-coherence-in-steady-state-resonance>

How does collective learning work with authenticity? Can authenticity be a strategy of collective learning?

I have long been interested in the obsession we have currently in our culture with authenticity, especially in the negative aspects of authenticity. In my academic work on the subject I was asking, what happens when a culture – especially far right governments and political movements – becomes obsessed with a single way that something has to be? When does an obsession with authenticity end up excluding certain people and practices?⁸

The easy example is some form of intangible heritage, such as food or dance or ceremonial practices. Typically, far-right governments latch onto these, claim they represent the “essence” of the culture, and insist that in order to remain “authentic”, they must remain as they are. That can then result in a kind of freezing of folk practices – which by nature are in constant evolution – and also in exclusion (so new arrivals or those of a different ethnic and/or religious background aren’t allowed to participate in the practices). And of course from an anthropological perspective, this is contrary to the reality of how the vast majority of cultures have developed syncretic practices over time, in conversation with external influences.

But in terms of how that relates to the collective learning side, I think if you try too hard to impose some form of authenticity on a process, it can actually backfire. You can think of authenticity as an individual matter, as in: am I being “true” or authentic to an essential self? Am I being honest in how I present myself? That form of reflection can be a positive thing (as long as it does not become overly obsessive and self-focused).

So if everyone is coming to a collective learning process with a sense of personal authenticity, great. The danger arises

8 L. Biddlecome, *Exclusion in the guise of authenticity: (in)tolerance and intangible cultural heritage, and the case of Indian classical dance*. Dissertation, Joint Master en Sciences Sociales – Spécialité Territoires, Espaces, Sociétés, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris and ELTE, Budapest, September 2021. Accessed 5 August, 2025. https://www.leighbiddlecome.com/_files/ugd/6d0d7b_8d3a31ede46247ee977a033e8f585eb6.pdf

when an individual, group, and/or institution, begins to claim that a process or artistic practice must be a certain way in order to be considered authentic. I also find that the more people talk about authenticity, the less of it there usually is. What is more important is that people touch in with a kind of individual felt sense of: am I being honest in how I am communicating and what I am creating? Am I caring for others and listening to their experiences as much as I am in tune with my own? Or am I so wrapped up in my own experience that I have not really listened to my collaborators for the last twenty minutes?

In that sense, if authenticity means truthful sharing, alignment with one's own understanding or creative process, and not overly modifying that in order to fit into some perceived sense of what should be done, then I think that is really positive. But it has to include the element of listening, awareness, and attunement with the group.

What you said about authenticity made me want to confront it with the concept of queer use. Alessandra Saviotti, in her doctoral thesis on Arte Útil, referred to queer use, a term used by Sara Ahmed. At some point, queering seems almost like the opposite of authenticity, as it involves making things different and perhaps not authentic. However, I also understand that at the core of queering there is something deeply authentic.

That's where authenticity can be a super interesting concept, because I think our standard understanding of it can often be wrong. I think as we see with the Freire quote, it can operate in these paradoxes. And what can seem really authentic can actually be inauthentic if it is overly forced. So, to follow my example above, if a government is imposing certain forms of authenticity on art forms, I would argue that whatever is performed or created loses some element of authenticity, because its form or content is being imposed from the outside. And so I think, similarly, maybe there is this paradox of authenticity and queering. In Ahmed's work, queering involves “discordance”, inversions, innovation, and “odd

solutions” – all of which I would say can be present within the kinds of authenticity that I advocate (i.e. the non-exclusionary, fluid, evolving versions).

How would you define collective knowledge, particularly in relation to your own experience and practice? What aspects do you consider essential in how it is formed, shared, or embodied?

This question makes me think of my friend Bryan Kam, who I mentioned earlier. His approach to learning is that we need to constantly oscillate between theoretical knowledge and practical, lived experience.

In terms of collective knowledge, if I were to speak from a theoretical perspective, I see it as a layering that happens over time, ideally with many different nodes of people, and ideally a mix of individual, embodied understanding as well as relational knowledge. This includes what we gain from collective creation and learning experiences. I would also include historical knowledge, whether from Western culture or knowledge systems from Eastern traditions, Indigenous traditions, and so on.

Regarding practical, lived experience, I think it can be an interesting exercise to close your eyes and remember a moment in which you experienced collective learning happening, wherever you were, and to remember what it felt like to be in that moment.

I think if you can draw upon that feeling, it’s a strong basis from which to begin to recognize when it’s happening (and when it’s not...). In my own experience, I would conjure up what it felt like to be part of a dance and music creation residency a few years ago at a former monastery-turned-foundation outside Paris (Fondation Royaumont). I was working as a researcher-dramaturg with a choreographer and a composer, along with three dancers and over two weeks, we created a new piece from scratch. It was a site-specific project, and the feeling of the rehearsal context

where ideas were being thrown out and played with, both physically by the dancers and musically by the composer on the organ — that to me is the essence of how one creates collective knowledge. It is not knowledge in the sense of propositional knowledge, but rather a kind of knowledge about how to communicate multimodally and create with a group of people who come with an array of different skill sets.

How can we apply collective learning strategies in the future in a meaningful way?

In a way this is what I am trying to do with this cross-disciplinary facilitation methodology I’m developing – to consider psychological and relational learning, as well as an embodied learning aspect, in addition to whatever the core subject matter is. I’m drawing on somatic techniques and “nonverbal ways of knowing” from contemporary dance as well as social and relational practices from the emerging field of “inner development”, including group transformation processes.

For example, in a more traditional arts pedagogy context in a fine arts university, how can you, in small ways, incorporate an acknowledgement of the psychological and emotional state of the room? Not to turn every learning experience into a psychotherapy session, but rather to remain aware of how learners are doing, how they are relating to one another, whether they are treating each other with care, and to be in touch with their bodies throughout the process. And in the contexts where there is already a strong focus on psycho-emotional learning and relational



awareness, I would bring in artistic and somatic approaches to collective learning without art and dance devolving into mere spectacle or entertainment.

So the aim is to be able to create an adaptable toolbox of practices and methods that is supple enough to work in the contexts of arts residencies (especially for socially-engaged artists and curators), academic workshops and convenings, and performing arts creative processes (particularly for dramaturgs in complex, multidisciplinary creations within residency contexts). All this to say that I think designing for collective learning ideally involves moving across our habitual disciplinary comfort zones and bringing techniques across in intuitive and unexpected ways.

Facilitating a post-conference integration and “sense-making” workshop after the Inner Development Goals Summit in Stockholm, Sweden, October 2024. Photo: Ivo J. Mensch.



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