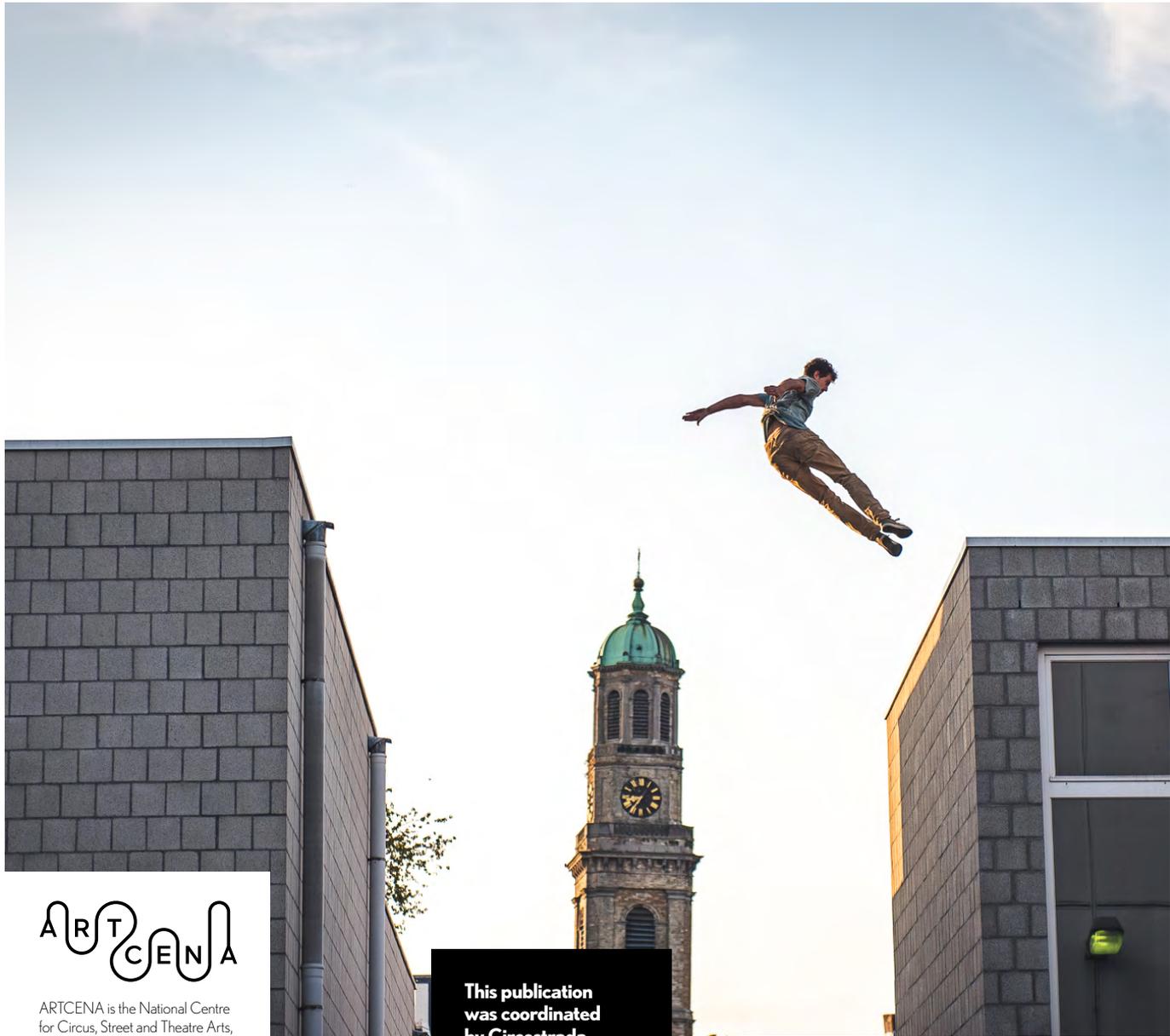




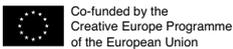
# FRESH STREET#4



ARTCENA is the National Centre for Circus, Street and Theatre Arts, created by the French Ministry of Culture. It coordinates Circostrada and has a permanent seat on its Steering Committee. It works closely with sector professionals and offers them publications and multimedia resources through its digital platform. It develops mentoring, training, tools and services to help them in their daily practices. It provides support to contemporary creation through national programmes and encourages international development of these three sectors.

This publication was coordinated by Circostrada and edited by John Ellingsworth

Since 2003, Circostrada Network has been working to develop and structure the fields of circus and street arts in Europe and beyond. With more than 120 members from over 35 countries, it helps building a sustainable future for these sectors by empowering cultural players through activities in observation and research, professional exchanges, advocacy, capacity-building and information.



## FOREWORD

### **WHAT DID WE HAVE IN MIND?**

After a grand edition in Galway in May 2019, in partnership with ISACS and the European Capital of Culture – the members of the Circostrada workgroup led by FNAS and engaged in the development of this event, agreed on a common curatorial theme for the fourth edition of FRESH STREET: the Space in Between. The idea was to go to Turin, in Italy, and explore the dual nature of the city, both royal and industrial, and to think about the “Space in Between” as the place where art may find its inspirational matter to build bridges between “opposing riverbanks”. In a world torn between conflicting views and positions – where dialogue becomes asymmetrical, power-laden or even disappears – what role should street arts play today? This was our starting point.

### **WHAT HAPPENED IN THE MEANTIME?**

In March 2020 – as Covid-19 started to become an integral part of lives – we felt torn between bewilderment and bitterness at first, and then slowly came to accept the fact that a physical and experiential event in the “Mediterranean Europe” would not be possible as we initially imagined, especially if we wanted to ensure a timely and appropriate preparation and guarantee the best possible equity of access. Was the “Space in Between” still a meaningful theme to investigate though? More than ever! The current pandemic had highlighted existing fragilities and barriers, while questioning the role of (art in) the public space. Meanwhile, we had to redefine our identities in order to survive and thrive, establishing new ways of connecting and creating multiple ways to support and involve artists and cultural professionals, whether locally or globally.

### **WHAT CAN WE DO NOW?**

Although no one, yet, is able to fully grasp the effects of the emotional vacuum in human and social relations, caused by the ever-so-present physical distancing, we can at least try and regard this moment in history as a chance for reshuffling the cards and shaking up certainties. The “Space in Between” can then become an opportunity to pause and investigate the key role that creation in the public space might hold in the cohesion processes and well-being of communities and citizens; we can also take a step back to reflect on our practices, our professional and individual realities, before rushing to return to the “world as we knew it before”, without even so much as asking ourselves the question: what matters now? The “Space in Between” is certainly an uncomfortable area filled with doubts and uncertainties, but it could also be a beam of light in a dark night leading us towards a more inclusive, diverse, sustainable and fairer future. It really depends on how we are able to adjust our focus and how we can put that ability to spark further investigation and new creativity. What role should street arts play tomorrow?



The FNAS team in Turin, Italy. © FNAS

## FRESH STREET #4 IN A NUTSHELL

OVER **300** PARTICIPANTS

**6** PLENARY SESSIONS

**43** COUNTRIES FROM **6** CONTINENTS

**9** SPEAKERS

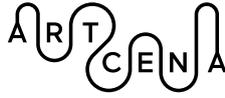
**4** DAYS OF WEBINAR

**ONLINE**

### A big thanks to

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### Additional note



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June 2021

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# KEYNOTE

## ART AT THE HEART OF LIFE



Interview with **Vida Cerkvenik Bren** by **John Ellingsworth**

In the last year the (street) art world has found itself caught in a period of immobility, separation and reflection – but where does it go now?

Theatre Director, outdoor artist and FRESH STREET keynote speaker **Vida Cerkvenik Bren** on street arts in the interim.

**A simple one: what is the space between?**

The space between? I don't know what that is but I know I like it! [chuckling] I like to be in between – between work and leisure, between the public and the private, between countries, between political stances, between opposing world views. Where things either haven't yet been defined or labelled or where they are in transition. That is where you will generally find the truth – somewhere in between.

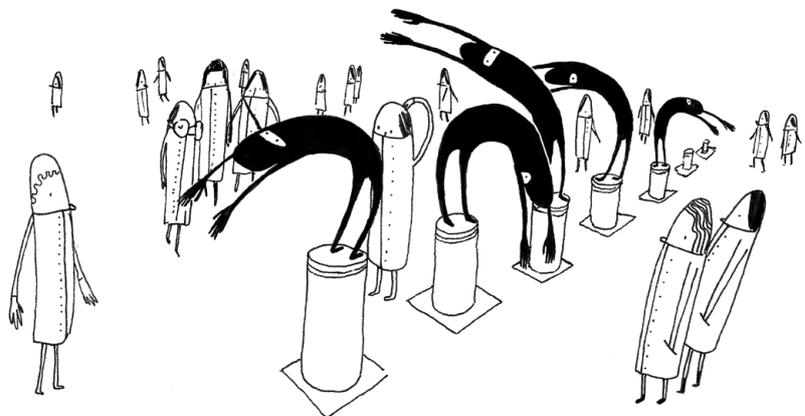
**In your book *Why Don't We Do It in the Road* you talk about circles and squares as symbols for passive observation and active participation, and give the computer screen as an example of a square – something passive. Has your view on this shifted at all, given that the digital world currently feels like our most active public space?**

The square and the circle are metaphors and as such shouldn't be taken too literally. You are right, the computer can be an intermediary in communication and interaction, enabling active participation. However, it can also be a medium for one-way presentation. My view of the digital world has in fact changed somewhat in Covid times; I regularly find myself staring at the screen, mentally

and emotionally immersed in the interaction that is taking place 'live' via Zoom. Most of all, I get the sense that I am with all those people on the screen, that we are all together somewhere in some between space rather than scattered around the globe. Just yesterday I received a phone call in the middle of one of these conferences. A friend asked me: "Where are you?" and I immediately blurted out: "On Zoom!" rather than "At home" or "In the office" as one might have expected. If we conceive the digital world as actual space (as our physical location while we are staring at the screen or even when we are offline and someone else is reading a post on our wall or liking our tinder profile...),

then my analogy with the square and the circle doesn't work. In that case, the computer or smart phone are not frames but entry points into another world. A world that we can be part of, not merely as observers but as participants. A world that is just as chaotic, real and infinite as any other world.

Street arts can take place anywhere, so why not online. Exhibiting your work online has many advantages, the most obvious being that anyone can attend regardless of his or her current location which is a huge benefit. Being able to access audiences around the globe with no jet lag, without compromising our families and other relationships, without



© Illustration by Robin Klengel from *Why Don't We Do It in the Road*

polluting the planet... It all sounds great. But there is also a downside. If we get too used to this new normality where the digital world is our most active public space, as you put it, we may soon end up having no body and no cheese (if nobody has a body, no one will be left to eat the cheese [chuckling]). Joking aside, it's been more than ten years since I was on tour in South Korea where I watched passers-by wearing masks, passengers on the metro staring at screens, couples on park benches looking at their phones instead of looking at one another. Covid is making the discomfort with physical contact and proximity even worse.

I consider street arts and live arts as an attempt to be creative and think about art in a different way, meaning in terms other than curtain up, art happens, curtain down, applause. In street arts, the line between the work of art and the rest of the world is not that clear; a live work of art is part of life as is the web nowadays. How to adapt to this situation is largely a personal question. Anyone who is drawn to digital media should definitely follow their intuition; particularly projects that manage to combine both the street and the web in a simple and natural way (thereby taking advantage of the entire 'increased' public space) are very promising. But there are also many analogue channels that are Covid-safe. Now is also a good time for advocacy, networking and reflection. However, if someone needs a break, there is nothing wrong with that. Sabbaticals are an essential part of any creative career, process or relationship. In fact, I have noticed that the Covid pandemic has given many of my acquaintances and co-workers around the world a real opportunity to take a much needed break from working too much, from stress, hyperproduction, economic nomadism, etc. They had to be locked down so they could realise that they had been caught up in a rat race and they were finally able to take some time off, knowing that they will not be missing out on anything.

It is of course possible to be too open to change, but as I see it people are generally more likely to be too afraid of change, particularly radical change. (And now is the time to dive deep.) Fear of the unknown, laziness or habit often leave us stuck in our old ways. The pandemic has shown us that change is

possible (when it is the only option), both at the individual and the collective level; it has also highlighted certain global crises that we as a society need to take on as soon as possible. I hope we will use this opportunity and change things now!

**You touched in your talk on how street artists always have to negotiate with audiences and the public. How might these negotiations change in the near future?**

I consider the tension between the work of art and the environment as a key ingredient; it is what gives street arts their impact. The negotiation between the street artist and the users of public space is a dance, a seduction, a quest for a new or different purpose; it is a request for meaning, for something more. A street performance, an intervention in public space, graffiti on a façade, a concert on a bus can all turn the tedium of our daily lives into a game of pursuit for hidden meanings, invisible connotations and sense (as well as senselessness).

I have already mentioned the concern that Covid may enhance the fear of physical contact and proximity. This fear hinders eye contact, touch and directness; it makes it difficult to build the trust it takes to turn a group of strangers into a temporary community that becomes the audience of a street performance. No restriction of public gatherings can be good for street arts or the freedom of expression and creativity in general. On the other hand, the joint experience of the pandemic has taught us many things and if we are willing to listen, it can also teach us to be more tolerant, patient and connected. A lot will depend on the final turn of events. On the developments to come, on the rising tension between us citizens, the experts, the media and the governments.

**Beyond the obvious advantage of being outdoors, what do you think street arts can bring to the wider arts at the moment? Do you see signs already of institutions changing their thinking?**

Street arts put art at the heart of life and put the audience at the heart of this art. They play with the established order of things

to reinvent public space and ways of living together. As such, they have managed to integrate most of the concepts and ideas of 20<sup>th</sup> century art that still remain a stumbling block for institutional arts. The idea that everyone can be an artist and everything can be art comes to life through street and live arts in a constructive way, not as a depreciation. After university, when I was working as a director in institutional theatres, I felt like a cobbler making shoes exclusively for other cobblers and their closest associates. Can you imagine how absurd that would be? At some point, cultural institutions lost the genuine contact with people, topical issues and the questions of life that are not related to art unless you are an artist. I am convinced that the experience of street artists and live artists can help cultural institutions find new contexts for art and rebuild the harmony between art and life that has been destroyed.

Well, you asked if I have seen any signs of institutions changing their thinking. To some extent, my answer is yes; everyone is aware of the fact that interest in art in its traditional forms is in decline, particularly in younger generations. Calls for public funding are full of phrases like audience development, accessibility, inclusion, participation, active engagement, etc. Meanwhile, street arts are already putting all this into practice. Unfortunately, too few policymakers and heads of cultural institutions are aware of that. They lack information, many of them are prejudiced and, most importantly, they have never experienced street arts in all their diversity and potential for themselves. That is why advocacy is so vital.

**What about the possibilities for collaboration between street arts and indoor theatre?**

Uncertainty about the future is creating more room for innovation and experiments and driving the search for new prospects in all areas. In light of this, I would think that theatres, although currently closed to the public, are more open to unconventional proposals; not least because their arts managers and directors now have the time to hear them. I suggest we inform them about all the possibilities of performing outdoors

and in non-theatre spaces; we should let them know what has been done, explain the principles of 'site-specific' performances, present the broad variety of techniques for audience participation, etc. Perhaps their curiosity will allow them to see past the usual issues such as 'But what about the weather?' and 'What do we do about the tickets?'. The next step is collaboration; collaboration in creating a joint play, establishing theatre as a ritual and a social gathering.

**Like many street artists, you've been around the world. How do you think mobility could change in the future?**

What you say is true, as a member of the collective Ljud I would sometimes be on the road for eleven months of the year. Then, after a decade of flying from country to country, from continent to continent, I felt a burning need to get a feel for the distances that usually flashed by miles below my feet. So after we finished the season of 2013 in Seoul, I said goodbye to the team who were leaving for the airport and travelled back home by train and hitchhiking. It took me three weeks to get back and I arrived in Ljubljana on the very day of my mother's birthday. I then decided to spend three months at home – I called this little experiment 'my winter challenge'. It wasn't easy, my vagabond lifestyle left me full of internal turmoil and I was used to being constantly on the move. I felt like time had stopped. Renovation works of the main street of Ljubljana were underway just under my window and since I had the time, I spent many hours sitting on the window sill. At first, it felt like nothing was going on underneath; with time I started noticing minute changes, a process. Workers were digging trenches, laying pipes; pedestrians were put on a detour around the building site; trucks and machinery came and went. One day, trees were delivered and I realised that the holes that had been dug some time ago in two parallel lines along both sides of the street were there for the rows of trees. It then turned out that a tree too many had been delivered or not enough holes had been made. That filled me with such joy! I went down to the street and asked if I could have the extra tree. Since then, I have been

travelling more slowly, leaving openings for unexpected encounters and creative feats without any prior arrangements, contracts or transactions.

Moving from place to place, being on the road and performing on the street or in a circus have always been and always will be related. As a foreigner in a foreign country, it is easier to temporarily change the established order, to attract attention, to put on a veil of mystery, to impress, to inspire, to break and/or expose a taboo. Nevertheless, the pandemic has clearly shown that a lot can happen at home (and/or online); that we have wasted too much time at airports in the past; that it is crucial that we learn to travel less and/or differently (more slowly) not just for the sake of the health of our planet, but also for the sake of ourselves and our own (mental) health. The fact that we have become 'economic nomads' is the result of a void in the funding of local street art productions, of the focus on final results, of the competitive atmosphere at fairs, of the tendency of festivals to select 'hit' productions that are overbooked, of the general undervaluation of (street) arts and much else. Street artists lack opportunities to act more locally, to be engaged in a process and work in the long term and in dialogue with anthropologists, social workers, scientists and local actors. They are also desperate for opportunities to exchange experiences and learn from one another. If policymakers come to realise the potential of street and live arts, all this can change. Vivan Storlund, the author of the book *Widening horizons by mining the wealth of creative thinkers*, dedicated her life's work to the idea of a basic income for artists. In fact, some years ago the collective Ljud already came up with the idea to try to convince the city municipality of Ljubljana to pay us a flat rate for acting not as court jesters but as city jesters – for artistic interactions with the local population, for 'custom made' performances, for spontaneous (re)actions to social, political and human situations in the city. Why shouldn't every city have a street and live arts centre co-funded from the city and national budgets instead of yet another gallery or theatre? Such a centre doesn't require its own exhibition or performance space, it only needs an office

(or not even that, given the current circumstances). Let's take things a step further: why shouldn't every city have two or three such centres or as many as there are galleries and theatres?

**Many people have experienced a 'new reality' in the last year or found their perspectives and priorities shifting. Do you think these shifts will be lasting ones?**

The pandemic is forcing us to abandon our routines and get out of our comfort zones. We have been compelled to change our habits; many people have had to involuntarily face themselves in the past year. The uncertainty of the future and the frailty of the certainty with which we used to plan it have become blatantly obvious. Every experience teaches us something. Such an attitude towards a difficult situation is good because it allows us to focus on finding the lesson; in addition to making progress, figuring something out also makes us feel good. However, we can only learn from experience if we process, reflect and integrate it; learning only through repetition in the sense of Pavlovian conditioning takes a lot longer.

I personally believe that it is essential to be honest, at least to oneself; if we hide from ourselves behind a false self-image, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to improve our situation and to grow. The victim mentality is one of the more grandiose illusions that have intensified in the wake of Covid-19, giving rise to a new wild goose chase for culprits. In addition to the feeling of helplessness, fear and anger are also on the rise; perhaps they are rooted in the distant past and have only now been given a chance to surface. On the other hand, many people have come to realise that they can manage without many of the goods being forced upon them by consumerism; the mistrust of politics and politicians keeps growing and we see a new sense of global solidarity starting to emerge. What I am trying to say is that the more personally and honestly we deal with the pandemic and its aftermath, the more permanent the lessons learnt and insight gained will be. The pandemic has flushed out certain societal crises that were previously resonating in the background: the

environmental crisis; the crisis of confidence in politics, the media and experts. I think it has also highlighted a crisis of the arts and cultural institutions; at least as far as I can see, the closure of restaurants and shops seems to have 'hit' citizens much harder than the closure of museums and theatres.

**In your book, each chapter ends with a practical exercise for street ninjas. Could you set a special in between exercise for our own street ninjas / FRESH readers?**

Gladly.

Dear street ninja / Fresh Street reader,

- 1. Put on a mask (if required)
- 2. Go out.
- 3. Take a stroll across a public space and:
  - a) Try to think of ideas you had had in the past which then felt too small because you thought they wouldn't be backed by festivals/financers or they wouldn't attract crowds.
  - b) Look around and let your imagination run free – imagine a small-scale Covid-proof intervention in space that would surprise you, make you laugh, change your perspective or establish a connection (a writing in chalk; a minute figurine sitting on the edge of a bench; a notebook with a pen as an invitation to exchange notes with strangers;

graffiti of two viruses having a discussion; a statute, a traffic sign or a tree wearing a mask; an invitation to a distance dance, etc.)

- c) Consider what kind of artistic intervention could make people more open to positive change and how art can help us in our personal and collective transformations.

- 4. Put at least one idea into action, however small!



Vida Cerkenik Bren (Slovenia) is a street artist first and foremost and is also the author of 'Why Don't we do it in the Road'. To me this book is like a bible for street arts creation. Everyone should read it. I think we have an amazing opportunity here to present the potential of street arts and to transform attitudes to the same. She can do this.

*Vida Cerkenik Bren's book, Why Don't We Do It in the Road, can be downloaded for free in English and Italian at:*

🌐 <https://riote.org/2019/06/21/why-dont-we-do-it-in-the-road/>



John Ellingsworth (UK) works as a writer and editor in the cultural field. As an editor, he has worked on projects and publications for the Swedish Institute, Kulturrådet, IETM, Dansehallerne, the European League of Institutes of the Arts, and Flanders Department of Culture, Youth and Media. He also leads the company MES, which specialises in developing websites with complex information architectures.

🌐 <http://sideshow-circusmagazine.com/>

# THE SPACE BETWEEN NATURE AND CULTURE

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## FOOD FOR THOUGHTS

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### PERFORMING AFTER A PLAGUE: A PROVOCATION IN THREE ACTS

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By Jay Jordan

Nature and its species are often ‘themes’ for art, but how close are we really looking? Artist and activist Jay Jordan takes the long view – starting 700 years ago – to find the intersections of art, life, nature and culture.

“If fundamental theatre is like the plague, this is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is a revelation.”

– Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, 1938

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#### Act 1: Embody the art of attention

Let us start by putting this journal down, or if you’re reading this article online, turn away from the screen and we will try an exercise with your fingers. Pick up an imaginary stringed instrument, imagine it is a medieval lute, hold it, feel its wood, imagine its taut strings. Now imagine you can play this beautiful instrument and try to strut the strings mimicking the gestures of “an emaciated crow pecking at the snow in hope of finding something to eat”. If this is too hard, try this time to imitate “the nonchalant flick of a carp’s tail” with your fingers.

Was it easy?

These strangely beautiful instructions are from *The Great Treatise on Supreme Sound*, a 14th century handbook for musicians. It taught lute players specific gestures, like

a staccato pluck, by suggesting they copy the movements of animals, the assumption being that it would be totally normal for a musician to have not only seen these animals behaviour up close, but to have spent enough time giving them the deep attention needed to be able to reproduce and embody their gestures.

When was the last time you watched a wild animal coexisting with its habitat?

When was the last time you gave some attention to living beings and bodies that were not human, or rather as philosopher and sleight of hand magician David Abram says, more-than-human?

Now 700 years later most of you reading this will be living in the metropolis and probably

only experience wild animals on your screens or in cages in zoos. In the metropolis, everything is done so that humans only relate to themselves, so that we create ourselves separately from other forms of existence, other forms of life. This human centered logic, this deep separation, is embodied and naturalised in the very fabric of the metropolis, in the concrete and tarmac, powerlines and fiber optics, in the layout of streets, the networks of surveillance cameras, the architecture of the shopping malls, the design of parks, the museum districts – all capturing our body-minds and behaviours 24/7. The Metropolis is what you have when the modernisation process is complete and ‘nature’ is gone for good, where only ‘we’ produce and create reality. And that reality is shaped by the urbanists and architects, the planners and managers, the executives and bureaucrats, in the like-

ness of the 'sky is the limit' gods of economic growth. Development and productivity become the only goal.

It's a world without worlds, where we are split from our food sources, from our soil, from our plants and our water. The worlds that sustain our life have become alien, like unknown planets. We have forgotten how to make our shelter, which plants can heal us and which feed us, how to clothe ourselves, what the seasons are, where the wind blows from, to recognise the song of the birds returning at spring time, to know how to find our way home using the north star.

As I finish writing that sentence, I hear the hoot of a brown owl sitting on the oak tree whose branches caress the caravan from which I'm writing. Our home is on a wetlands, the Zad: Zone a Defendre ('zone to defend') of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, where the French government and multinational Vinci once wanted to put an international airport, stretching the grey urban fabric into these fields and forests. But thanks to decades of creative disobedient bodies, including our own, these lands were saved from being sucked dry and covered in concrete. New forms of collective life were built in the way of the developers: beautiful cabins grew out of the mud, farms flourished, pirate radio stations were emitted, bakeries baked bread for hundreds of inhabitants, medicinal herb gardens healed us, and at the centre of the zone we built a full scale working lighthouse exactly where the control tower should have been. The tabloid-like 24-hour French news channel BFMTV even called the Zad "a utopia that might be being realised"! The Zad was a theatre of conflict between the forces of money and the forces of life, a place that took theatre back to its roots, from the Greek, *Theatron* – 'a place where something important happens'.

On the Zad, Art and life, nature and culture, resistance and creation are entangled. Art becomes a discipline of attention, enfolded into the designs of our lives, our gardens, our ways of resisting, the way we build our houses, our rituals to mark the seasons. This life consciously crafted, rather than another style of art? We need "a technique of life, an art of living. We have to create ourselves as



© CIRCA - The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army in action - Edinburgh, 2005

a work of art," claimed philosopher-activist Michel Foucault. "Rather than something specialized or done by experts, couldn't everyone's life become a work of art?" He asked. "Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?"

But one of the most important reasons we were able to protect these lands was because we got to *know* the hedgerows and greenways, the forest and marshlands, the prairies and streams, when the newts mate and the swallows return from Africa, we got to know these lands in the same profound way a dancer knows his body or an acrobat senses her muscles.

When you pay attention to something it becomes sacred. Nothing is created sacred, it's the attention we give to it that renders it so. I don't mean sacred as holy almighty aloof power, but as my friend Starhawk, incredible witch and activist, taught us: immanent sacredness "is not a great something that you bow down to, but what determines your values, what you would take a stand for." When something is sacred it becomes harder to destroy, to pollute, to turn into a resource and you are prepared to put your life into protecting it. The more you inhabit a territory the more it inhabits you.

The owl hoots again, and I'm reminded of the incredibly courageous 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist Harriet Tubman, who used her knowledge of

birds song and of the living world to save so many lives. Tubman escaped from slavery aged 27 and rescued hundreds of escaping slaves by guiding them up what was known as the underground railway, a network of safe houses ferrying slaves to safe haven. She mastered these long dangerous journeys through marshlands and forest, often tracked by dogs sent out by the authorities to sniff them out. She had grown up in the wetlands and had a complex understanding of the landscape, and she would use the call of barred owls to alert the refugees that it was OK, or not OK, to come out of hiding and continue their journey. Her accurate rendition of the sound of the bird blended in with the normal night time sounds, and so created no suspicion. The lives of the freedom seekers were saved.

This is the art of attention; observing and sensing the living world deeply, feeling its pleasures and pains and performing forms of life that open up spaces so that the life of others can continue to thrive. A slave is freed, a wetlands continues to flourish.

## Act 2: Desert Nero Culture

The Roman Emperor Nero did not play the lute, but the lyre. The myth claims he played music whilst watching the city of Rome burn. This story was a metaphor for cold, ruthless tyrannical leaders, without feelings, able to watch a disaster from their aloof position of power and caring nothing for those suffering. Not unlike President Trump playing golf whilst the bodies of the poor and the elderly dying of Covid pile up across the US.

For me, this myth has more sense now than it ever did. But Nero does not represent an individual any more, but our entire western idea of art and culture, a culture that until Covid lockdowns, continued business as usual despite a world on fire. Despite 200 species pushed to extinction every day, despite the soils turning to deserts, despite poverty rising faster than the seas, despite a tsunami of mental health issues paralysing young people, despite the far right spreading faster than the forest fires – our culture continues its escape into the same old forms of entertainment. The Roman Empire collapsed, partly due to ecological overstretch, but its strategy of bread and circuses is more alive than ever: keeping the people docile through diversion and distraction never failed.

In the summer of 2018 I was invited to the Aurillac international street theatre festival to give a talk during a professional seminar entitled: 'En marche... en marge... en rade...?', ('On the move... on the fringe... stranded...?'). On the panel was the deputy director of the festival (soon to become director), a couple of writers, and some friends from an outdoor dance company. The seminar was asking key questions about art in public space in this moment of crisis. Despite all the crowd barriers and health and safety restrictions could street art still be radical? Does this festival still make utopian work? Are street arts really challenging the status quo? Do we need a cultural Zad, a zone to defend free expression? Like I always do before accepting any invitation from a cultural institution, I went to the website and looked at its 'partners', a wall of corporate logos greeted me. There

was KPMG: world leaders in accounting – with their speciality of helping their clients, such as big oil companies like Total and Gazprom, numerous arms manufacturers and worse, to find tax havens, little utopias for the rich to avoid sharing their billions. There were local banks and the cherry on the cake: JCDecaux, one of world's largest outdoor advertising companies. Advertising corporations are perhaps the greatest polluters and corporate controllers of public space. As our friends, the art activists at Brandalism, say: "Corporate advertising influences every aspect of our modern lives: from how we feel about ourselves; our bodies; our understandings of gender, race and class; through to our perceptions of others and the world we live in. Advertising doesn't simply sell us products – it shapes our expectations of how meaning should be produced in life."

Key to Nero Culture, is this practice of artwashing. It is the use of art by toxic corporations to clean their public image by associating with progressive culture. The festival itself thus becomes part of the infrastructure of the corporation, a cool PR wing, where openings and cocktail parties can bring new networking opportunities but more importantly where the corporation's violent activities can be forgotten and most importantly forgiven. When we walk through the streets of the festival filled with so much creative joy, no one sees the consequences of the sponsors activities: the artic drilling platforms leaking, the flooded villages, the indigenous communities pushed off their expropriated land, the crops failing under the climate chaos, the birds poisoned, the emaciated bodies of the hungry. It's great magic, the art of misdirection.

If our art activism collective, The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, is commissioned or asked to do an action by an institution with sponsors that we find unethical, we normally refuse, not wanting our name and work to be used for artwashing, and always make the refusal public. In some cases we decide to intervene critically, knowing that

its likely to be professional suicide and that we won't be reinvited, but we cannot separate our ethics and our aesthetics, protecting life comes before nourishing our career. In the case of Aurillac I attended because our names were not in the programme (the panellists were invited after the printing) and we thought it was worth opening up the debate at such a key festival.

During the talk I suggested that art could be the most beautiful form of resistance when it becomes a force that recognised the real power of imagination, not as an escape from reality, but as a way to create it. The Zad had taught me how constructing a utopian life against this world, merging the yes and the no, dream and direct action, was the art of the future practiced in the present. 'Direct action', as our friend the anthropologist David Graeber once said, "is ultimately the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free".

As artists we should desert a culture that lets destructive corporations hide behind the masks of creativity that we carefully construct for them. If we were working in a time of slavery, would we have accepted to do our shows sponsored by the slave trade? Instead of being the fools in the palace, as artists in a time of crisis we should apply our creativity, our expressivity, our playfulness to solutions, not feed the wrecking machines. I had spent 25 years applying what I learnt from theatre and performance to direct action. From recruiting thousands of rebel clowns to recycling hundreds of bikes as tools of street disobedience, from choreographing a carnival of 10,000 masked people taking over London's financial centre to turning a theatre stage into an assembly to decide on the ethics of sabotaging banks, my work has always tried to follow Artaud's call for theatre to be life's double, intense, unmediated and world changing. For me the role of the artist in this war of money against life was always to render rebellion irresistible, to reinvent forms of disobedience, turn our actions into dreams on display, make performance useful again. At the Aurillac festival there was so much knowledge



© Robert Logan - disobedient bike training, COP15 - Copenhagen, 2009

and skill, so much ability to transform public space, tonnes of ways of expressing desire. Yet it felt like it was all caged, in a zoo, actions separate from the real issues at stake, separate from real communities, uprooted from place, ripped from life.

After the talk, I went to see the closing show of the festival, Trans Express' *Cristal Palace*. A crowd of thousands is packed like cattle in between crowd barriers in a town square, above us a monumental chandelier swings from a crane. Acrobats, clowns and musicians adorn it, waltz music becomes techno, the idea is to turn the public space into a ballroom. People stare up into the air, many experience the entire show via their smartphones streaming it, very few dance with the actors in the crowd. The atmosphere is not the wild party announced on the programme. I have been part of collectives that organised large resistance parties in public spaces. 8000 people dancing illegally on a motorway whilst some hidden under giant puppets drill into the tarmac to plant trees. That

was what I called a wild party. As I watch the chandelier rising and falling, like some luxury alien object out of reach of the people, I can't help thinking about the massive forest fires raging that same night in California, Sweden and Indonesia. The spectacle felt so much like the end of a decadent empire.

Of course there are many artists who want to be political, to resist the empire, not just build spectacles for it. But Nero culture makes sure that even they can't materially change anything, that they remain separate from the complexities of designing and choreographing daily life. So we have performances *about* revolutions, acrobatic circus pieces *reflecting* on the apocalypse, a dance show *exploring* migrants drowning, an installation in public space to *speak about* the ravages of debt on the poor, a tightrope show *contemplating* our alienation from the living world. It is a culture which continues to show the world to people, to represent the crisis, make pictures of politics. The audiences love it. Afterwards, those with the

means go to the bars and restaurants with their friends, to discuss and debate the issues that the show unearthed.

"WOW it was so beautiful, so powerful," Andrew says as he pours another glass of wine. "I was so moved," replies Louise, and they begin to talk about the biosphere collapse and the costumes, the special effects, the acting. Isn't this meant to be the pinnacle of their civilisation, the definition of being a good citizen, merging art and democracy, people getting together after a show to debate politics. Isn't that what Ancient Greece was all about?

But it is not political to discuss with a few friends after a show. What was political in Greece was that it was a community (one must not forget that the 'cradle of democracy' excluded women, foreigners and slaves), not individuals which assembled and debated the issues that affected their daily lives directly. The theatre was the place where the community took direct decisions about the running of their lives together and put them into prac-

tice. The show was not a separate thing to contemplate, it was a catalytic part of a long festival combining processions, ceremonies and rituals. Religion, politics and culture was seen as one. There was no word for 'art' as a separate part of life in Ancient Greece.

When Andrew and Louise go to bed after the show that night they feel so good, blessed by culture. But the next morning they go back to work, business as usual. Even in their dreams they cannot imagine that their civilisation, with its ridiculous line

of perpetual progress from Greece to infinity and beyond, is over.

### Act 3: After the Plague?



© Jay Jordan - The lighthouse at the ZAD built where they wanted to put the control tower

The Covid-19 virus has been a sudden glitch in the frictionless fiction of the status quo of historical progress, an unexpected yet predicted storm that has combined with all the others to blow everything off course. It's been like a global X-ray machine that has made visible all the deep inequalities of the system and somehow made the scale of this centuries-old explosive cocktail of crises more tangible. The old civilisational model, what we could define as patriarchal Western capitalist modernity, with its binary philosophical foundation in deathly dualisms: mind/body, self/ other, subject/object, nature/culture, matter/spirit, reason/emotion, sentient/non-sentient, female/male, straight/gay, art/life was already crumbling. The blueprint for these destructive binaries was the myth that said 'nature' was the backdrop for the theatre of humanity. A myth that has enabled the extractivist machines to devour human and more-than-human life for profit

everywhere. The virus turned the backdrop into centre stage.

The story for a few centuries was that art not only defined what was human but was civilisation's backbone. André Malraux claimed that without artworks civilisation would crumble "within fifty years", becoming "enslaved to instincts and to elementary dreams". Art turned us away from barbarism. But we know this is a lie; we all know that the officers of the concentration camps went to the opera in the evening after working in the gas chambers, we know that aesthetics and ethics have long been split apart.

The pandemic has certainly been an Anthropause – especially in the spring of 2020 when much of the world's economy shut down. With the consequent lockdowns, human spaces for art and culture and even the bars and restaurants, art's middle class an-

techambers, closed down. We were all forced to reconsider so much. For many in the cultural sector it is as if the world holds its breath, waiting for an after, waiting for a post-pandemic era, dying to get back to normal. As I write, there is a wave of theatre occupations by cultural workers spreading across France, asking for a reopening of their theatres, with the hashtag: #CultureEnDanger. Wars and plagues have a tendency to sabotage prevailing sentiments. Do we really want to return to theatre as normal, in the street or otherwise? Or do we want a shift towards something a lot more adventurous: a culture that turns back towards life, performances that, like ritual, remind us of our ties and our togetherness through mutual transformation.

Leo Tolstoy summarised art as a human activity where someone consciously conveys, by external signs, the feelings they have experienced, and thus infects others with those feelings. But contemporary science increasingly reveals to us what indigenous wisdom has known for so long: that feeling and expression is not the exceptional realm of the human, far from it. From the bower bird who for 50 million years has ground up pigment from fruit pulp seeds and painted his extraordinary bower to perform ritual dances to the humpback whales who rehearse their songs for hours on end, more-than-human beings are freely expressing the joy of being alive, and every cell in our bodies is in some ways doing the same thing, sensing, interpreting and expressing aliveness. Life, from the cells in your eyes to the blue whale in the ocean, is a swarm of entangled sensing and feeling flesh, matter that reveals itself through form.

In a few weeks time, as the spring blossoms in the hedgerows that I see out of my window, a tiny warbler (whose French name, Hypolaïs polyglotte, means ‘the many tongued harmonious one’) will return, with its song that resembles a merger of 90s modem sounds and lo-fi effects from vintage video games. No bigger than my fist it is able to imitate dozens of other birds. It replays samples from species in Europe and Africa, where it winters, into wild mixes. Our civilisation used to say this beautiful song was just an advertising jingle, a soulless soundtrack saying ‘come fuck me’ or ‘fuck off’, just another sonic weapon in the battle of biological survival and efficiency. They imagined birds like machines just obeying the dictatorship of DNA, only humans could have souls, and selves, only we could express emotions.

But if the warbler is able to imitate other species, then this mirroring, representing and arranging the replay, suggests to etho-

logists that the bird’s behaviour has the ability of abstraction. It experiences that there is self and world and perceives that it can act on this world according to a personal point of view, a sensitive inwardness, a sensing self. Its song isn’t a deterministic sequence of cause and effect, but an individual self freely expressing and celebrating its feelings of aliveness.

The civilisational shift that we are living through gorgeously muddles and complexifies every binary: perhaps nature is after all no different from culture, it too is the form that emerges from feeling. “If feeling is a physical force and the expression of this feeling is a physical reality whose meaning motivates organisms to act,” writes biologist Andreas Weber, “then we might understand living beings better if we imagine what is happening in the biosphere as, in a way, resembling artistic expression... Art then is no longer what separates humans from na-

ture, but rather it is life’s voice fully in us. Its message is that beauty has no function. It is rather the essence of reality.”

It is hard to imagine the reality of the world of the writer of instructions for playing the lute, written 700 years ago, which we began this essay with. But it is perhaps even harder to imagine what our descendants might think when they look back at our period in history in 700 years time. If Homo sapiens haven’t joined the extinction list by then, will they tell stories about a paradigm shift, more profound than the Neolithic and industrial revolutions, when culture turned towards life again and in so doing healed art, put it back together? Perhaps they will sing songs about the artists that deserted the extinction and representation machines, dissolving back into life and becoming real thaumaturges at last – those that reveal the wonders of life.



Jay Jordan (UK) has spent 30 years balancing on the tightrope between art and activism. Infamous for fermenting direct action on bicycles during a climate summit, throwing snowballs at bankers, launching a rebel raft regatta to shut down a power station and refusing to be censored by the BP fossil fuel sponsored Tate Modern, he is labelled as “domestic extremist” by the UK police and a “magician rebellion” by the French press.

He now co-facilitates the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (Labofii) with Isabelle Fremeaux. The Labofii inhabits the ZAD of Notre-dame-des-Landes, where an airport project was abandoned after 50 years of struggle. Jay Jordan is also the co-founder of Reclaim the Streets and the Clown Army, and co-director/writer of the book/film *Les Sentiers de L’utopie* (La Découverte, 2011).

🌐 <https://labofii.wordpress.com>

# ARTISTIC VIEW

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## ON COUNTRY

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Pippa Bailey talks to artist Jacob Boehme about his current project, *Wild Dog*

This piece was written on Wangal Land in the Eora Nation, otherwise known as Sydney. These lands have never been ceded. I pay respect to First Nations Elders and offer solidarity to all Indigenous people in the ongoing struggle for constitutional recognition.

2020 was a devastating year for artists all over the world as the coronavirus pandemic disrupted so much of what we have come to expect as 'normal'. For many, there was already a growing awareness that the way of life we have come to expect is destroying the living world. As an English-Australian 'settler' living on stolen land, the idea of reconnecting with 'the livings' casts a very different shadow when walking alongside artists from the oldest living culture in the world.

We find a moment to yarn via Zoom. The state border between NSW and Victoria is closed again due to a surge in Covid cases, a tiny cluster compared to what is going on in other parts of the world.

Jacob reminds me that he started performing on the streets in the western suburbs of Melbourne as a teenager using physical performance. He later studied puppetry at the Victorian College of the Arts. However, it was his training in dance at NAISDA, the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association, which embedded him in First Nations cultural traditions.

At NAISDA, Jacob learnt traditional performance, connecting dance directly to the place it is from. The students had the benefit of both mainland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. Through cultural exchange they would learn ceremonies from a specific community throughout the year and then go to perform it 'on Country'. In this way Jacob learnt a Tiwi Island Creation Ceremony. Preparing to perform on the Tiwi Islands, north of Darwin, the whole community helped to paint up the student's bodies with intricate local designs. The stu-



© The Wild Dog Project

dents then performed around a tree, the site of the story, where the dance came from and belonged.

This is what Jacob refers to as ceremonial arts. I fear it doesn't quite translate to the European context because the ceremony, although it may be built on centuries old tra-

ditions, seems more about the achievements of civilisation there rather than carrying a sense of responsibility in the human relationship to the natural world.

Jacob muses: "Performance in Western street arts has to be big and bold to capture attention and draw people to the show or

spectacle. Ceremonial Arts is very different because its purpose is intimate, the performers are in service to the stories and the place. A Western show is for the audience, but a ceremony is with them, they are playing a crucial part. The deep consideration of place and one's relationship and responsibility to the country, and the stories a country hold, are hugely important."

*Wild Dog* is Jacob's latest project and likely to be his focus for the next decade. The story of the Dingo is connected to Jacob's bloodlines on the Narangga (Yorke Peninsula) and Kurna (Adelaide) Nations. The story is part of a song line, sometimes known as a dreaming track, that works its way right up through the country from Adelaide to the top of the Northern Territory and over to far North Queensland, traversing over 5000km, where the story appears and reappears in many forms.

"Every Wild Dog song or story that we're tracking has geography. There was a practical natural location directly linked to the story. There is a (body) paint up that is directly linked to that location in that story, and in some cases there are still existing songs and dances that are in a direct relation to that paint up, which is in relation to that story, which is in relationship to that geography."

It is this interconnected relationship between people and other living things shared through story, dance, song and place that sets Indigenous cultures apart. According to Jacob's research, talking to Lore men and women, there are also traces of the Dingo story across other parts of Australia and even amongst Indigenous communities in Papua New Guinea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam and Southern China, linking to trade routes thousands of years old.

In order to be able to start using this Dingo or Wild Dog story, Jacob had to seek permission from Kurna Elders who will continue to guide and advise the project as it develops. Then in every new Indigenous Country or Nation, and we are talking about dozens of different communities where the song line and story appear, permission must be sought and negotiated with Traditional



© The Wild Dog Project

Owners, Elders and community members, so the story can be told the 'proper way', honouring the people and cultural practices of those places. Dingoes were water diviners and guided ancestors to waterholes and water sources, helping travellers sustain themselves on their journeys. Australia is the driest continent on Earth so this songline is all about survival. In a contemporary context that survival remains a strong imperative for continuing to tell these stories. This is a signifier of Indigenous culture: it crafts people with a humble respect for the past with a sense of liability for the future, very different from the modern artist, preoccupied with their own unique perspective.

First Nations people have proudly fought to maintain their culture despite genocide, violent subjugation and generations of stolen children that enabled colonisers to seize and exploit land, dislocating Indigenous people from Country, identity and sense of belonging. There is a growing awareness that climate change and a crisis of identity in Australia are directly impacted by this history and the ongoing denial of Indigenous knowledges.

"Ancient stories provide clues to what people are responsible for, because humans are not the only creatures reliant on those water sources," Jacob explains. "The ceremonies are there to keep you and the

ecology safe. As an apex predator Dingoes play a vital role in keeping biodiversity in equilibrium."

Jacob enthuses that through *Wild Dog* he is learning much about land and water management, caring for country and layers of different knowledge from agriculture to aquaculture to astrology, as well as how those knowledges have been passed on. The imperative for the project is to explore how this knowledge can continue to be passed on through a mix of ceremonial and contemporary arts, retained through culture. It will connect elders with younger generations. "Technology is likely to play a part, given that is where the mainstream culture is leading us, and we need to make sense of that from an Indigenous perspective."

*Wild Dog* will be for a wide-ranging audience with information likely to be layered to protect the custodians of the culture. On this journey there are things that even Jacob can't know, because Indigenous cultures have complex systems for knowledge transfer. There are also things he can't know yet, until he has shown that he will act responsibly with the information that he has been entrusted with. "Until I get my black belt, if you want to put it that way," he explains.

"In October, we're bringing nine communities together in Adelaide. That's the start.



Jacob Boehme performing in *Blood On The Dance Floor* © Bryony Jackson

We will be performing a ceremony that exists, recreating a ceremony that may not have existed for a couple of hundred years and turning that into a performance that can be received by the witnesses that show up. These ceremonies need to be accessible at some level to everyone, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Being able to straddle both worlds and honour ceremonial practice is complicated and it will take as long as it takes. That could mean an event taking three days? It won't be bound to a 60-minute 'showtime'."

Jacob and I agree that the spectacle approach to making street art is as seductive as marketing spin and easy to fall into. Ironically, it's even easier when 'ceremony' is increasingly being co-opted for non-Indigenous events. Jacob knows all too well the trap of creating ceremony for the non-Indigenous cultural elite and how this undermines its cultural importance.

Jacob thanks Covid-19 for stalling him. Unable to travel he was in lockdown for al-

most eight months in Melbourne, brewing ideas about how *Wild Dog* and its process will unfold. Covid has stopped him running towards an outcome. Part of the purpose of this work is to revive and enliven knowledge that has been broken. And if that's where the art stands now in this country, reconnecting and deepening its relationship to place, adapting cultural practices to honour old ways, in order to find new pathways ahead, then I think humans here stand half a chance of surviving the ecological emergency.



Jacob Boehme (Australia) is a Melbourne born and raised artist of the Narangga and Kurna Nations, South Australia. He describes himself as a multidisciplinary theatre maker and choreographer, creating work for the stage, screen and festivals. He is working between what we refer to as 'Western' performing arts and his Indigenous cultural heritage. Jacob is an outspoken cultural leader when leadership is in short supply.

For more on Jacob Boehme's work and *Wild Dog* see:

🌐 <https://www.jacobboehme.com.au/about>



Pippa Bailey (Australia) grew up on Wangal Land in Sydney, starting her career as a performer and reporter/producer with SBSTV. Pippa spent many years in the UK. She was Artistic Director for The Museum Of on London's South Bank and also for ohlart @Oxford House; an Associate Director with The World Famous - innovate company of pyrotechnicians and also produced the Total Theatre Awards at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2007-12. She is on the Advisory Board of IETM - International Performing Arts Network and a board member of Theatre Network NSW. Pippa was Director of ChangeFest 19 and is passionate about culture leading on climate action to create a fair and sustainable future.

# INCLUSION THROUGH ART

## FOOD FOR THOUGHTS

### THE MESSAGE OF THE MEDIUM

By Anand Rajaram

In thinking about diversity, inclusion and identity in the art world what can we learn from the forms themselves – from mask and puppetry to clown and virtual reality?  
Actor and artist Anand Rajaram on theatre and belief.

#### OM SHREE MAHAKALIKAYAE NAMAH KALI MA IS THE SUPREME POWER.

Once upon a time an ascetic named Raktabija stood on one leg in a forest, palms together, arms extended upwards, an antenna to the universe, face to the cosmos in meditation, for so long that he became a tree.

The concentrated prayer violently shook celestial abodes. God Shiva offered him a boon if he ceased. Raktabija asked that for every drop of his blood that touched the ground, 100 clones of him would appear, whose spilled blood would also yield clones. The boon was granted. Raktabija became War, his ambitious ignorant ego birthing more ignorance whenever challenged. Soon, this warrior had spawned an army of millions, threatening all creation.

In the celestial sphere, from Goddess Durga's *shakti* (power of life) beamed the divine projection of Kali Ma (Mother). With many arms bearing weapons, Kali Ma engaged simultaneously in multiple battles, while her long tongue caught the blood before it hit the ground to propagate. Rakta-



The Ashta-Matrikas (Kali Ma bottom right) battle copies of the demon Raktabija.

bija and his army were vanquished. Kali Ma defeats ego by using her tongue, which we channel through creative voice, discarding the prison of 'I, body', to swim the ocean of 'we, story'.

We are stories manifested in human form. When we tell stories, we become consciousness birthing life. As we live, we make stories to mark our time. When we die, we live on through the stories we leave.

Stories also cast us in world views that label us the enemy. We temper them when we channel the power of Kali Ma's tongue.

As artists, we are guides via art to a deeper plane to encounter Maya, the illusory nature of reality, the curtain obscuring divine vision, moving from translucence to transparency. As performers, we offer the visceral experience of difficult lessons without risk, awakening wisdom and empathy.

As storytellers, our central job is to create empathic response, provoking the audience to imagine a world it hasn't considered. The problem is, we haven't been challenging audiences, we've been catering to their limited perspective. Yet, our imagination can conjure infinite lives.

In Canada, as in much of the world, we celebrate multiculturalism. What is 'culture'? The colonial definition centres on non-Eurocentrism. So, checkpoints of identity are set up along geographic borders, defining people by broad categories of language, clothing, race, divergence from the dominant Eurocentric paradigm. The 'multi' is all extrinsic markers, how we see each other, not ourselves.

Imagine identical twins, similar in look, socioeconomic status, family dynamic. One twin loves table tennis, the other badminton. Are these not cultural activities? The definition of multiculturalism, then, is pluralistic celebration, the definition of diversity. It could relate to language, race, clothes, but these solely external parameters are narrow and limiting. We are all multicultural because we have free will. As we change the stories projected on us, replace them with our own narratives, we edge closer to immortality. This is the eternal struggle of the marginalised, the crushing ego death of leaving the world ignored as if you never existed.

Through performance we transmute our identity and curate that of others, having audiences not only bear witness to our transformation, but powerfully engage in a suspension of disbelief. We change their perception, present the world anew. After all, empathy shapes our perception. And stories engender all human civilisation.

So if stories liberate, enlighten, teach, emancipate, and guide us, if hearing a variety of perspectives increases our omniscient understanding, why do we struggle with diversity and inclusion? We are multifaceted beings living in an illusory world of stories. The tension of mortality is the most common link between us; that should be the foundation of our identity. But, since we have no control over death, we struggle to control life, wrestling at the heart of the dominant

paradigm against ideological erasure. Who wants to be forgotten?

Our struggle with diversity and inclusion centres around power brokers unwilling or unable to see the problem. Inclusion is complicated. To be included suggests a centre to be brought into. As such, it asks of those outside that centre, 'Where is home?' To be home asking that is very different from having left home responding. To understand this paradigm is to appreciate your sense of home, based in your own identity, is at odds with the dominant paradigm, so to try to bring people into the circle is to reorient home for them, not change the dominant paradigm. It puts the merit on those making the effort towards inclusivity without really recognising the profound challenge of those who are marginalised and must assimilate.

My parents and I were born in India. They'd spent more than a third of their lives there before moving to Canada, maintaining an idealised memory of 'back home', where the ways of the 'old country' were superior to the 'lazy, loose morality' of this new world. Every trip back, the India they knew had dissipated further until they realised India was never their home. They weren't just outsiders in Canada, but disconnected from the daily lives of everyone they'd known for 29 (Amma) and 39 (Appa) years, outsiders to home. Time is the country to which you can never return.

There are many approaches toward inclusion and diversity, all have merits and missteps. The most troubling may be that, as one form of discrimination is replaced by the perception of another, we are sowing the seeds for an embattled future. Resources are still limited, just reallocated. We're swinging the capitalist pendulum, not destroying the metronome.

All effort is progressive, evolution dictates we'll learn to fit in to survive, and there is no one path forward to a better world. I'm thankful so many opportunities now exist for societally disabled, IBPOC (Indigenous, Black and People Of Colour) LGBTQI+ and female-identifying artists because I know this inclusivity will grow our collective consciousness rapidly, jet fuel in the rocket to enlightenment.

My critique is not of any one effort, but the resting on laurels, the perception we are made morally superior by these new policies without addressing how we were morally bankrupt before. This is not to harp on the past, but to realise the best intentions of that earlier age didn't see it's own complicity, then as now breeding roomfuls of elephants. One day they may trumpet war.

For all that institutions may do, much may be gained investing in self-sustainable entrepreneurship. My sense of agency, of empowerment, begins at my creativity. I am the seed, the tree. An environment that nourishes me will reap the benefit of my fruit. Institutional mentorships and apprenticeships are like sitting in the cockpit, never flying. Ending in self-sustaining agency would be achieving the potential of the programme.

A demonstration of our present blinders is that all language around equity and opportunity centre on those identity markers earlier named. What is the identity marker of class, the hashtag? Has it been branded? Co-opted by advertising? Inspired PR campaigns innovating casting and distribution? Do we even have a word that isn't clinical, like 'disenfranchised', dehumanising, like 'homeless', insulting like 'beggar' or 'tramp' or 'hobo'? Why would they not be included in wokeness? Because of survival. Resource allocation. Not Capitalism the system, but capitalism the mindset, which thrives on maintaining the status quo, dominance by wealth.

Class is not centre-stage right now because our blinders are narrow: only so many issues at once. We need to extrapolate from our current conversation centred around our 'wokeness' to ask about the place of class struggle in the larger argument. What we are seeing with affirmative action programmes is inclusivity of marginalised communities across middle/upper class strata, but not a consideration of class divides, the danger being that once we have reached some sense of equity in representation across all other groups, the historically marginalised working class will continue to be marginalised. The question of why we struggle with inclusion and diversity may be answered by looking at who is not currently served by the changes being proposed.

What are the blinders we have in theatre? Well, how actively do we encourage new forms of expression? What styles of performance are disenfranchised from the mainstream and which artist practitioners are thereby economically oppressed?

Thinking of the audience, what modes have they never experienced? Artists working in puppetry, mask, mime, clown, performance art, dance, and other 'non-naturalistic' modalities are theatre incarnate. A play may be made into a film without a radical reimagining, but apart from puppetry, none of these other modes can.

Most artists I know who work exclusively in these modes struggle financially. And yet they continue, committed. With mainstream engagement, theatres developing relationships with these groups and creating presentation opportunities could offer a wider variety of styles, attracting a larger demographic who may not enjoy 'naturalism', but would adore an improvisational mask dance. Non-verbal work would diminish language challenges, reach refugee and immigrant communities. The democratisation of theatre is not only in the body represented on and off-stage, or the class of audience offered discount or free tickets, it's in the breadth of imagination four walls can encompass. And not just the playground of styles curated, but the artists who make their living by them.

Puppetry, mask, mime and clown are theatre incarnate because they invite the imagination in immediately. The performer must make the audience suspend disbelief quickly. If they can do that and maintain it, they are masters of the craft. These forms demonstrate the power of an audience to accept any given circumstance, at least initially. They show that if theatres had cast as diversely before as they are doing now they would've been at the forefront of change, socially relevant and engaged, not struggling to build new audiences. Theatre has the power to shape an audience's belief, so the theatre must first check its own conviction. Does the theatre believe it? Is diversity and inclusion important?

Also, these forms have the ability to transform identity markers. Anyone can play



Augmented Reality Masks © Anand Rajaram

anything in a mask or through a puppet. Declare to the audience you are a penguin and, so long as you believe it, they'll recognise the penguin in themselves. The democratisation of the theatre, and the liberation of both audience and theatre makers, can be found here, in commitment to the act of transcendence beyond perceived reality.

Freedom to mask identity connects these forms and XR, where spectators also abandon their physical reality. Digital theatre creation is not yet financially accessible for all to participate in or watch, but it is close. Besides the significant economic challenges, XR can be the site of a great equalising. XR is the catch-all phrase for AR, augmented reality, VR, virtual reality, and MR, mixed reality. XR combines the visual aesthetic of produced film and the immediacy of live theatre. This new art space sits at the nexus of community building, accessibility, and economic sustainability. XR, a digital form, with digital distribution, worldwide border-free artistic collaborations in a communal Zoom, accessible to all, funded by the crowd, is a wave, coming.

XR is more than just another art form. It demands a different engagement from au-

diences and performers. Audiences watch a Zoom show with their camera and mic off, check their phone, walk away from the computer, make lunch, not restricted as they would be in a theatre. Audiences wearing VR headsets are totally restricted, but unlike in a theatre, no one has dragged them there against their will to be snoring fifteen minutes in.

As theatre is an actor's medium (no one to edit between the actor and audience), film a director's medium (in the edit, the power), and TV a writer's medium (the showrunner as storyteller), so XR is a spectator's medium.

Every aspect of an XR show is curated to the spectator experience, not only aesthetic, but duration and platform. The spectator has complete agency. More than this, it's live and dynamic. The spectator can shape their own experience. Actor performance is only one aspect, interactivity is the key. Freedom of the spectator to comment or participate in the show is central. So the performance of the audience is the heart of the planning. The methods of building audience patronage will radically shift, since the subscriber base no longer needs to be geographically local.

The curation of a global audience invites global stories, global collaborators. Each creator/performer brings their own local influences and styles, the emergent performance forms developing as rapidly as TikTok trends. To understand the shift in performance style, we may look to the past, to ancient traditional forms still in practice, like the 250 year-old Kerala art form, *kathakali*, developed from the 2000 year-old *koodiyattam*.

Traditionally it was only performed at night inside temples, the performer's torch the only light, illuminating stunning make-up. The stories, mythic tales of Gods. Comedies, dramas, with morals and a codified gestural vocabulary. The *mudras*, or hand gestures, a kind of sign language, the hands 'speaking' the dialogue as singers sing. The performers don't speak in the show. The costume is spectacular and the face paint takes time to apply. For all the attention to visual presentation, it's curious that there is no focus on the audience sitting in front of them.

I attended a performance, saw people sleeping, walking around, texting, eating, kids playing. The ground beneath the performers' bare feet was laid with only a blanket, covering dirt not cleared of rocks. They didn't mind the pain. The crying baby, ringing cell-phone, immaterial. The low attendance or distracted focus was the least concern. I asked how they weren't troubled by any of that distraction. They said the training is to not consider the audience at all. They'd light the wick at the beginning (connecting to ancestors), then perform for that lamp light, the tradition, and Godhead. I asked if that meant they don't really modulate or vary the perfor-

mance, they said no, they perform for God, the audience invisible.

The essence of this type of performance is selflessness, surrendering to the tradition, performing with no feedback. This is diametrically opposed to Western performance best summed up in the story of Laurence Olivier who asked an actor, "You know why we do this?" then leaned close to their face, "LOOK AT ME LOOK AT ME LOOK AT ME!" The ideological shift in XR for performers from performing live for those physically present to performing for a 'God camera' with none of that live audience feedback is a significant one. It's bound to impact both performance styles and the spectatorship's intimacy and agency. As the advent of film created a new style of 'natural' acting which then impacted the theatre in writing, performance and presentation, the impact of XR on theatre remains to be seen. My belief and assumption is there will be a departure in the theatre from 'naturalism', but replaced by what? My best guess would be more heightened reality, lucid-dream magic realism, based on XR's influence.

The possibilities of the future of theatre post-pandemic will be aided by the development of XR. Though it's an independent art form, not theatre, the act of gathering live (digitally or in person) will be changed. And theatre that integrates AR will for a time be the cutting edge.

XR accomplishes an aspect of what Kali Ma tantric devotees hope to experience, transcendence from the physical realm. The body

and mind are still entwined, but the mind gets trained to see that reality is not immutable; imagine what pure consciousness, liberated from the constraints of the body would feel like.

This makes Kali Ma a Goddess for this age. As social media increases our connectivity, our interactions, emboldens our perspectives, silos our ideologies, in its most destructive state, posts are drops of the blood of Raktabija, armies of followers gathering silently.

The reason we struggle with diversity and inclusion is analogous to a news story about a teenager who invented a cheap way to desalinate water, otherwise a very costly process. He said all the research had been on how to extract the salt from the water. His method began by identifying what the percentage of salt was to water. It was 10%. He thought why focus on the 10%, not the 90%, and added a safe for consumption binding agent to the water to bond with the salt. The salt clumped together and was discarded and this teenager may have solved one of the most pressing issues of our time, water scarcity. If that which makes us different is only 10%, honour that difference, but strategise towards that 90% common ground. That's equality not exceptionalism.

**OM SHREE MAHAKALIKAYAAE NAMAH  
KALI MA IS THE SUPREME POWER.**

What is supreme power? Ultimate consciousness, complete connection with all sentient beings, outside of time and space. We now have a tool for practicing.



Anand Rajaram (Canada) is an actor, writer, director, puppeteer, mask performer, teacher and performance artist based in Toronto.

🌐 [www.anandrajaram.com](http://www.anandrajaram.com)

## WALLS OF STORIES



Interview with Aravani Art Project collective by Arundhati Ghosh

Founded in Bangalore in 2016, Aravani Art Project is a women and trans women art collective that creates colourful – and sometimes gigantic – wall paintings. Arundhati Ghosh speaks to members of the collective about the stories behind and in the artworks.

**Arundhati:** I've been following the work of Aravani Art Project for many years now, but I'm keen to learn from you how this group came about. How did it happen?

**Purushi:** So, I was working with the filmmaker Tabitha Breese on a documentary about the transgender community in India and Poornima was part of it. Poornima and I shared a lot of special moments and we became very good friends. We talked about the arts and about this idea of wall painting. I didn't understand much, but had so much trust in her that I invited all my friends from the community one day to paint a wall at KR market in Bangalore. It all unfolded from there; we have built this group on a strong foundation of friendship and trust.

**Poornima:** Our collective, or I'd like to call it family, has grown organically and has been blessed with connections across the world. TRUST is the most important component of this collective. The people from the transgender community in India form a strong network and once they are aware of the work and its premises, it becomes easier for us to trust each other.

**Arundhati:** Yes, trust is such an important part of this work, as well as our journeys together, right? So how did you decide to do what you do?



© Aravani Art Project

**Poornima:** As part of that documentary project, we filmed transgender people answering questions on camera about their life, their joys and sorrows. Off camera, I found time to bond with them and it was effortless! Something about my own mental health and the situation I was in with my personal life allowed me to empathise and heal by listening to their stories of bravery and hope. It felt surreal to me that our society was losing out on learning from these incredible people. After being part of such a project for almost three and a half years, I ex-

perienced extreme guilt and felt the urge to do something for the wellness of the people from the community. I felt so cut off from my own family and friends who were not able to understand the people from this community. I felt a sense of responsibility to do my bit.

**Arundhati:** What does making art mean to you? How does it make you feel?

**Raji:** I have always liked art from a young age, but I never thought I would end up painting



© Aravani Art Project

again as a trans woman. As a young boy, my interest in the arts was not something I could pursue. But now art is helping me slowly come out of my depression. I keep thinking of the days I've spent painting large walls in public with all my friends from the collective, or sometimes painting canvases alone at home, it just makes me come alive. I feel peaceful when I create art amidst all the chaos.

**Arundhati:** I admire the range of stories that I see in your work. What kind of stories do you like telling through the artwork?

**Sadhna:** In the early stages, our artworks were very focused on colour and shape, just like pieces from an art class, except we were all learning by painting directly on the wall. Our visual style took shape with our first mural in Bangalore. We started by painting faces/portraits of trans people because we felt that it was a face that so-

ciety was shunning. Our work has moved through so many different turns. I love the style and the place we've arrived at. Our art conveys stories of trans people, their rights, what they love, what they have dreamed of, their views on and anecdotes about society, their history, culture, tradition, sometimes their friends, neighbours or allies. We intersperse these with lots of flora, fauna and patterns that are inspired by our beautiful country.

**Arundhati:** In your work I also see stories of other people who are often marginalised or made invisible in the city. I see daily wage labourers, sanitation workers, bus drivers, construction workers — people who build the city, make it run, and yet have so little claim on it. Also I see the elderly, children, animals and those with disability — again people the city often forgets about.

**Poornima:** When we initially began our work, we had to create a visual language and most importantly listen to and voice the ideas of the transgender community. Slowly, as we began to gain momentum with our work, we realised that we could move into spaces that involved other communities who are also marginalised. For example: when we chose to paint at Sonagachi in Kolkata, it was clear that we had to collaborate with the women there — sex workers and trans sex workers. Another example would be extending our art-based approach to gender sensitivity to schools. We've collaborated with organisations that work with women who have survived domestic violence, acid attack survivors, people with HIV, and migrant children.

**Arundhati:** Do you face any challenges to making public work?

**Purushi:** The challenges with our first wall were internal and concerned the depiction of a trans person. The debate was around the politics of representing a trans woman with or without facial hair. It was an interesting challenge. A lot of times the public look at us with doubt when we are working, or when a wall has just begun. They always look at us in a way that we know is teasing us. By the time we finish the wall their perspective on us changes completely. This gives me immense pride. We've had some problems with the noise, weather and traffic of public space. Sometimes it's tough to block it out and work. A fundamental challenge which is positive is the height and the scope of our work.

**Arundhati:** Your community is severely marginalised, humiliated, and denied the dignity we all deserve in society. Does being artists change that? Are you still subjected to discrimination? Please share a few stories if you would like to...

**Several answer this one:** Too many to write down! But as a collective we believe that every small step is important. Being an artist is itself almost to be an outcast in a country such as ours right now. We can all celebrate and feel alone together, perhaps.

**Arundhati:** May I please share one story that I heard from Poornima which made me so sad and angry at the same time? You had been invited to present your work at a venue, but when you arrived the people at the gate didn't allow you in because you were trans women. You were the special guests and yet socially you were looked down upon. I felt so hurt thinking how hard it must be for you to negotiate all of this and yet work so joyously. When I see the amazing colours in your work, I hope I can learn to do that. Tell me, has making art and being artists changed your lives in any way?

**Thara:** To be an artist with Aravani has been a great support. Especially during the pandemic, as an artist I have received the support to survive and sail through the difficult times and I am very happy about that. My life as an artist has made me gain respect around my neighbourhood. Everyone knew me and always associated me with begging and sex work; I have stopped almost all of that now. I have a lot more to learn and practise as an artist. But I'm really living a nice life because of art.

**Arundhati:** Are there also stories of hope where people have embraced you and your work?

**Poornima:** Whenever we receive a query for a project it's either Sadhna or I who decides what kind of project it is. We often ask them the reason why they would like to work with us, in order to understand their thought process. More often people approach us because of the way our art looks and not because it is a collective of trans and cis people, which is already a moment to celebrate for us.

**Arundhati:** Is working within corporate or institutional environments different to working on public art out in the open? Do you feel safe in both places?

**Aditi:** It's not really different. Each has rules and policies. Both have a scope of work,

tasks assigned each day, deadlines to meet. While the corporate spaces are safe, with HR governing the office environment and keeping everyone in check, in public places it's the team who keeps an eye on one another and there are bystanders who sometimes become helpers/saviours. In both cases, one has to keep to herself before anything else.

**Arundhati:** What have some of the stories been about how the work is accepted and celebrated by people?

**Poornima:** The sheer fact that we have lived through six years of the collective by working on all kinds of projects that were

commercial, community based, or deeply engaged with the public, including digital media projects, book covers, and almost 60 wall artworks in public spaces, big corporations, schools, hospitals, etc. This is enough proof that we are celebrated for our work, for the people who do it and more.



© Aravani Art Project



© Aravani Art Project



Aravani Art Project recently finished a large-scale mural in Bangalore city for the Museum of Art and Photography, and are now working on several projects across Bangalore and Chennai.

🌐 [www.aravaniartproject.com](http://www.aravaniartproject.com)



Arundhati Ghosh (India) is the Executive Director at India Foundation for the Arts (IFA). She has 20 years of experience in arts philanthropy. She is a recipient of the Global Fundraiser Award from Resource Alliance, the Chevening Clore Leadership Award, and the Gurukul Scholarship for Leadership and Excellence at the London School of Economics. She speaks and writes on arts and philanthropy for leading Indian and international cultural networks including On the Move, The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC), Kultura Nova Foundation, among others.

# ALLOWING A PUBLIC SPACE FOR SOLIDARITY AND CREATION

## FOOD FOR THOUGHTS

### ARTISTIC PRACTICE, RADICAL CARE

By Roselle Pineda

The pandemic has intensified inequality and insecurity, but also created a space to rethink our underlying structures. If others are seizing the moment, why can't artists?

Curator and artist Roselle Pineda on communities coming together and the liveable life.

When the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020, the world as we knew it stopped. Many nations went into lockdown and we were forced to confine ourselves to safe spaces. Even then we faced an uncertain future in which, if we survived, most of us would

have to withstand a global economic crisis. It is as if *the wind got up in the night and took our plans away*, as the Chinese proverb goes, and we suddenly found ourselves in a strange moment and space of perennial waiting.

The precarity that the pandemic has hurled us into has forced us to experience two

opposite extremes in time and space – that of standing still, as we become more and more confined to our own little spaces and pockets of time; and that of hypervelocity, as the number of infections and deaths, and the sheer amount of information we discover about the virus, changes at unprecedented speed. A very tangible panic has crept in as the foundation of the current world order, entrenched in accumulated capital, begins to crumble, falling to crush the most vulnerable and marginalised.

Indeed, the pandemic has intensified what Judith Butler in her book *Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly* refers to as the 'falling away' of strongholds and support systems with/in our society. Now more than ever, we are confronted with news of people losing their jobs; with the disenfranchised being stripped of the choice to stay home because their lives depend on a daily wage; with the situation of immigrants, who make up a large percentage of frontline workers in the pandemic, facing an even more precarious situation with regard to their residency statuses; and with the actions of right wing and/or fascist regimes who weaponise the pandemic to suppress dissent and set up more authoritarian



A community garden run by SAKA - Artist Alliance for Genuine Land Reform and Rural Development.  
© Courtesy of SAKA

regimes. Truly, as the Argentine philosopher Miguel Benasayag has said, the pandemic has become a 'tyrant's dream'.

In my own country, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has been one of the most unsuccessful leaders in dealing with the pandemic. While he and his lackeys hold on to their seat of power through widespread militarism, his regime has failed to provide a comprehensive plan of action against the pandemic at the same time as it has led the country into an even more dismal economic state, with COVID-related debt now in the trillions of PH pesos and counting. Worse, he organises his 'combat COVID-19' programmes under a quasi-martial law, crushing debate, dissent, and resistance against the regime. Not only are the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) placed in charge of these civic health programmes, they are also implemented alongside Duterte's counterinsurgency plans and policies. These are characterised by numerous instances of coercion and harassment, as well as by raids and killings of artists, activists, community workers, lawyers, researchers, and others deemed 'dissenters' or 'communist terrorists'.

This worsening situation on the ground calls on us to resist, to gather, to assemble, and to protest against positions of precarity. But how do we protest when the world is at a standstill? Where do we find a space for progressive action when we are in the space in between? How do we gather and forge solidarity when maintaining distance is today's form of solidarity?

Perhaps the radical potential lies in recognising that while precarity is unevenly distributed, it is, unfortunately, still a universal condition. As such, our shared experiences of dispossession could be regarded as points of intersection and solidarity, not only within our local contexts and communities but also globally – a global unity of the dispossessed. The radical potential of the space in between lie in transforming this global unity of the dispossessed into a kind of radical care, realising what Butler describes as an interdependent form of



SAKA community kitchens help to address food insecurity. © Courtesy of SAKA

cohabitation, where one form of life is not in a position of privilege over another and life is 'livable' for all, not just for the privileged few. The radical potential of our creative practice is perhaps to find, as Jacques Rancière puts it in his *Dissensus*, "new ways of making sense of the sensible [and] new configurations between the visible and the invisible [...] between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time – [and] new bodily capacities". The use of art and performance to reimagine, reframe, reinvent, and find new ways of seeing and doing gives us a potent practice to make sense of our space in between.

The performative body has the polemical potential inherent in its materiality and the way it occupies, carves out and intervenes in spaces, struggling against various forms of invisibility and disenfranchisement to create what Hannah Arendt calls 'spaces of appearances'. Indeed, while performance has been one of the art sectors most affected by the pandemic, it was also one of the first to respond to the 'invisibility' that the pandemic trapped us in by creating artistic productions in and during quarantine. Whether these responses came in the form of montages of ballerinas dancing from home, musicians giving lockdown concerts, or festivals and other performing companies shifting to virtual platforms, they were powerful demonstrations of artistic resilience and the right to present, perform and

appear. They also sparked timely conversations on the precarious situation that the creative sectors faced even before the pandemic. These 'performance practices from home' were not only expressions of the artists' untiring commitment to their craft; they also gave us, the audience, a glimpse of their domestic environments and ways of living. In these documentations of private space made present in the (virtual) public sphere, we have both borne witness to a beautiful archive and deluge of creativity of and from confined spaces, and seen how these confined spaces have taken their toll on performing artists and on all of us.

These conversations, which started quite intimately with artists documenting their lockdown lives, have also taken shape in various virtual gatherings that focus on the economy and ecology of artistic practices, and the power structures that support them. During the international symposium 'Conversations on Curation and Performance in the Time of Halting and Transformation', spearheaded by Performance Curators Initiatives (PCI) and held in October 2020, Canadian dance scholar, curator, and educator Dena Davida spoke of the numerous ongoing meetings happening in North America regarding the future of the performing arts field. Mostly attended by artists, presenters, venue directors, curators, scholars, and programmers, these meetings have discussed a range of concerns, from

raising funds for the most badly affected workers and practitioners in the performing arts field, to the systemic inequality caused by the devaluation and mishandling of public funds and the practice of 'gatekeeping' in their distribution.

Another thread has been the radical transformation of dance and performing arts as a field of study, with dance programmes adapting to the challenges raised by recent social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter, as well as to the aesthetic shifts brought about by the pandemic. All of this debate is held with a view to emerging from the pandemic with a more caring and humane outlook, as well as proposals for restructuring current institutions and support systems in the performing arts.

The PCI 2020 Symposium's recurring provocation to forge a 'curatorship of care' (founded on the Latin term *curare* from which the practice of curation evolved) invokes the inherent relationality of performance by extending the curatorial mandate of 'care for materials' towards 'care for relationships'. Performance has always been a practice of relation, whether that's relating to a perceived audience, to participants within the practice, or even to non-human elements such as space, site, atmosphere and sound. This practice of relation is a potent way to understand, navigate and imagine what a curatorship of care might be like, as well as to think about how this curatorship of care might be transformed into a model of radical care that can expand outside performance practice, forming what Judith Butler writes about as an ethical obligation to care for as well as be responsible for one another.

At FRESH STREET #4, keynote speaker and festival organiser Sepehr Sharifzadeh spoke of the open communication within his own neighbourhood in Tehran to illustrate a kind of model for this ethical obligation to care and be responsible for each other. Sharifzadeh described how neighbours would regularly check in on each other, on how they were doing, on what they needed, even before the pandemic. This practice of caring for thy neighbour has been a widespread phenomenon during the pandemic. We have seen expressions of camaraderie

and support among neighbours, as well as collective action and organising in support of community needs. In the Philippines, for instance, the artist solidarity group SAKA or Sama-samang Artista para sa Kilusang Agraryo ('Artist Alliance for Genuine Land Reform and Rural Development') has focused on the tending of community gardens and community kitchens as a means of collective action against food insecurity in poor, communities that have been badly hit by the pandemic. The current phenomenon of community pantries in the Philippines, started by the artist Patricia Non as a small and simple pantry stocking basic goods such as rice, vegetables, fruits, alcohol, and face

However, these community pantries quickly got on the radar of the fascist Duterte government, and within several days the initiators were 'red-tagged' (labelled as being left-leaning, subversive, communist, or terrorist) by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, leading to the closure of several community pantries and the profiling and harassment of the people who started them.

In this instance, we could infer that because the current systems in place are corrupt to the core, and indeed staunchly committed to maintaining our positions of precarity and dispossession, the practice of radical care



Maginhawa Community Pantry - one of a growing number across the Philippines. © Maginhawa

masks, along with a sign reading "Magbigay ayon sa kakayahan, kumuha ayon sa pangangailangan", a rough Filipino translation of the famous quote, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" popularised by Karl Marx, has spread like wildfire throughout the whole nation, growing from a single community pantry to about a hundred in the span of a week.

also demands political action. Our ethical obligations towards one another also mean engaging in a struggle for collective rights that will minimise, if not dispel, conditions of precarity for all, whether it be economic, mental, emotional, environmental, or political. As such, radical care must go beyond small communities and beyond our neighbourhoods. As a pastor from Indiana,

Thomas Horrocks, quipped, “loving our neighbours means dismantling the systems that oppress them”.

This point was picked up at FRESH STREET by Chiara Gusmeroli, who underlined the need for an unwavering commitment to act, participate, speak out, negotiate, assemble, and claim the “right to appear”. “Coming together,” she says, is just the beginning; we must “keep together” and “work together” to continue to pressure the powers-that-be. It is our ethical obligation and collective responsibility to struggle in, with, and against precarity.

This call for collective responsibility and the forging of a collective voice is one that is now sounding throughout the world. In the ‘Globe Occupy: Remake the World/Remake the Globe’ event held in Rome, Italy from 14-19 April 2021, over a year after the pandemic was declared, the collective voice of the Art, Entertainment, and Culture Workers’ Network, was loud and clear:

Today we say: It’s enough! [...] This stratified and heterogeneous city assembly, today

occupies a public space to strongly affirm the need to rethink a sector, which was in crisis well before the health emergency [...] This is the time to intertwine the struggles, to get out of invisibility, to speak out [...] We do not need to reopen the theaters and cultural spaces, if the conditions to do so, in safety for everyone, do not exist. The indiscriminate so called restart penalizes the most fragile experiences and fuels competition, aggravating an already collapsing system. Choosing between health and work is not a questionable option. We need to structurally rethink the conditions of our lives and our work, giving the possibility to all the subjectivities that exist in the city, to imagine models that are sustainable, based on collaborative bottom up practices, also replicable elsewhere. What we have been experiencing on our skin in recent months is only the inevitable collapse of a system that is unsustainable for all of us, which today concerns those who are more fragile and will soon end up desertifying the entire landscape. We claim the right to a continuous basic income, to a paid and permanent training,

because time of research and study is work. [We] need new social rights and new protections, we need tools against discrimination and inequalities between subjects; a need [for] an access to art and culture for everyone is clearly emerging. We defend the informality of the spaces of artistic and cultural production currently excluded from the financing circuits, and we reiterate the need for a revision of the public financing criteria. From this public place, which lives of a strange combination between public and private, today we take word. Today we enter to go out and we invite you to do it with us, to build a collective discourse in which everyone can recognize themselves and immediately begin to imagine together new paradigms, new statutes, new social rights for precarious, autonomous, intermittent work. We invite single workers, artists, technicians, operators, companies, artistic and cultural institutions, theaters, festivals, research centers, formal and informal spaces to support our struggle.

Let us heed the call. The time is now.



Roselle Pineda (The Philippines) is an educator, researcher, curator, dramaturge and cultural worker. She is the founder, artistic director and curator of the Aurora Artist Residency Program and Space (AARPS) and the Performance Curators Initiatives (PCI). She teaches at the Department of Arts Studies, University of the Philippines Diliman; and is currently taking her PhD in Creative Arts on practice-led creative research and community arts at the University of Wollongong, Australia.

[http://wikipacewomen.org/wpworg/en/?page\\_id=5023](http://wikipacewomen.org/wpworg/en/?page_id=5023)

# ARTISTIC VIEW

## PUBLIC SPACE, PRIVATE LIVES



Interview with Azadeh Ganjeh by Sepehr Sharifzadeh

If the safety of the individual depends on the health of the collective, how does public space (and performance in it) contribute to a cohesive society?

Producer Sepehr Sharifzadeh speaks with the Iranian playwright and director Azadeh Ganjeh, whose work in site-specific and immersive theatre sees public space as a collective extension of private life.

How did you enter this realm of theatre in public space?

I began my education in civil engineering but I was working in theatre even then, while I was studying. There was a general belief that you couldn't live off of art, so on the recommendation of my family I studied civil engineering to have another source of revenue that would allow me to work in art freely, without money as an obstacle or influence. As for public space, I always liked to wander the city. I love the city and I love to be free there – something which, in many ways, is not always possible. But then I discovered that it's possible to perform in the street. Theatre led me to work in urban spaces because it was important for me that theatre reach everyone.

In the early 2000s, performing outdoors was not a common thing to do in Iran. We did have some street theatre, but mainly within the off programmes of larger festivals, and the very spirit of street theatre – political voices – had been taken away from it, making it more or less a pedagogic theatre. We lacked polyphony in our street theatre. By 'we' I mean different parts, or classes, of society. We were able to go to the theatre and there we'd feel somewhat intellectual, feel that we were connected, that we were a collective, but it was a collective that wasn't really growing or bringing in new members.



Always passes by you... © Roozbeh Vatankhah

So I thought both that we had to reach other people, and that we shouldn't limit ourselves to being inside theatres. Going to the street and performing in public places was also very important for me because my work was connected to social issues. I wanted to talk about what is current, what is real, what is happening to everyone.

I also knew that I needed to be in dialogue with people on the street. Not in a one-way communication, where people just receive your message, but through performance

that lets the public cooperate and interact. Then you, the artist, can learn something, and the public in turn can give something to the event. I found the idea of Forum Theatre was very well suited to that. That's why I began my work in community theatre with Forum Theatre. I tried to approach public space very honestly, not trying to manipulate it but being very direct. It's theatre and it needs your collaboration. For me, it was important that we found our voice, and those other participants in different regions of the city, and from across society, found theirs.

**How do you ordinarily find your ideas?  
Or how do they come to you as a city  
wanderer?**

It always begins with a dilemma, with something that I think we have to talk about. I would say that I mainly work with forbidden memories – events in our sociopolitical history which, for many reasons, are not being discussed. These are collective memories held by many, and yet talking about them, and reminding people of them, is forbidden. By working with these forbidden memories I try to make a collective memory for the city. I feel that we are distracted, that we are shut out from society. We are limited and we're also limiting ourselves.

I also think about how I should reach people, how they can participate, how they can relate through theatre to an issue. And then I think about the form. For example, when I wanted to talk about the issue of polygamy in Iran – as a law had been approved in parliament to say that a man could marry another woman without any consent from his wife – I created the piece *Always passes by you...* I can't know what other people think, so I decided to create an event where people could come and talk freely, to share their personal voices and ideas in regard to those laws, and to share their experiences through the two formats of Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre and Invisible Theatre. So my way of working is that I first think about an issue, and then find a way

to share around it. By thinking through this, and about what kind of collaboration it needs, I find the form, the aesthetic. Is it narrative? Is it dramatic? Is it post-dramatic?

We Iranians love to talk to each other, we love to share. For example, we have this system of shared taxis – private spaces that are also public. They are a very important part of our lives, and so I thought this was a place where we could meet the various parts of society, meet one another, and I decided to create a show there. That became *Un-Permitted Whispers*.

**What are the challenges of making, and getting official permission for, theatre in public space in Iran?**

I presented my first piece, *Always passes by you...* at the Women's Festival of Theatre in Iran. Even though it was a women's festival, the organisers were surprised having never met a woman leading and managing a show in unconventional spaces. They were saying things like 'we never had a woman perform in the street before – what will happen?' So they had their doubts, but they gave me the permit. For other shows, it has been more difficult. In Iran, public space belongs to many organisations, not to the people. Some have a face: you can go see them, debate, and ask for permission. Others you don't have access to, but then you meet them when you are actually in

the place. So the challenges are not only before the performance but actually during it.

I have funny memories and sad memories, but in the end it worked, and I believe we were the first to start this kind of theatre after the revolution in 1979. It was also not easy as a woman. I remember once the authorities told me they couldn't hold a woman as the responsible person for a performance in the street, and that a man would have to be named, or that we would have to share the credit as co-directors. I didn't accept the co-director option, but in the end one of the actors took the official responsibility.

**What is public space for you?**

Public space is wherever the public is, wherever there are different voices. It is a place where there is diversity, even if it is sometimes suppressed and there are voices that go unheard: a common space to share with one another in spite of our different lifestyles. There you can find dialogue, insight, shared discourse, as well as memories that no one wants to be documented or archived, the forbidden memories which are condemned to be forgotten and for which I want to make a platform to keep them alive. Public space is an important extension of our private life, although as Iranians there's a big contradiction between our private and public lives. It's important for me to find a compromise between all these paradoxes in the public space, and I believe theatre can help to reunify us with each other within public space.

**Does this also relate to collective or societal health? What you do helps people to find common relations and to regain memories. Could we say that theatre in public space can improve mental health?**

I think it can, and it's very important when you find your voice. You feel your stories are being listened to, so you feel you are a person – a real person, not a shadow or second-class citizen. Then you feel much better, you are more active, and this activation helps you to become a better citizen, to find hope. It's a very important part of being healthy. It's not a therapy session of course, but it gives you the chance to be the subject, so it gives you power.



Ganjeh's works draw on Forum Theatre to bring societal issues to public space. *Always passes by you...* © Roozbeh Vatankhah

It reminds me of what Gertrude Stein said about Picasso and the connection of French and German artists with nature, while in southern countries like Spain and Italy the connection is more within a social context.

Yes, I believe it's something in our culture to identify ourselves with people, with others around us: with our family, our history, our family history. We are very connected with our roots, our grandparents, everything that makes our identity.

**Despite the challenges, is public space part of Iranian cultural identity?**

Yes, it is. What has happened in the past is that theatre in public space has been restricted to special sites and events. It is not everywhere, nor open to any subject, and yet we live in public space and act in it. So what I want to do is to destroy restrictions and open new possibilities. During Covid-19, people have not been able to use public space as before and digital platforms have been a very important extension of public space for us Iranians. Even before the pandemic they were very important. It's a very real world for me – an extension of public space which happens at home. We open a laptop and we are inside it; we are



Azadeh Ganjeh and film crew at a performance of *Always passes by you...*  
© Roozbeh Vatankhah

known and acknowledged, can talk, act, perform, and be seen.

**And we let the outside in. I remember during your talk at Re-connect festival you pointed out how digital platforms tend to shift to a kind of Forum theatre or immersive theatre.**

I really like immersive theatre and believe that it's meant for public space – or that

when it happens it makes public space. In digital space, it's a challenge, but it's still possible if we believe that being present digitally is real presence. If we limit presence to only the body, then it limits us.

*Azadeh Ganjeh was interviewed by Sepehr Sharifzadeh in December 2020.*



Azadeh Ganjeh (Iran) was born in 1983 in Tehran. She is a playwright, performance artist and theatre director. She is also an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Performing Arts, Tehran University. Her special interest in theater for development, Public Sphere and Social Theater lead to achieving national and international prizes for her site-specific and immersive theater Productions. Her research interest is focused on cultural mobility theory, theatre for development and democracy, activism in art and new media art. After receiving her BA in Civil Engineering, she earned a Theater directing M.A degree from Tehran Art University and graduated as a Dr. in philosophy from Bern University. Since then, in addition to her carrier in academy, she has taught directing workshops with concentration on site-specific theater, immersive theater, dramaturgy of real and performance art.

🌐 [www.azadehganjeh.com](http://www.azadehganjeh.com)



Sepehr Sharifzadeh (Iran) is an independent creative producer, curator, festival maker, and researcher. He started his career in performing arts as a creative writer, puppeteer, clown, and mime. At the age of 24, he co-founded the first International Theatre agency in Iran, aiming to facilitate the cultural exchange between Iran and the International performing arts scene. He has been working as a project coordinator, artistic adviser, and curator with several independent festivals and organizations such as Bozar, The Festival Academy, IETM, Tehran Contemporary Music Festival, Marivan Street theatre festival, Puppet Theater Festival of Tehran-Mobarak, and Fadjr Theater Festival. He is alumni of The Festival Academy where he collaborates as a member of TFA's alumni steering committee. He has co-founded two independent, alternative, and artist-led festivals in Iran including the Micro-theatre and Re-connect online performance festival in light of the Covid19 global pandemic. He recently founded the first online showcase of contemporary Iranian theatre, "New Narratives".

🌐 <https://nhtheatreagency.com>

# FRESH STREET EXPERIENCE

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## FROM IN-BETWEEN TO ALTERNATIVE SPACE

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By Luisella Carnelli and Elettra Zuliani

Taking in the entirety of the four-day seminar, the researchers Luisella Carnelli and Elettra Zuliani reflect on the discussions, provocations and questions of FRESH STREET#4.

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At the time of writing, we have not yet managed to put the Covid-19 pandemic behind us, and we are still experiencing a period of crisis and great uncertainty. Almost one year since the outbreak of the virus, we have gone through long periods of lockdown, with closed and empty cultural spaces, drastically reduced mobility, and a situation where it is impossible for artists not only to perform but also to research and experiment as they once used to. Now, more than ever, it is clear that the conditions we are living in forbid us to turn back the clock, forcing us to live in a suspended state where what the future holds for us, in a post Covid-19 world, remains blurred. Whatever world will emerge from this health crisis, it will be one traumatised by grief and fear. It will be poorer and preoccupied with the efforts of recovery and reconstruction. It might seem that this is not a time to talk about arts and culture. Nothing could be further from the truth. Arts and culture cannot be a solution to these immense problems, but it is a territory where solutions can be found,



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where trauma can be acknowledged and healed, and where new ways of living can be imagined. Art helps us understand ourselves and others, and shapes how we see the world.

Indeed, the title of the fourth edition of FRESH STREET, 'The space in between',

resonates with the current emphasis on the soothing and curative capacity, the critical and dialectical functions, the supportive and cohesive power of arts and culture in facing the challenges of the present crisis.

### The power of art

In reflecting on the role of arts and culture in societies, an international parterre of FRESH STREET speakers – made up of street arts professionals and experts, artists, organisers, producers, researchers, consultants and

funders – offered varied and multifaceted responses to the matter, taking into consideration art as a form of expression of one's self, as a therapeutic practice to understand and process emotions, as a mirror to societal pro-

blems and struggles that can change people's perspectives on life issues, and as a means for grassroots civic movements to advocate for fairer and more equitable and sustainable societies. Indeed, the role of street arts and

its potential to connect opposing values by transcending and reshaping time and borders is more important than ever before.

“Art can be of use to everybody” was the opening line for Vida Cerkenik Bren, who started her passionate speech by focusing on the use of art. For her, art has a therapeutic capacity and gives concrete shapes to feelings and anxieties, transforming bitterness into humour while also providing room to ponder important issues. For her, art often reminds us of the neglected values of our everyday lives and makes us notice things that we would normally overlook – thus making us shift perspectives. Rebecca Hazlewood’s point of view follows a similar direction: for her, creation is seen as a form of therapy, an outlet for expression and a way of connecting with emotions we cannot process in other ways.

The creative power of the arts to move us emotionally also has a profound connection with social change. Jay Jordan fervidly ties the conception of *disobedience* as source of progress to the role of art in the transformation of our culture. From his side, performances that reflect and comment on the current state of



The FRESH STREET nerve centre © FNAS

things are not enough: art has the transformative power to create a space for new forms of disobedience and resistance of the status quo.

The concept of ‘artivism’ – at the intersection between art and activism – pervaded many of the issues raised at the conference.

Arundhati Ghosh’s reflection fiercely underlined the role of arts and creative expression in challenging and changing power relations and in embodying a form of resistance to dominant narratives. Her perspective sees the creative expression as a space fostering diversity, equity and inclusion.

## What social challenges may artists, creativity and culture face?

A common thread that marked the whole conference is the essential role played by the arts and by creativity throughout the pandemic and the role that they may have in the recovery phase. Covid-19 has been a tsunami that deeply shook the foundations of our economies, societies and lifestyles. Among the hardest hit by the pandemic, the arts and cultural sector was already structurally fragmented, suffering from a weak economy, poor conditions, and widespread precarious employment. At the same time, in these disastrous circumstances, the health crisis has highlighted the centrality of creativity, arts and culture as a human and social need and its role in reconnecting with individuals in lockdown has been recognised far and wide.

As stated by Vida Cerkenik Bren: “during the pandemic, if artists are able to reach

audiences, individuals could make use of art to overcome fear, loneliness and anger”. This is indeed needed to overcome the traumas caused by deaths and illness, as well as to face the growth of anxiety, depression, suicide rates and domestic violence. Especially during periods of confinement, arts organisations and artists increasingly shaped their cultural contents into a form of social service to ease people’s feeling of isolation, taking over the functions and services usually under the purview of the state and the public sphere. Responding to these emerging challenges, could, as Chiara Gusmaroli puts it, mean the sector creating “moments of inclusiveness for all people and through all the diverse forms of art we know, to give citizens the possibility to cultivate interests and relationships”.

The health crisis, together with the recent dangers of a new authoritarianism, have exposed the considerable risk of growing cultural exclusion. For instance, the practice of social distancing that is slowly taking over from our normal social practices, and the concept of ‘safe space’ which emerged often during the conference, may have effects on artistic practices and on the desire for cultural participation. On the other hand, the economic crisis may lead to a rise in unemployment and poverty, which could limit access to social services and even cultural participation. For the sector, reacting would mean questioning whether the artistic contents are suitable to meet the needs of all audiences and people.

One quality raised in the conference is the ability of arts and culture to make people re-



The team at FNAS, mid-seminar © FNAS

## What role for street arts in responding to these new challenges?

Quoting Vida Cerkenik Bren, “street art is innovative in the sense that it responds differently from traditional art to the questions ‘where does art take place?’ and ‘who is art for?’”. While the challenges that the arts and cultural sector is currently facing are many, street arts, in its intrinsic values and practices, may play an important role in the wider sector’s response to the human, relational and social needs in question.

As street arts mainly happen outdoors, in public arenas and in non-traditional settings, it is a form of art able to connect directly with people in a context free of assumptions and prejudices – unlike art exhibited or performed in museums and theatres.

In this sense, street arts expose people of all social strata to artistic and political expressions. Moreover, as in the case of the story of the Aravani Art Project in Bangalore, told by Arundhati Ghosh, a form of art that happens in public places opens up the possibility of giving

voice to the community and to marginalised groups of citizens. As passionately pointed out by Arundhati, bottom-up public art forms use a commons approach to tell the stories that are silenced by dominant narratives. Echoing the words of Dounia Benslimane, “in this polarised world, socially engaged art is a solution to inclusion and diversity”.

Street arts can also play a role in reinventing urban spaces and reconnecting our everyday life to our environment. As mentioned by Rebecca Hazlewood “our digital and urban lifestyles are impacting on our physical and mental well-being and concern is mounting on how we value the living world”. Street arts can be a powerful tool to reflect on the experience of urban life and to provide the audience with an alternative vision of the world at play within the everyday setting, inviting citizens to take an active role in re-socialising public spaces and acting as a catalyst for social and ecological change.

## Towards the future

“There can be no return to normal because normal was the problem in the first place.”  
– Graffiti in Hong Kong

While there is currently an animated debate on how to navigate the complexity of the present environment, much less discussion is taking place about what world we want,

reflect on current circumstances and change perspectives and narratives. In this sense, a further challenge is to reflect on the environment and on the ecological sustainability of our species. In this sense, in the words of Rebecca Hazlewood, the arts are called on “to tackle the climate and ecological crisis with urgency, where all have a role to play” in order to change our environmental behaviour and foster initiatives and processes that can “ensure that everyone has access to green spaces even in urban areas, to reinvent urban spaces and to build a sense of community around the topic”.

Although they are becoming more and more widely recognised, street arts are historically and predominantly an independent form of art that does not pander to the demands of an industry or public, but rather develops honest reflections that challenge peoples’ preconceptions. In this sense, street arts are far from the neoliberal logics of some forms of art and of the creative industries. On this point, the story lucidly told by Jay Jordan in the form of 10 lessons learned as an artist and activist (“for a live art that lives and lets live”) vividly narrates the journey from a form of art that reflects and comments on the present to a form of art that shows other kinds of possible reality and that is able to transform cultures and habits. The pandemic gave us an unprecedented break from the norm to reflect on artistic practice and is, from Jordan’s point of view, an unmissable opportunity to decide whether or not to change our practices, habits, goals and cultures.

what we say no to, what we no longer accept. Although artists are unable to produce a vaccine, they must fully serve a social role, through their art, by providing connection,

comfort, and well-being for individuals, and can lay the foundations for new community-based processes.

In this context, street arts can be a suitable microcosm in which to tackle this debate and launch a more radical approach that goes against the tide. This exceptional period in time offers us the opportunity to make a radical change of direction. The street arts can be seen as a space to facilitate the connection between people beyond

time and borders, and to remind people of how creativity enables a comprehensive understanding of differing histories and cultures. Thus, street arts must constantly consider their social and public role, by being an artistic expression that offers a tolerant worldview, capable of seeing the value of diversity and marginalised voices.

In this unprecedented time, new issues emerge with great urgency: how to give relevance and voice to this sector? How to create

the proper conditions for independent artists to keep on their research paths? How to give stability to the many artists and street workers who are not usually detected or who cannot be counted? How to underline the social impact street arts can generate by preserving the artistic value of the creation? How to enable the conditions to open an arena for clear and democratic dialogue among the street arts and other sectors?



Luisella Carnelli (Italy) has a PhD in Theory and History of Theatre and a Masters in Entrepreneurship of Performing Arts. Since 2005 she has worked as a senior researcher and consultant at Fondazione Fitzcarraldo and at the Cultural Observatory of Piedmont. She carries out studies and research designed to investigate the crucial aspects of creativity, production, organisation, evaluation, consumption of culture, management of cultural organisations and co-creative processes focused on active participation. She particularly deals with the analysis of cultural behaviours and cultural project evaluation, with a primary focus on audience engagement and participatory approaches in performing arts. She is involved as a researcher and trainer in EU Projects related to participatory/co-creative practices, studying the impacts on the artists, organisations and communities involved in them (ADESTE project, CONNECT, BeSpectACTive! 1+2, Dancing Museums, Empowering Dance, Adeste+).



Elettra Zuliani (Italy) graduated in Innovation and Organisation of Culture and the Arts at the University of Bologna (Italy). Since 2016, she has been Programme Assistant for ArtLab, a national cross-sectorial, multi-stakeholder platform and event dedicated to innovation in cultural policies, programmes and practices. This experience has allowed her to develop a considerable knowledge of the cultural and creative world, enhancing her competences in the field, thanks to the many relations with the primary stakeholders of the platform: policymakers, directors of many national and European cultural institutions, and individual cultural operators. She has approached the world of research with particular attention to the topic of participation and audience engagement and is now involved in the EU project BeSpectACTive!2 as a researcher and trainer.

