Prefiguration, Complicity and Afterlife in Contextual Practices: A Conversation on What Happens When Art Encounters Reality

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Resum

Utilitzant la conversa –una pràctica col·laborativa– com a forma d'investigar i escriure sobre la col·laboració, els autors es van reunir per a un intercanvi oral sobre els imaginaris activistes en què les seves investigacions i experiències en el camp de l'art socialment compromès

i basat en la comunitat es van convertir en desencadenants d'interaccions. La conversa comença a aprofundir en les diferents posicions entre l'activisme, l'art activista i l'activisme comissarial, així com els termes utilitzats en la literatura per descriure artistes involucrats en projectes socials o comunitaris. Preguntant què porta els artistes a treballar dins i amb una comunitat que no és la seva, l'article fa sorgir la idea de complicitat, suggerint que potser l'artista ha de ser *funcional* a una comunitat, servint les seves necessitats i sentiments. A continuació, els autors discuteixen les seqüeles d'un projecte situat, la seva permanència en el territori, entre els conceptes de manteniment, *afterlife* i reverberació, prestant atenció als diferents matisos d'autonomia amb els quals una comunitat pot apropiar-se de l'obra de l'artista. Finalment, la conversa explora la dimensió materialista de les pràctiques contextuals, reflexionant sobre els imaginaris en què es planifiquen i conceben les obres d'art i les accions activistes i com la realitat les compromet, fent-les reals. Considerant si hi ha espai per a la poètica en àmbits d'alta violència política i si sempre té sentit produir art en aquests contextos, la conversa acaba amb una pregunta oberta: És sempre possible l'art? L'article es tanca amb un moment pòstum, en el qual els autors, rellegint la conversa, reflexionen sobre com ha reverberat en les seves pràctiques recents.

Paraules clau: conversa; escolta; col·laboració; imaginaris activistes; projectes comunitaris

Abstract

Using conversation –a collaborative practice– as a way of researching and writing about collaborative endeavours, the authors met for an oral exchange on activist imaginaries in which their research and experiences in the field of socially engaged and community-based art became triggers for interactions. The conversation starts delving into the different positionalities between activism, activist art, and curating activism, as well as the terms used in literature to describe artists involved in social

or communitarian projects. Asking what leads artists to work within and with a community that is not their own, the article brings forth the idea of complicity, suggesting that perhaps the artist has to be "functional" to a community, serving their needs and feelings. Then, the authors discuss the aftermath of a situated project, its permanence in the territory, between the concepts of maintenance, *afterlife*, and reverberation, paying attention to the different nuances of autonomy with which a community can appropriate the artist's work. Finally, the conversation explores the materialistic dimension of contextual practices, reflecting on the imaginaries in which artworks and activist actions are planned and conceived and how reality compromises them, making them real. While considering whether there is space for the poetical in areas of high political violence and whether it always makes sense to produce art in those contexts, the conversation ends with an open question: Is art always possible? The article then closes with a posthumous moment, in which the authors, rereading the conversation, reflect on how it has reverberated in their recent practices.

Key words: conversation; listening; collaboration; activist imaginaries; community-based projects

Introduction

Conversation in Linguistic Anthropology is defined as a collaborative endeavor between listeners and speakers (Duranti & Brenneis, 1986), in which participants, in turns, co-create meaning and discourse, interacting and reacting to what is said (Keating & Egbert, 2005; Sacks, 1992). It is a co-creation practice that happens face-to-face. Participants speak one at a time, and each turn produces a context for interpreting the next one (Keating & Egbert, 2004). Listeners modify what they say based on what they have heard. Similarly, speakers modify what they say to consider listeners' reactions –their engagement and disengagement manifest through body and speech regulation (Goodwin & Harness Goodwin, 2004). In a conversation, listeners and speakers react to each other, constantly exchanging roles: the listener is expected to respond, becoming a speaker, and the speaker, while speaking, is also a listener. In each turn, what is said shapes its audience, and at the same time, the audience can shape the speech it is listening to (Goodwin, 1986). Authoriality continuously shifts from speaker to listener, osmotically, and meaning is created in interactions. As Cavanaugh (2020) wrote, speakers do not control the meaning of what they say: it depends on who listens, the context of enunciation, the relationship between speakers and over-hearers, and previous historical discourses about what is being said.

For these characteristics, we –the authors of this article– used conversation as a methodology to investigate, write, and co-produce knowledge in a reflexive (and oral) manner on the topic of the open call proposed by *Revista de Estudios Globales y Arte Contemporáneo*: Art and Curatorial Practice as Collaborative Endeavour. A meta operation in which we put our respective understandings, experiences, and previous readings on the topic into dialogue while reflecting, by talking and listening, on what we were saying. We became our own field material. We also used conversation because it allowed us to consider listening to the other as significant as speaking. Philosopher Corradi Fumara (1990) famously defined the Western tradition as one that knows how to speak but not how to listen and called for mastering listening to promote a

"philosophical solidarity capable of envisaging the common destiny of the species." (p. 57). Furthermore, listening is a crucial element of some artistic practices – like those described in *Conversation Pieces* (Kester, 2004) – that we may investigate when discussing collaboration. In these practices, a fundamental prerequisite is establishing a form of mutual listening – what Gadamer called (1975) *openness* in who speaks and who listens.

We –the authors– are a researcher in artistic and architectural contextual practices and art curator (Alessandra Faccini), and an art practitioner and researcher in Urbanism (Alessio Mazzaro), who met for a conversation on activist imaginaries. This is the score we followed: first, we had a conversation on the methodology of writing, then we exchanged ideas and questions on the journal's open call, sharing personal research and experiences in the field of Socially Engaged and Community-based Art. Being aware of the possible dialogic tendency of conversation – an open chain of reactions, without a synthesis – we also set a durée of the conversation before starting (1 hour and 30 minutes). What led us to the decision to engage in this conversation was, firstly, our friendship and mutual esteem, as well as our academic involvement as doctoral students at the same university; secondly, our curiosity in bringing our knowledge and perspectives into a fruitful dialogue that would enable us to activate generative questions for both our research and further collaboration opportunities. Although we had no fixed expectations, we were confident that the discussion would surprise us by organically taking unexpected twists and *dérives*.

We used the books *Autoritratto* by Carla Lonzi (1969), an example of co-creation of thought in which it is difficult to trace the genealogies, and *The Force of Listening* (2017), a free montage of the transcribed conversations that Lucia Farinati and Claudia Firth had with artists, activists, and political thinkers in the aftermath of the Occupy Movement (2011), as strategic references in the transcription and editing of our conversation. Regarding the process of *composing* with transcribed conversations, it is essential to highlight how different temporalities are present in the writing of our text: a performative one that carries in the orality and the syntactic peculiarities of spoken language –the process of putting mind-thought discourse into sentences, the live thinking– and

the slower temporality of reading the transcript of the conversation and acting on that, by cutting off some parts rather than changing the syntax of what was said. Reflecting on the time of performing a conversation and the one of editing it opens up a parallel in collaborative and activist operations, with the moment of planning an action -people get together, exchange, and plan to do something – and that of executing it, that may as well be seen as the editing of the oral exchange which led to that very action.

Activist actions are thought and performed within imaginaries. Speaking of collaboration and activism within the art world means dealing with the *poetry of the future* (Institute of Radical Imagination, 2021). Art, with its prefigurative potential, can open up future scenarios in the present, where the two components of the term *prefiguration* allude to a temporality of the Future (pre-) and to a capacity that belongs to the imaginary (figuration), significantly intertwining with today's cultural and artistic practices that "deal with what is missing, with what is not yet present [...] pointing towards a different model of public engagement" (Graziano, 2021, p. 235). This is not an operation detached from reality but rather the opposite: to imagine something is not alien to praxis, nor is it a fantasy, but it has to do with the possibility of performing in the here and now an emergent spatiality and temporality (Davoudi, 2023). As Emanuele Braga said, reporting Toni Negri's words, "Imagination is a political act, a linguistic and therefore common fact, which casts a net over the future to organize it in a powerful way."[1] Prefigurative practices aim to sustain imaginal processes at the intersection between the individual faculty of imagination and the collective production of the social imaginary (Bottici, 2014) by thus encouraging political transformations. Only when imagination is held in a generative tension with the real and material dimensions is the risk of aestheticization avoided. Only by working on this precise potentiality can art make *concrete utopias* possible (Davoudi, 2023).

[1] The occasion during which Braga quoted Negri's words was the meeting held on 22 May 2023 at the occupied space in Venice S.a.L.E. Docks as part of Campo, the training course in curatorial studies and practices organized by Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (Turin, Italy), https://campo.fsrr.org.

Conversation

The conversation occurred on May 3, 2024 at the Valentino Castle, the Architecture and Urban Planning campus of the Politecnico di Torino. We sat opposite each other in one of the empty studios overlooking the Po River and started talking spontaneously, using a smartphone to record our voices; we had previously written down just a few key terms to guide us in dialoguing (art activism, community, prefiguration, participatory and contextual practices, responsibility). We stopped the conversation after an hour and a half. A few days later, we proceeded with the transcription of the recording and the shared editing of the text.

Alessandra Faccini: I would like to start by asking if you think the distinction between mimetic and performative approaches still makes sense in the current context of *activist art* or *art activism*, to quote Gregory Sholette's (2021) book from a few years ago.

Alessio Mazzaro: I think there is a difference between making, performing, and curating activism. These three modalities have different audiences and goals. In performing activism, we take aesthetic elements from activist repertoires and perform them, and the final recipients are galleries or museums. Then, there is a significant difference between taking a stance because it aligns with how you would like the world to be and having to fight to be alive. In part, it has to do with what Vanessa Machado de Oliveria (2021) writes about in her book *Hospicing Modernity*, the radical difference between having no choice and striking because you think it is a good thing. Curating activism could be understood as an intermediate position between these two. You may have funds to curate the struggles you are interested in, but it is a question of why you do it. I believe there are multiple levels at which action can be taken. You can also choose to work on a more structural dimension without using the aesthetics of activism.

A. F.: I think it is important to identify some key points in your answer. The first one, which is very urgent for me, has to do with our positionalities within this conversation: you come from Venice but worked for several years in Brazil. Instead, my reference context has

always been Western. In this context, I am reminded of Claire Bishop's (2019) observation in an article for *Artforum*, where she highlights the challenges of applying North American terminology to other geographical regions. For me, as a philosopher, the lexical question is fundamental. Western liberal democracies tend to use the term *activist* to describe those who support actions for political and social change. In authoritarian regimes, the same individuals are named *dissidents* and driven by frustration and urgency. This dialectics between activism and dissent becomes a significant thread in contemporary activist art for its ability to create different conceptions and modes of intervention depending on the specificity of the situation in which it takes place. At the same time, it is true that many other terms are subjected to a similar *disorientation*: historically determined meanings have been pushed at the edges to expand and include a variety of nuances. Artists have started to refer to their role as *activators*, *facilitators*, *practitioners*, *cultural producers*, and *organizers*. And even the artwork is no longer conceived in a traditional way.

A. M.: I do not call myself an *activist artist* for initiating processes that might make change possible. In fact, properly speaking, I do not create change. To me, it seems humbler to say that I am just an artist because I work with aesthetic forms. Even if I organize something, a gathering, or a workshop, I maintain a sensitivity for spatial design and materials. In another conversation a few days ago, my supervisor told me that our role as researchers in Urbanism is only to make some possibilities visible, thinkable, and to materialize them. However, I keep thinking about the impact that a certain kind of intervention could generate in a community. In community-based projects and socially engaged practices, artists often collaborate with communities outside of their own, which presents both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, this dynamic offers a 'foreigner's perspective'—or *olhar estrangeiro* in Portuguese—allowing one to view the situation differently from those deeply embedded in the local context. This outlook enables artists to approach things in ways that locals may not be able to, as they can operate outside the established codes and norms of the community. In this way, working with a community you are not a part of can provide opportunities for

actions that might not otherwise be possible. At the same time, there is a sense of responsibility, as your time working with the community is limited, and you eventually must leave. As an outsider, you can engage with the realm of the imaginary, approaching the work from a more conceptual perspective. In contrast, when you collaborate with your own community, the art you create tends to be grounded in a deeper, more personal context.

A. F.: I think that what has just emerged in the background is the rethinking of the notion of aesthetic autonomy in a way that keeps autonomy and heteronomy together in a generative tension. Grant Kester (2023) speaks of aesthetics, ethics, and politics as being inseparable. According to your experience, what drives an artist/practitioner/social worker to activate specific spaces, projects, or practices? Lately, trying to answer this question, I started to write down different terms used in some books I am reading about the semantic sphere of intentionality: some speak of *affectivity* as a generative force able to take into account the level of conflictuality typical of working with communities. Others talk about *responsibility*, *adjacency*, *advocacy*, *community caring*, or *complicity*, and that may be the expression I prefer. In English, the word 'complicity' carries a strong legal connotation, as an accomplice is someone who aids in the commission of a crime. However, in Italian, it seems to convey a sense of collaborating or conspiring together, particularly in the context of an artist working with a community. I find this interpretation interesting, as it connects to what you mentioned earlier—the idea of making visible what was once hidden or marginalized.

A. M.: Complicity… For a long time, I have worked with communities to which I do not belong, often in countries outside of Italy. More recently, from 2019 to 2022, I spent time in Brazil. Initially, I participated in residency programs, but something happened during my first experience that drew me back, ultimately inspiring me to create artwork focused on São Paulo and its people. For me, this was once again about dialogism—engaging in a conversation with the context around me. Perhaps this dynamic of responding to and interacting with communities is what truly drives me as an artist.

A.F.: Maybe this is connected to the *strategies* that artists working with communities develop in order to avoid the risk of adopting an extractivist approach?

A.M.: Sure, it can be a strategy, but for me, it is not. It is a practice.

A. F.: Maybe strategy is not the best word…

A.M.: I grew up in an environment where listening to and seeking out stories was central to life. My grandmother, who is almost 97 years old, would often share her stories with me. In many ways, I travel in search of stories. I visit a place, not always knowing exactly why, but discovering the purpose only once I arrive. When I first came to São Paulo, it felt like an electric shock— the city has a way of training you to be fully present. Every time you step into the streets, São Paulo compels you to question yourself: What are you doing? How are you doing it? Over time, I became deeply attached to the city, which is why I returned so many times. Perhaps this connection relates to the affective dimension you mentioned earlier. I felt compelled to express my gratitude to São Paulo for what I was learning there, so I began creating art and listening to the stories of its people. During my time in the city, I collaborated with various collectives. I spent some time in Bom Retiro, a neighborhood historically known as the first stop for immigrants arriving in the city. It is home to Casa do Povo, one of the city's most significant cultural spaces. I was drawn to the idea of collaboration, so I reached out to the director, Benjamin Seroussi. Our conversation sparked a process of negotiation that was truly important to me.

The director connected me with a group of activists who had recently come together and asked me to help facilitate the exchange of ideas among them. I quickly felt integrated into the local ecology of the space. My initial idea was to organize a storytelling workshop where we would explore how they envisioned changing or improving their neighborhood. My plan was to record our conversations and then use those recordings, along with a loudspeaker, to create actions on public transport. The goal

was to expand the discussion by reaching a wider audience and allowing this narrative to travel across the city.

When I presented this proposal to the activists, they adapted it, shifting the focus of the traveling action to Bom Retiro, the area they were most invested in. They suggested using a large trolley—similar to those seen in street markets—attaching a loudspeaker to it, and then pulling it around the neighborhood with a bicycle. This collaborative process is how we ended up creating a mobile parade.

I wanted my practice to align with their needs because they had entrusted me with their stories. It wasn't just about co-creating; it felt more like providing a service. I fully shared the agency of the process, and what happened on the day of the parade was a surprise: the activists arrived with modifications to the project that I hadn't known about, which they had planned autonomously. They had decorated the trolley and printed small pieces of paper with questions. One of the questions was: 'What is the Bom Retiro you dream of?' The activists handed these papers to passersby, asking them to write down their dreams. When you share agency in a project, you must be prepared for the fact that you may not have control over the outcome. However, the interaction was a success.

A. F.: There is an expression you used that resonated deeply with me. When reflecting on the artist's role, you mentioned being *functional,* serving the needs and emotions of the community. I would like to highlight two key aspects. First, there is the issue of temporality: working with communities demands a mid- to long-term commitment. This type of artistic practice is part of an expanded field, not only in terms of interdisciplinarity but also in duration. The second point concerns what I call *maintenance*—what happens after the project concludes? How do we assess the long-term effects and the ongoing impact of such work?

A.M.: There is a distinct kind of temporality in these projects. You return to the community, to the place. These projects unfold in phases, and things become more complicated when you are not living on-site. I have worked on projects where I would meet with the community every three months. Life happens in between, both for them and for you. Their

willingness to stay involved or the reasons they participate can shift over time. It is a dynamic relationship, and it evolves. You also need to remember that things can end unexpectedly or poorly.

Rather than thinking about *maintenance*, I prefer to consider the *afterlife* of the work. This perspective likely stems from my background in performance: I am always thinking about what endures after the action is over and how it continues to resonate. It was fascinating to see how the activists in Bom Retiro began to organize events and workshops very similar to the one I had facilitated with them—they took 'my' practice and made it their own. In that sense, something remained, but they adapted it to fit their own needs. The reverberation of the work, too, is beyond the artist's control. I think the term *maintenance* can be more problematic than talking about the *afterlife*, because maintenance implies some degree of control over the process, whereas *afterlife* suggests an open-ended, organic evolution

A. F.: In Italian 'maintenance' is a legal term that refers to the dimension of dependency. For example, when talking about separation or divorce, the people involved often fight for specific maintenance conditions. But this word also has to do with the action of nurturing and taking care of something or someone over time.

A. M.: True, it means to keep nurturing something. It also implies having the time, energy, and resources to do that. The first time I considered the concept of the afterlife of a work was in 2016, when I began a performance project in the UK called the *Do Nothing Club*, in collaboration with a designer. We found it intriguing to think about the afterlife of the project because, while we lacked the capacity to sustain it, the participants were deeply engaged. This led us to explore how we could hand the project over to someone else to ensure its continuation. In this way, we saw ourselves as the initiators of the process, with others taking it forward and even altering it as they saw fit. The idea of *maintenance* or *afterlife*, I believe, is closely tied to another crucial issue: responsibility

A. F.: I am thinking about artist Sandra Calvo: for her, the essential aspect of the work is to activate self-learning and self-organizational processes. Another example is Jonas Staal's *Training for the Future* (2023), a project in which trainees later become trainers. I think they both represent different ways of ensuring that what is generated by the experience keeps resonating after the end of the project.

A.M.: I like the term *resonating* but I am skeptical about the notion of training and trainees because somehow it reminds me of the issue of 'mastery'. I prefer thinking in terms of reverberation: you create an action in the real world, and this action has consequences.

A.F.: Moving on to another important topic in relation to socially engaged art, what is your opinion about narrating, transmitting, or documenting a certain type of contextual practices?

A.M.: When working with oral practices or conversations, one approach is to transcribe the exchanges and then share them with others, asking them to read and engage with the material. Some may argue that this is a form of appropriation or re-enactment, but it can also be a way to keep the conversation alive. It is fascinating to see how the words resonate with different people and how their meaning can be reinterpreted or transformed in the process. In this context, I don't necessarily view appropriation as a negative concept. It is, in fact, a way of engaging with and understanding something. When we appropriate, we make things our own—and this can extend to documentation. Documentation is not just about creating archives; it is about using the material after the project has concluded. This becomes even more significant when working with audiences who speak different languages. Moving a piece from one context to another often requires translating and finding ways to make the work accessible. In this way, documentation is an active process.

A.F.: I would like to conclude our conversation by exploring the material dimensions of these contextual practices. The first point relates to something you mentioned earlier: within this field, the artwork often takes the form of a project and can sometimes resemble more of a 'procedure.' To what extent does this approach influence the practice of

art itself? The second dimension concerns the importance of making certain dynamics visible, particularly their connections to the political and economic spheres. Recently, there has been growing awareness of the precarious working conditions within the art world, and the recognition that artists, like other workers, are often subjected to self-exploitative and extractive processes. Looking at artists like Caroline Woolard and Kathrin Böhm, we see a profound reflection on alternative economies. My question for you is: what enables contextual practices? What material infrastructure supports them? And, to conclude, returning to a topic we discussed earlier: is there space for the poetic in contexts of intense political violence? Does creating art and projects in such environments always hold meaning?

A.M.: I think your questions bring us back to the heart of our conversation: imaginaries, activism, and activist imaginaries. To create an artwork—whether individually or collaboratively, for political reasons or not—is to bring something into existence. When we talk about projects, we are referring to something conceived on paper that then meets reality. Reality enters the project and its imaginary, giving it form and substance. For a long time, there has been an idealized vision of artists creating extraordinary, even impossible, works in the real world. However, I believe that one can still be an artist without necessarily moving mountains. When it comes to the connection with activism, I believe there are two distinct approaches: one is opposing a system and protesting, while the other is focused on creating change. These are different stances, in my view. You can protest your whole life, but if you want to generate change, you must be willing to compromise. To get something approved by society, you need to adapt your vision to reality, taking into account its economic constraints and practical limitations. Of course, there is also the possibility of engaging in art or activism by working with imaginaries and exploring the potential for change without necessarily aiming to bring about tangible transformations.

In response to your question about the project-format, this has increasingly become the dominant method of making art today, and in many ways, it seems like the only way for artists to sustain themselves.

Personally, I wouldn't say I have a strong preference for projects, but they are a practical way to navigate constraints. The question of compromise, as I mentioned earlier, is crucial. I believe it is important to reconsider the term 'compromise,' because in Western society, it often carries negative connotations. However, in situations where survival is at stake, compromise can become a necessary part of the infrastructure that enables engaged and political artistic practices.

Finally, is art possible in contexts marked by political violence, where there seems to be no space for poetry or the poetic? I do not have a clear answer yet. It is an issue I am still reflecting on, though I think it's something that can only be truly understood through direct experience. You need to be in these contexts, reflect, and take action to understand what can and cannot be done. What remains in my mind is this question: Is art always possible? Are artists always needed? If there are moments or places where creating art is not possible, I think I would come to terms with that

Conclusions (reading the conversation)

In this final section of the essay, the thoughts presented belong to a second temporality: they emerged in the process of listening to the recording of our conversation and reading its edited transcription. During the conversation, we contemplated two different dimensions of listening: listening as receiving something, creating an emptiness in oneself to welcome the other through words, in line with Gadamer's *openness* (1975). We also approached listening as reacting to what is said –the listener in the Linguistic Anthropology's conversational framework. The first conceptualization of listening points to an attempt at horizontality between group members, whereas the second refers to a possible open-ended chain of reactions and feedback between speakers and listeners. The "other readers" of our transcribed conversation are like an eavesdropping audience; they cannot intervene in the conversation they are witnessing (peer reviewers are an exception). This process is similar to what happens in the *Conversation Pieces* studied by Grant Kester (2004), where the listening audience, in most cases, cannot interact or participate in the conversation: they are either looking at

posthumous documentation of it or as in the works of Susan Lacy –the primary inspirational reference in Kester's study– they are overhearing the performance of a conversation. However, unlike the ones organized by Lacy, the conversation transcribed in this article has not been rehearsed before its encounter with the audience (the readers and the peer reviewers).

At the end of our dialogue in May, we were surprised by how our interaction brought to the surface the topics about the *afterlife* and *maintenance* of an artistic intervention in a given territory as if it were an infrastructure or a reverberating sound. We felt the potential for further discussion and investigation, and this arrived after Alessandra's summer experience in Borgo Mezzanone and Alessio's planning of the artistic interventions he will soon do in Brazil. Picking up the thread of the conversation we had in the spring, we realized that we had developed a renewed awareness: those same questions that had animated our discussion and led us to ponder on ethical dilemmas (how to be *functional* in a community that is not one's own? Does art make sense in contexts of intense political violence?) had changed in light of our summer experiences. We were no longer asking ourselves whether we have the right to activate –as curator and artist, respectively– artistic interventions in such places, but we started to reflect on how to respond concretely to a community's needs: in other words, now we believe that our role is to provide a service or, to use a Jerzy Ludwiński's formulation adopted by Kuba Szreder, a *post-artistic* service.[2]

In June 2024, Alessandra Faccini was invited to co-curate a participatory artistic intervention in Borgo Mezzanone (Foggia, Italy), a village built during the fascist regime in Northern Apulia that hosts the largest informal settlement in Italy. It is a marginal place inhabited by migrants, most of whom work irregularly in the agricultural sector, participate in informal economies, and live below the poverty line, experiencing a

[2] The very concept of *postartistic* practice is based on the writings of Jerzy Ludwiński, a conceptual art theorist, who gave a short lecture on "Art in the Postartistic Age" in 1971. Curator Kuba Szreder has adopted Ludwiński's definition in his practice; significantly, among the projects he helped activate is the so-called *Office for Postartistic Services* (The Office for Postartistic Services, n.d.).

dramatic situation of precariousness and socio-spatial confinement under the constant but silent threat of eviction. As part of a collective investigation project led by a group of researchers from Politecnico di Torino and The Bartlett School of Architecture (UCL, London), Alessandra has recently co-designed an artistic platform together with artist and agroecologist Luigi Coppola, who has been involved in the project at the end of the summer. The revision work on this text has represented a further opportunity for discussing and sharing reflections among the authors on how art can be a way to interact with disadvantaged communities through a pragmatic approach and, at the same time, on how, in such cases, artistic practice can question the limits of its agency.

In the first phase, a generalized feeling of paralysis was perceived by the research group members in Borgo Mezzanone while thinking of the possibility of activating something in such a problematic context. After engaging with the daily reality of the settlement and assessing what was lacking, a shared vision began to emerge. The proposal that took shape was a collaborative effort —involving the research team, the artist, the residents, and the associations and volunteers active in the area— to create shade by planting trees with a dual regenerative purpose. On a material level, the trees would improve living conditions; symbolically, they would represent the settlement's resilience, transcending the limitations of top-down projects that directly impact it. In this way, the aesthetic value of the intervention becomes inseparable from its ethical and political potential. All these dimensions work together to meet the community's needs, forming a bond of belonging and commitment through an approach that blends the precision of natural sciences with the prefigurative potential of art.

One of the case studies in Alessio Mazzaro's research is a small informal settlement alongside a stream in a Brazilian megalopolis. Here, a Living Lab focused its territorial research on improving the conditions of people living in flood-prone areas. After initiating a participatory process in which residents contributed data for risk modeling, they proposed a co-designed solution to the local infrastructure agency. However, their project encountered the harsh realities of corruption and construction lobbies, supported by armed militias. In this context of political

violence—where people may see participation as a failed practice—Alessio Mazzaro was invited to intervene through art, not only to alleviate the residents' situation but also to generate data for the academic world in a less extractive way. The initial question was whether art was even necessary in this situation, where the immediate needs of the people were practical, such as preventing flooding and shielding them from the consequences of decisions made by politicians and the market. In response, Mazzaro began to reconsider the role of art, focusing on creating *services* rather than traditional artworks. He initiated a series of dialogues through online calls and text chats with local participants and stakeholders to brainstorm about potential actions. He shared his research interests and explored how they intersected with the specific issues and challenges faced by the community. Based on this exchange, he proposed a preliminary intervention, which was continuously updated in response to feedback, ensuring that the project was grounded in the context of the community. This iterative process led to a set of draft proposals, not fixed blueprints, but adaptable ideas. These proposals would be presented to a local citizens' assembly in Brazil, offering the community an opportunity to take ownership of the intervention and modify it to better serve their needs and interests, rather than those of the artist or researcher

The experiences outlined above illustrate what happens when the planning of an art intervention meets the reality of a community. These examples echo the conversation we had in May, which explored a further temporal dimension: the aftermath of an art intervention. The effectiveness of many art projects, as well as participatory interventions organized by universities and Living Labs, is often questioned, particularly in terms of their short-term presence in a territory and the economic challenges they face. Rather than adhering to a positivist approach that measures success through quantifiable data, we frame the *afterlife* of a project as what remains once the artist—or participatory initiative—has left the community. For us, thinking in terms of the *afterlife* means acknowledging that one cannot control how an intervention will reverberate within the socio-spatial dynamics of a place, or how it will be remembered by its inhabitants and participants.

It requires moving away from the need to control or measure effects. The *afterlife* is about allowing others to appropriate a project—or parts of it—based on what resonates most with them and reusing it as a form of *Cognitive Justice* (de Sousa Santos, 2015).

In the case of the initiative in Borgo Mezzanone, the question of the *afterlife* of an art project becomes central from the outset. Rather than limiting the intervention to the act of planting trees, we chose to adopt a mid- to long-term approach that includes monitoring plant growth and observing the evolving social dynamics of appropriation, cooperation, and commoning fostered by the project. The *maintenance* of the entire process can also involve moments of re-evaluation and adjustments to the project's trajectory, as if it were an infrastructure requiring ongoing care. This process reflects a complex ecosystem, a space of co-existence, and "an active point of relation... and affective encounter" (Dragona, 2021), all of which demand continuous nurturing and reactivation. In conclusion, by considering the afterlife and maintenance of a situated intervention from the start—thus initiating and sustaining complicity with the territory and its communities—we contribute to rethinking socially engaged art, moving beyond the limitations of short-term contextual practices

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