# European *Alternatives* Journal

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**Lidka Makowska**, a feminist activist, educator and intercultural trainer from Gdansk, shares her insights about the Women's Strike in Poland and a list of 10 points we should take into account in our intersectional practice as movements acting beyond the divisions of communities, struggles, and nations.

**Ophélie Masson** is Deputy Director at European Alternatives, where she coordinates the programmes that aim to develop and implement sustainable tools of participative democracy such as citizens assemblies and ECIs. She also co-coordinates the Citizens Take Over Europe coalition.

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**Víctor Andrés Renza** holds a bachelor in law and an Msc in international development studies from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. He is currently a Research assistant for the Nordic Centre for Internet and Society at BI-Norwegian Business School and is part of the Horizon 2020 project Artsformation. His main interests lie in sustainable development, digital transformation and gig workers. Particularly, Víctor is interested in how the arts and artists can contribute to face the different challenges of sustainable development within the digital transformation era.

**Ally Zlatar**, an artist, scholar, and activist, founded The Starving Artist, an initiative promoting advocacy and systemic reform through creative expression. She also established The Starving Artist Scholarship Fund for eating disorder treatment and launched the "This Body of Mine" campaign, supporting individuals and artists from refugee backgrounds.

**Samar Zughool** is a community art director and performing artist. Through her series of practices, "SAMA Community Arts" and "NOT your Scheherazade", she co-creates public performative journeys that deconstruct social communication as free of the enforced binarism of "nation-state" and "state-nation" as both tools and products of colonialism along with enforced gender binary profiling.

**The Ukraine-Palestine Solidarity Group** is a group of Ukrainian researchers, artists, and activists.

As this editorial is being written, European and Western state's active participation and complicity in the ongoing violence and genocide endemic to colonisation and nationalism continues to be painted in garish colours for all the world to see[1]. At the same time, mass movements across borders are rising up to challenge this injustice. On the question of reparations for slavery and the brutal crimes of 500 years of European colonialism, demands for justice and accountability from colonial metropoles are taking place.[2] On the question of solidarity with Palestinians who have been resisting settler-colonialism, occupation and apartheid for 75 years,[3] millions have come forth from all backgrounds and faiths around the world to stand and act in support, despite brutal repression of freedom of expression.[4] Workers, including EU staff, are rising up against the hypocrisy of their leaders.[5]

Decolonisation in its most material and primary sense means the dismantling of settler-colonial states. Support for resistance does not mean support for war crimes; all such crimes committed by any party must be brought to justice through independent investigations applying international law justly to all parties.[6] Such independent investigations are sorely lacking and would be an alternative to war, with an underfunded International Criminal Court that has been unable to act where Western powers and their allies such as the United States, the UK and Israel have transgressed, while (rightly) acting relatively quickly against the

transgressions of non-Western states (see, e.g. Putin's arrest warrant).[7]
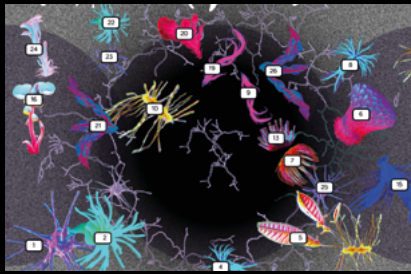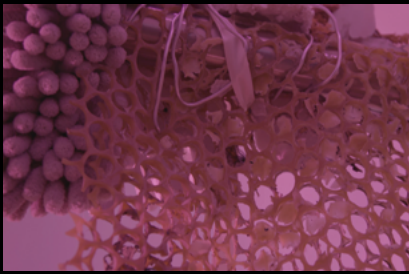
These questions are summed up poignantly in a letter of solidarity from Ukrainians to Palestinians, published in this journal's section on 'Decolonising Europe'. Also in this section is an article on the need for intersectional feminist movements to rise up against nationalism, patriarchy and the far right in Europe; a discussion on reviving postsecular decolonial knowledge; and a homage to a forest endangered by extractive capitalism.

In our section on Assembling, Organising and Connecting, we put forward a proposal for parliamentarians and cities to work together for radical migration policy reform ahead of the 2024 EU elections; learn lessons from Poland's wom*n's strike; report on our Transeuropa Festival 'Holding Spaces' assembly; and explore ways of connecting community through growing plants and inter-species dialogue.

Art Beyond Borders begins with a powerful reflection on dealing with eating disorders through art; the exciting launch of European Alternative's Room to Bloom catalogue - a feminist platform for ecological and postcolonial narratives of Europe; report from Artsformation research into using the arts to shape desirable technological futures; and a podcast on democracy, dictatorship and decolonisation where artist Samar Zughool talks about how culture and creativity can challenge censorship and build new narratives.

editorial

1       See, for example: https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/gaza-un-experts-call-international-community-prevent-genocide-against; https://www.democracynow.org/2024/1/2/south_africa_israel_genocide_icj; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v-AUeEnjULHeO

2       https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/06/eu-must-face-legacy-of-colonialism-and-support-reparations-say-meps; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/08/clive-lewis-calls-for-uk-to-negotiate-caribbean-slavery-reparations

3       https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2022/02/israels-system-of-apartheid/

4       https://peoplesdispatch.org/2023/11/29/across-the-globe-mobilizations-called-for-the-international-day-of-solidarity-with-the-palestinian-people/

5       https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eu-staff-criticise-von-der-leyen-over-israel-stance/; https://www.newarab.com/news/eu-chief-slammed-double-standards-ukraine-gaza;

6       https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/10/damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-as-israeli-attacks-wipe-out-entire-families-in-gaza/

7       https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/5/20/an-icc-warrant-against-putin-is-good-its-also ; https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/5/israeli-families-bring-war-crime-complaint-to-icc-against-hamas

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# Ukrainian letter of solidarity with Palestinian people

*More than 300 Ukrainian scholars, activists and artists express their solidarity with Palestinians in this open letter.*
*This letter was first published on 2 November 2023 in the Ukrainian journal Commons. To see the full list of signatories and to sign the letter, visit www.commons.com.ua.*

The Ukraine-Palestine Solidarity Group sends a letter of support to the people of Palestine.

We write this letter as people to people.



Credits: Kateryna Gritseva

Scan the QR code to sign our ceasefire petition.

We, Ukrainian researchers, artists, political and labour activists, members of civil society stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine who for 75 years have been subjected and resisted Israeli military occupation, separation, settler colonial violence, ethnic cleansing, land dispossession and apartheid. We write this letter as people to people. The dominant discourse on the governmental level and even among solidarity groups that support the struggles of Ukrainians and Palestinians often creates separation. With this letter we reject these divisions, and affirm our solidarity with everyone who is oppressed and struggling for freedom.

As activists committed to freedom, human rights, democracy and social justice, and while fully acknowledging power differentials, we firmly condemn attacks on civilian populations – be they Israelis attacked by Hamas or Palestinians attacked by the Israeli occupation forces and armed settler gangs. Deliberate targeting of civilians is a war crime. Yet this is no justification for the collective punishment of Palestinian people, identifying all residents of Gaza with Hamas and the indiscriminate use of the term "terrorism" applied to the whole Palestinian resistance. Nor is this a justification of continuation of the ongoing occupation. Echoing multiple UN resolutions, we know that there will be no lasting peace without justice for the Palestinian people.

On October 7 we witnessed Hamas' violence against the civilians in Israel, an event that is now singled out by many to demonize and dehumanize Palestinian resistance altogether. Hamas, a reactionary islamist organization, needs to be seen in a wider historical context and decades of Israel encroaching on Palestinian land, long before this organization came to exist in the late 1980s. During the Nakba ("catastrophe") of 1948, more than 700,000 Palestinians were brutally displaced from their homes, with entire villages massacred and destroyed. Since its creation Israel has never stopped pursuing its colonial expansion. The Palestinians were forced to exile, fragmented and administered under different regimes. Some of them are Israeli citizens affected by structural discrimination and racism. Those living in the occupied West Bank are subjected to apartheid under decades of Israel's

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## We oppose the new wave of Islamophobia.

military control. The people of the Gaza Strip have suffered from the blockade imposed by Israel since 2006, which restricted movement of people and goods, resulting in growing poverty and deprivation.

Since the 7th of October and at the time of writing the death toll in the Gaza Strip is more than 8,500 people. Women and children have made up more than 62 percent of the fatalities, while more than 21,048 people have been injured. In recent days, Israel has bombed schools, residential areas, Greek Orthodox Church and several hospitals. Israel has also cut all water, electricity, and fuel supply in the Gaza Strip. There is a severe shortage of food and medicine, causing a total collapse of a healthcare system.

Most of the Western and Israeli media justifies these deaths as mere collateral damage to fighting Hamas but is silent when it comes to Palestinian civilians targeted and killed in the Occupied West Bank. Since the beginning of 2023 alone, and before October 7, the death toll on the Palestinian side had already reached 227. Since the 7 of October, 121 Palestinian civilians have been killed in the occupied West Bank. More than 10,000 Palestinian political prisoners are currently detained in Israeli prisons. Lasting peace and justice are only possible with the end of the ongoing occupation. Palestinians have the right to self-determination and resistance against Israeli's occupation, just like Ukrainians have the right to resist Russian invasion.

Our solidarity comes from a place of anger at the injustice, and a place of deep pain of knowing the devastating impacts of occupation, shelling of civil infrastructure, and humanitarian blockade from experiences in our homeland. Parts of Ukraine have been occupied since 2014, and the international community failed to stop Russian aggression then, ignoring the imperial and colonial nature of the armed violence, which consequently escalated on the 24th of February 2022. Civilians in Ukraine are shelled daily, in their homes, in hospitals, on bus stops, in queues for bread. As a result of the Russian occupation, thousands of people in Ukraine live without access to water, electricity or heating,

and it is the most vulnerable groups that are mostly affected by the destruction of critical infrastructure. In the months of the siege and heavy bombardment of Mariupol there was no humanitarian corridor. Watching the Israeli targeting the civilian infrastructure in Gaza, the Israeli humanitarian blockade and occupation of land resonates especially painfully with us. From this place of pain of experience and solidarity, we call on our fellow Ukrainians globally and all the people to raise their voices in support of the Palestinian people and condemn the ongoing Israeli mass ethnic cleansing.

We reject the Ukrainian government statements that express unconditional support for Israel's military actions, and we consider the calls to avoid civilian casualties by Ukraine's MFA belated and insufficient. This position is a retreat from the support of Palestinian rights and condemnation of the Israeli occupation, which Ukraine has followed for decades, including voting in the UN. Aware of the pragmatic geopolitical reasoning behind Ukraine's decision to echo Western allies, on whom we are dependent for our survival, we see the current support of Israel and dismissing Palestinian right to self-determination as contradictory to Ukraine's own commitment to human rights and fight for our land and freedom. We as Ukrainians should stand in solidarity not with the oppressors, but with those who experience and resist the oppression.

We strongly object to equating of Western military aid to Ukraine and Israel by some politicians. Ukraine doesn't occupy the territories of other people, instead, it fights against the Russian occupation, and therefore international assistance serves a just cause and the protection of international law. Israel has occupied and annexed Palestinian and Syrian territories, and Western aid to it confirms an unjust order and demonstrates double standards in relation to international law.

We oppose the new wave of Islamophobia, such as the brutal murder of a Palestinian American 6-year old and assault on his family in Illinois, USA, and the equating of any criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism. At the same time, we also oppose holding all Jewish people all over the world accountable for the politics of the state of Israel and we condemn anti-Semitic violence, such as the mob attack on the airplane in Daghestan, Russia. We also reject the revival of

## Stop pitting Palestinians and Ukrainians against each other.

the "war on terror" rhetoric used by the US and EU to justify war crimes and violations of international law that have undermined the international security system, caused countless deaths, and has been borrowed by other states, including Russia for the war in Chechnya and China for the Uyghur genocide. Now Israel is using it to carry out ethnic cleansing.

We have witnessed the world uniting in solidarity for the people of Ukraine and we call on everyone to do the same for the people of Palestine.

### Call to Action

—  We urge the implementation of the call to ceasefire, put forward by the UN General Assembly resolution.

—  We call on the Israeli government to immediately stop attacks on civilians, and provide humanitarian aid; we insist on an immediate and indefinite lifting of siege on Gaza and an urgent relief operation to restore civilian infrastructure. We also call on the Israeli government to put an end to the occupation and recognise the right of Palestinian displaced people to return to their lands.

—  We call on the Ukrainian government to condemn the use of state sanctioned terror and humanitarian blockade against the Gazan civilian population and reaffirm the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. We also call on the Ukrainian government to condemn deliberate assaults on Palestinians in the occupied West Bank.

—  We call on the international media to stop pitting Palestinians and Ukrainians against each other, where hierarchies of suffering perpetuate racist rhetoric and dehumanize those under attack.

The Ukraine-Palestine Solidarity Group is a group of Ukrainian researchers, artists, and activists.

# Revitalising democracy through movement feminism

## Laetitia Caumes on the need for transnational European feminist alliances.

**In 1974, the French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir said to Claudine Monteil : *"Admittedly, Claudine, we have won, but only temporarily. All it will take is a political, economic or religious crisis for women's rights - our rights - to be called into question. You must remain vigilant throughout your life."* [A] 49 years later, this sadly still rings true. Although undeniable progress has been made all over Europe, womens' and LGBTQIA+ peoples' rights are constantly at risk of being overturned. Feminist activists and actors consistently have to be on the lookout and fight to safeguard them.**

A        CROM Nathalie, "IVG : "Il suffira d'une crise…" D'où vient cette citation de Simone de Beauvoir?", Télérama, 28 juin 2022, https://tinyurl.com/2dk5dk9x

In France, these last 49 years have allowed for the implementation of numerous feminist policies: the legalisation of same-sex marriage (2013), the implementation of a street harassment law (2018), and the access to Medically Assisted Procreation (MAP) for lesbian couples and single women (2021). In Europe, 19 countries have legalised same-sex marriage[1]. As the Gender Equality Index (2023) underlines, there is an upward convergence in gender equality, meaning that there is an "increasing equality between women and men in the EU."[2] But this Index also highlights that multiple gender inequalities persist: unpaid care work inequalities, gender-based violence, gender segregation in education and the labor market, gender gaps in income, etc. These persisting inequalities are ignored by numerous voices claiming that Europe has achieved a "post-feminist" and "post-patriarchal" era, in which social equality has been reached and where further mobilizations are unnecessary (if not framed as threats). These voices have had considerable influence and power in the last decade.

This observation, shared by multiple feminist actors, is at the root of the FIERCE project[3], an ongoing project funded by the European Union taking place in eight different countries in Europe: Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey. FIERCE stands for "Feminist Movements Revitalizing Democracy in Europe '' and it is a participatory research project, a transnational experiment. Its aim is to develop in-depth understanding of feminist and anti-feminist and anti-gender movements, activities and discourses as well as their impact on the institutional arena and on policy outcomes over the last decade. As aforementioned, multiple issues need to be taken into consideration when talking about gender inequalities and that is why this project has defined five key areas : the labour market; health and reproductive rights; LGBTQIA+ rights; migration and gender-based violence. To collect data, this project relies on case studies, coding of national debates and controversies and on the creation of laboratories with local feminist actors in each national context. These national co-creation laboratories are also accompanied by transnational laboratories that foster spaces of transnational feminist discussions and action.

1        Pew Research Center, Same-Sex Marriage Around the World Map, June 2025. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/fact-sheet/gay-marriage-around-the-world/

2        Gender Equality Index, October 2025, https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2025.

3        For more information on the project: https://fierce-project.eu/

Actors of the backlash have turned feminists and LGBTQIA+ activists into their scapegoat, holding them responsible for all current social, political and cultural issues.

## The anti-gender backlash

Cross-cutting the data from each national context leads to the conclusion that feminist actors all over Europe face what has been described as "a backlash" or a "backsliding". These concepts have been used in the *Gender Equality Index* (2023), the report by the *European Union Agency For Fundamental Rights* (2017) or the *EU Commission Engagement* (2019). This backlash is defined as a resistance to progressive social change; a regression on acquired rights or as the mainte- nance of a non-egalitarian status quo. If we consider - as is done here - that gender equality is indicative of the situation of fundamental rights and values - such as democracy for example - then attacks against it need to be analyzed as a warning of the deterioration of such values.  The concept of "backlash" was first popularized by the American feminist Su- san Faludi[4] to describe the way in which the feminist wave of the 1970s was followed by a conservative counter-wave that aimed at hindering this progress and the egalitarian public policies it had resulted in. In the 2018 study "Backlash in Gen- der Equality and Women's and Girls' Rights" commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee, it is specified that "backsliding is used in political science to describe a reversal in transitions to liberal democ- racies, whereas backlash is used in feminist journalism and academia to describe a reversal of progress with implement- ing feminist equality policies and related language."[5]

Actors of the backlash have turned feminists and LGBT- QIA+ activists into their scapegoat, holding them responsible for all current social, political and cultural issues. Judith But- ler sums it up as follows: "the principal aim of the movement is to reverse progressive legislation won in the last decades

by both LGBTQI and feminist movements. Indeed, in attack- ing "gender" they oppose reproductive freedom for women and the rights of single parents; they oppose protections for women against rape and domestic violence; and they deny the legal and social rights of trans people along with a full array of legal and institutional safeguards against gender discrimination, forced psychiatric internment, brutal physical harassment and killing."[6] These setbacks in rights had led to a global endangerment of previous achievements, especially when it comes to bodily autonomy and reproductive rights. A recent example of this would be Italy's right-wing government ordering "state agencies to cease registration of children born to same-sex couples" and pushing it further by order- ing "the cancellation and re-issuance of 33 birth certificates of lesbian couples' children, endangering access to medical care and education."[7]

Furthermore, feminist actors such as female politicians and researchers have endured personal attacks hindering their participation in democratic processes. Entire research fields such as gender studies or post-/decolonial studies are being targeted by campaigns framing them as "misguided forms of ideology that do not respect the basic principles of the research profession"[8]. On the 2nd of January 2023, members of the parliamentary group of the German far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) raised 14 questions to the Federal Government concerning the "evaluation of gen- der studies". Their questions concern the impact that gender studies have on "the design of laws, national action plans and equality initiatives of the Federal Government"[9]. This hasn't been covered in German - nor international - news.

6        Butler, J., "Why is the idea of 'gender' provoking backlash the world over?", *The Guardian*, 25 october 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2021/oct/25/judith-butler-gender-ideology-backlash

7        Kilbride, E., "Italy's Mounting Attack on Lesbian Parents", *Human Rights Watch*, 24 july 2023, URL: https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/24/italys-mounting-attack-lesbian-parents

8        My translation : « remises en cause les sciences sociales en tant que sciences, en ce qu'elles seraient des formes dévoyées d'idéologies ne respectant pas les principes élémentaires du métier de chercheur et de chercheuse », in Claude Gautier, Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, « Questions brûlantes de notre temps », in *De la défense des savoirs critiques. Quand le pouvoir s'en prend à l'autonomie de la recherche*, Claude Gautier, Michelle Zancarini-Fournel (Ed), Paris, La Découverte, « Petits cahiers libres », 2022, URL: https://www.cairn.info/de-la-defense-des-savoirs-critiques--9782548075069-page-187.htm (p.187)

9        Deutscher Bundestag, Parlamentsnachrichten, "AfD fragt nach Evaluation der Gender Studies" URL: https://www.bundestag.de/presse/hib/kurzmeldungen-928146

4        S. Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Crown Publishing Group, 1991, 552 pages.

5        European Parliament, "Backlash in Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Rights", Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs - Directorate General for Internal Policies of the Union, June 2018, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604955/IPOL_STU(2018)604955_EN.pdf

These attacks on feminist policies or feminist knowledge production have also found powerful outlets online and digital tools have been used to target individuals all around Europe.

## Cyber harassment

These attacks on feminist policies or feminist knowledge pro- duction have also found powerful outlets online and digital tools have been used to target individuals all around Europe. Digital tools have been host to a great deal of violences: cy- ber harassment, cybersexism, masculinist raids, etc, trying to discredit womens' and gender minorities' voices. In France, numerous activist initiatives, collectives and associations were born out of this such as *#StopFisha* and *Féministes contre le Cyberharcèlement*. These associations try to raise awareness on the ongoing cybersexism and the life-long con- sequences that cyberbullying can have on victims. "Fisha" is a French slang for "affiche" which means "exposing". During the first lock-down France witnessed the rise of countless "Fisha-accounts" on numerous social media platforms (es- pecially Snapchat and Telegram). These accounts dissem-

inated intimate content from young women, mostly minors, without their consent. As *#StopFisha* describes "the names of the victims (were) pinned to the images, along with their age, address, school and telephone number. (...) Very quickly, hun- dreds of accounts were created, by region, department, town or neighborhood. In addition to the dissemination of these sexual images, the young women were harassed and threat- ened when they asked for the content to be deleted. Video recordings of rapes and sexual assaults (were) also posted on these accounts."[10] Feminist activists in France have been fighting for these accounts to be reported and deleted and for broader cyber-security measures to take into account ques- tions of gender and sexuality. This issue can not be tackled at the national level only, since the Internet goes beyond bor- ders and national law. These issues need to be addressed internationally.

Analyzing and understanding where this anti-feminist and anti-gender backlash comes from is crucial in order to find ways to counter it and protect feminist activists and actors. It is also important to understand that this backlash cannot be understood solely as a response to feminist wins. As the researcher David Paternotte[11], who has extensively researched anti-gender movements in Europe, emphasizes, this phenomenon is part of a broader conservative wave. The "backlash" should be understood less as a response to feminist activism and more as a distinct phenomenon involv- ing the pushing of a femonationalist agenda against gender equality by the far right. Femonationalism is a concept coined by Sara R. Farris, a sociologist. In *In the Name of Women's Rights. The Rise of Femonationalism* (2017) she defines fem- onationalism as the "exploitation and co-optation of feminist themes by anti-Islam and xenophobic campaigns"[12]. That

10        More information on Fisha accounts can be found on #StopFishas' website: https://stopfisha.org/stopfisha-notre-histoire/

11        See for example, Paternotte, D. (2021). *Backlash* : une mise en récit fallacieuse. *La Revue Nouvelle*, 6, 11-15. https://doi.org/10.3917/rn.216.0011

12        Sara R. Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights. The Rise of Femonationalism*, Duke University Press, 2017.

same year, in 2017, during the Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights[13], participants "expressed concern at the growing wave of mobilization around the world against gender equality. Several populist and extremist movements have been targeting women's sexual and reproductive health and rights in their attacks."[14]

This anti-feminist backlash is part of an intensifying campaign across Europe against the so-called "gender ideology". The FIERCE project underlines that this new wave of conservative mobilization has served to further spread old conservative ideas, rhetorics that already had a pre-defined agenda. Therefore, anti-gender ideologies need to be analyzed in connection with broader political, economic, cultural and social issues since "gender" is merely a symbolic glue used to further a nationalist, essentialist and xenophobic agenda. As Judith Butler puts it "gender comes to stand for, or is linked with, all kinds of imagined "infiltrations" of the national body – migrants, imports, the disruption of local economics through the effects of globalization. Thus "gender" becomes a phantom, (...) such a phantasm of destructive power can only be subdued through desperate appeals to nationalism, anti-intellectualism, censorship, expulsion, and more strongly fortified borders."[15] Anti-gender movements contribute to contemporary authoritarian processes of de-democratization that target not only gender and equality but also the concept and practice of democracy[16].

13       Women's Rights in Turbulent Times: Conclusions of the 2017 Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights. https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/document.cfm?doc_id=50219

14       Ibid.

15       Butler, J., "Why is the idea of 'gender' provoking backlash the world over?", The Guardian, 25 october 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2021/oct/23/judith-butler-gender-ideology-backlash

16       Lombardo, E., Kantola, J., & Rubio-Marin, R. (2021). De-Democratization and Opposition to Gender Equality Politics in Europe. Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, 28(3), 521-531. https://doi.org/10.1093/SP/JXAB050

FIERCE aims at transforming national claims made by local feminists into concrete tangible tools and actions.

### Building Transnational Power

These processes can be identified at the European level and that is where the uniqueness of the FIERCE project lies, in its transnational approach. While taking into account the specific features of each national context, its history, its national political landscape and its different structures of opportunity, it also attests to the relevance of identifying commonalities between countries and the rhetoric and discourse that activists face in these different contexts. This is especially relevant since anti-gender and anti-feminist networks have been forging strong transnational links. They forge alliances such as AGENDA Europe[17] or sign declarations such as the Geneva Consensus, uniting against the right to abortion[18]. Neil Datta in a report for the European Parliamentary Forum (EPF) published in 2021 entitled "Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality & Reproductive Health in Europe'' exposes the extent of funding for anti-gender movements in Europe. The findings are appalling: "Thus, the religious extremists' USD 707 million to fuel anti-gender activism in Europe, representing a four-fold increase over a decade, is but the tip of the iceberg in terms of all the funding likely flowing into such a regressive agenda. However, the real tip of the iceberg is the much wider overlapping political and economic projects accompanying the religious extremist normative project which undermines human rights while eroding the foundations of regulated market economies and liberal, pluralist democracy."[19] These transnational networks have the means to truly influence political agendas and their strike force is huge even if the voices they carry are mostly those of a loud minority. These networks are powerful and very well-financed, which could easily send feminist activists into despair, especially when faced with this asymmetry in

17       Agenda Europe website : http://agendaeurope.org/.

18       The declaration: https://www.theiwh.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/GCD-Declaration-2021-2.pdf

19       Datta, N., "Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality & Reproductive Health in Europe", EPF 2021, https://www.epfweb.org/node/837.

the resources available to propagate feminist, anti-fascist and intersectional ideas. But they don't despair. Most of them certainly do not have millions of dollars, they often lack access to specific venues, equipment and time, they build their campaigns with the help of volunteers who are committed but exhausted, unpaid or under-payed. And yet they carry on. And it is vital that this work continues to be carried out nationally, transnationally and internationally.

FIERCE aims at transforming national claims made by local feminists into concrete tangible tools and actions: feminist festivals, self-defense manuals for activists, exhibitions, guides aimed at journalists, etc. The project will also address European institutions with concrete policy recommendations to guarantee the protection of feminist actors, to require monitoring of European fundings (ensuring that women and gender minority rights NGOs and organizations benefit from them), among many other recommendations. FIERCE is about highlighting that feminist mobilizations all across Europe are playing a significant role in the fight against the rise of anti-gender and anti-feminist movements. This project also calls for feminists to create alliances. As Judith Butler puts it: "this is no time for any of the targets of this movement to be turning against one another". The anti-gender movement "threatens violence against those, including migrants, who have become cast as demonic forces and whose suppression or expulsion promises to restore a national order under duress". Therefore it calls for a unified resistance by all of those deemed as a threat to white nationalist, cis-normative and heteropatriarchal systems.

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# Recovering lost knowledges for transnational social justice

Justin Beaumont and Christopher Baker on dismantling 'secular' and 'faith-based' dichotomies towards a radical new imagining of decolonial postsecularity.

*We argue for a decolonial perspective on postsecularity that recovers lost knowledges of discriminated people for transnational social justice. Our approach prioritises a granular, ethnographic engagement with the discourses, experiences and activisms of people displaying and articulating diverse identities, values, and worldviews across difference. Authentic holistic reconnection drives new progressive political spaces of hope, justice and solidarity featuring actors outside Christian and Western secular contexts that bridge material and symbolic culture.*

"Coloniality" concerns a structure of normative principles, values and practices that founds western modernity and generates forms of exploration, extraction and domination of being, seeing, doing, thinking, feeling and acting.

Greece's sovereign debt crisis in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial calamity resulted in austerity measures that deepened poverty and immiseration, precipitating a humanitarian crisis for millions of Greeks. Alongside the 2023 heatwave and devastating wildfires, the country's government corruption, discrimination against immigrants and minorities, and deplorable conditions for irregular migrants and asylum seekers, continue to afflict the people.

Dreaming of the future, only a progressive decolonial politics that brings together people from diverse walks of life, ethical worldviews and political persuasions can recover lost knowledges in the quest for transnational social justice, lasting peace, and socio-environmental harmony.

This article has been written under the dark shadow of the horrific violence that has escalated in and around the Israeli controlled borders of the Palestinian Gaza Strip in October 2023, triggered by Hamas's bloodiest ever military blow to Israel and coupled with fierce Israeli reprisal bombings. These atrocities represent the latest eruption in a vicious circle of carnage that has afflicted these territories for 75 years since the Nakba of 1948.



1: Palestinians near the site of a retaliatory airstrike, 08.10.2023

Whether talking about these latest conflicts in Israel-Palestine, the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War and captured Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the repression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, China, or the mass exodus of Armenians from the Nagorno-Karabakh disputed region in Azerbaijan, these struggles, acts of ethnic cleansing and human rights abuses share colonial origins.

Within Europe, for example, the power of financial capital has been concentrated in the German dominated Frankfurt banks, the German Federal Bank and the European Central Bank. These institutions have held European peripheral economies – Greece, Portugal, Spain, Italy and Ireland – in a form of neocolonial debt bondage through a number of government and bank bailouts since 2010.

### Definition of terms

"Coloniality" concerns a structure of normative principles, values and practices that found western modernity and generates forms of exploration, extraction and domination of being, seeing, doing, thinking, feeling and acting. Whereas colonialism denotes the long-term political arrangements that govern these practices, coloniality refers to the logic, culture and structure of the modern world-system.

"Decoloniality" is a way for us to re-learn knowledges from certain peoples, cultures and environments that were absent or forgotten by forces of modernity, settler-colonialism and racial capitalism. Drawing on the thinking of people like Fanon, Césaire and Spivak, among others, the term means an intentional, holistic commitment to ourselves and respect towards the wholeness of mind, body and soul of other people in their cultural, ethnic, racial and belief differences.



2: Frantz Fanon: Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist, political philosopher and Marxist from Martinique

"Postsecularity" refers to the stimulation of multiple ethical values arising from new relationships between people of diverse faiths and secular worldviews. Re-use of a secular, public building by a faith-based organisation, to provide social and emotional support and shelter for homeless and insecurely housed people in cities from diverse social, cultural, religious and no-faith backgrounds, would be an example in practice.



3: Hall II of the Herschel Baths in Mannheim, Germany where nowadays, through Caritas, homeless people can freshen up.

All along we shared the intuitive belief that something new was happening. The research agenda we now propose brings postsecularity to ground level. At the beginning we were hindered by a lack of appropriate theoretical tools and conceptual terminology to grasp precisely the nature and meaning of the empirical changes felt around us. The search for spirituality and ethical values provided the avenue for examining the changing roles of religion and secularism in contemporary societies.

New directions in psychoanalysis around the concept of **re-wilding** capture new discourses that we are seeking to unearth

## Towards an enlightened city

Deepening research into the faith groups in cities, the *Faith-Based Organizations and Exclusion in European Cities* (FACIT) project (2008-10) critically examined the value of the "F-word" in tackling, combating or mitigating poverty, exclusion and immiseration in diverse European urban areas. Inspired by a longstanding interest in Latin American liberation theology, a crucial component of decolonial theory, the research set out to address faith groups in relation to non-faith actors, despite critical urban theory and secular humanist intellectual moorings.

Similarly, Manav Ratti's landmark work *The Postsecular Imagination* has addressed from a perspective of postcolonial literature the potentials and limits of secular and religious thought outside the West. The interaction of postcolonialism, literary studies and decolonial thought informed the Routledge *Handbook of Postsecularity* that brought philosophers, theologians and social scientists together.
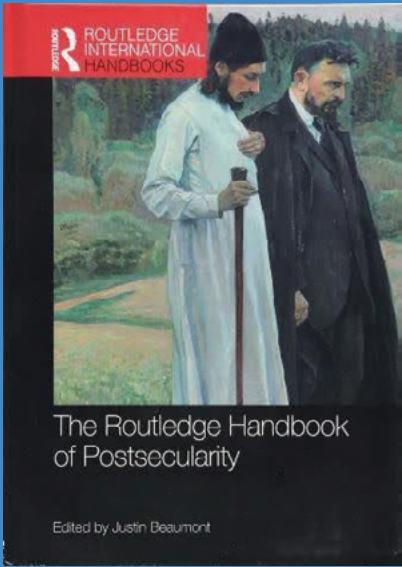


4: *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity*, depicting theologians Florensky and Bulgakov pondering Russia's plight on the eve of the 1917 revolution

Around the same time, *Geographies of Postsecularity* highlighted the variations in postcolonial readings of postsecularity outside the Christian/ secular/ Western nexus. The authors defined postsecularity as 'a context-contingent bubbling up of ethical values arising from amalgams of faith-based and secular determination to relate differently to alterity and become active in support of others by going beyond the social bubble of the normal habitus' (p. 3) with case studies from Egypt, India, Philippines and Russia.
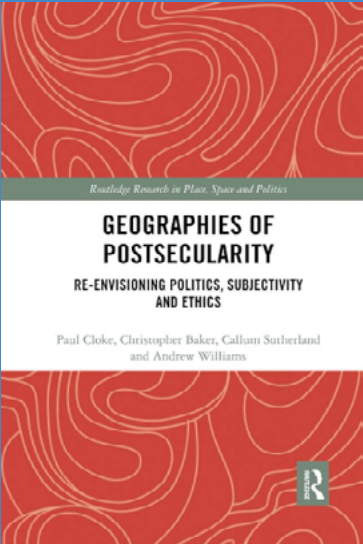


5: Geographies of Postsecularity (2019)

In the aftermath of FACIT, the subsequent Horizon 2020 bid (ENLIGHTEN) in 2015 provided the material that culminated in the forthcoming *Enlightened City*. While fully aware of the historic colonial, rational humanist "Age of Enlightenment" connotations of the term, we seek to deploy the distinct notion of "enlightened" as spiritual awareness and recognition of radical difference. In this sense, the term embraces interculturality and the tensions between and limits of universal values and identity politics.

## Emerging discourses, experiences and activisms

Recovering lost knowledges for transnational social justices requires appreciation of three areas of interconnected enquiry. Specifically, we refer to the material and lived out expressions of *discourses*, *experiences* and *activisms* arising from new coalitions and expressions of partnership and solidarity across difference in response to issues of trauma, injustice and oppression.

An example of a changing secular discourse, for example, emerges in pioneering work by scholars at Goldsmiths, University of London who are trained in counselling and therapeutic techniques within a Freudian psychoanalytic framework. Their assessment of that tradition is that it is no longer fit for purpose within the current challenges for human and environmental wholeness.

New directions in psychoanalysis around the concept of *re-wilding* capture new discourses that we are seeking to unearth, because it also opens new spaces of material decolonized postsecularity and new practices. Our Goldsmiths colleagues identify several new intellectual and practice-based frontiers of what we might call a decolonial postsecularity:

— Psychoanalysis's wild thoughts;

— Poetics of the psyche;

— Breathing in psychoanalysis;

— Wild space of thought;

— Occult feminisms;

— Ecological unconscious;

— Depth psychology and deep ecology;

— Magical instinct and discursive logic;

— Animal magnetism, wild attractions;

— Queer ecologies, animalities, desires;

— Shamanic dreaming and animal metamorphose.

The spatial and specifically urban cultural connotations of psychological and psychoanalytical inquiries would add original insights into what has been depicted as particular spaces, subjectivities and practices of postsecularity. The approach would relate sympathetically with Ankhi Mukherjee's *Unseen City*, a humanistic encounter with the psychic lives of dispossessed people in Mumbai, London and New York.



6: Professor Ankhi Mukherjee, Professor of English and World Literatures and Tutorial Fellow at Wadham College, Oxford

Nirmal Puwar's research, also at Goldsmiths, deals with spatial-linguistic experimentation through re-routing of established narratives of space, including consecrated spaces, such as Coventry Cathedral in the West Midlands of England. The project "Noise of the Past" was sparked by her own family's experience, including her father and uncle, who as members of the Commonwealth fought for Britain in the Second World War.

The project attended to the civic and national erasure and amnesia of their presence and of countless others during WW1 and WW2. Puwar commissioned the composer Francis Silkstone for a postcolonial "War Requiem" featuring a poetic dialogue in Urdu between her father and his grandson. Activating a call-and-response methodology, the musical score was put to poetry by Nitin Sawhney and then made into a film by the director Kuldip Powar, opening up, re-routing and extending how war and memory are considered.

Puwar's (2023-24) latest research returns to Coventry Cathedral and adds an historical and genealogical approach to explore the building's archives. This exploration is designed to show previous innovative multicultural engagements might provide inspiration for new artistic and curated works and inspire material practices and imaginations of what a civic cathedral can become. For example, Ravi Shankar performed in the cathedral in 1968; Duke Ellington performed in 1966; there was a controversy over John Lennon and Yoko Ono's living sculpture of two acorns disqualified from entering a prestigious sculptural exhibition in 1968. Puwar reveals several examples in this vein.

A third case study lies in the attempt to reimagine liberation theology. This endeavour sees liberation theology reframed in line with the new viscerality of police, state and urban violence resulting in the oppression of young black and brown bodies of colour and gender. The tradition of liberation theology emerged in the late 1960s in Latin America, riven through with the most egregious experiences of colonialism, dictatorship and radical social and economic disaffection. The approach combined radical prophetic Judeo-Christian traditions with Marxist and other secular sociological critiques for the liberation of oppressed people.



7: Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino, world-renowned Peruvian liberation theologian


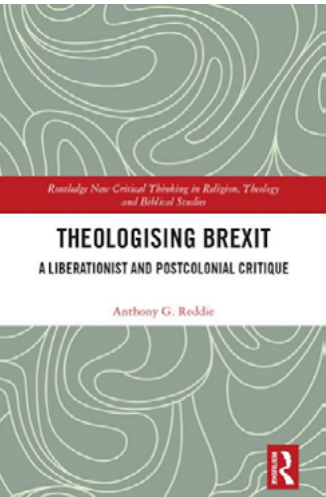
8: *Theologising Brexit* (2019)

The movement energised both Christian theology and left-wing politics into many social movements of grassroots protest across the Global South that are still picking up faint echoes in the 21st century in events like the Occupy movement of 2011, with its deep critique of neo-liberal capitalism and its call for the radical redistribution of resources and opportunity.

A new generation of theologian-activists, however, question whether previous models of liberation theology are sufficiently robust to speak into the anger and violence now being perpetrated on the bodies of the poor and the "Othered" by authoritarian regimes across the world.

Some thinkers and activists reflect that the killing of Michael Brown and subsequent uprisings in Ferguson which sparked the Black Lives Matter movement mark a change in existential threat that the cohort associated with the civil rights movement struggles to engage with culturally and politically. According to some trajectories in this analysis, the movement for Black Liberation has been co-opted into the American Empire that was, and continues to be, American exceptionalism. The rise of Black American elites, culminating in the election of Barack Obama as the first Black President of the United States, and the rise of Black 'civil rights entrepreneurs' has not led to any reductions in the numbers of Black and Brown people living in extreme poverty or indeed the number of police murders.

For others who still work within the faith-based racial justice system there is desire to reconnect Black Liberation theology more explicitly with the rage and thirst for justice, dignity and recognition experienced by additional "Othered" groups. Anthony Reddie's *Theologising Brexit*, for example, presents a prophetic, liberationist and postcolonial approach to Black theology that critiques White entitlement and parochial nativism in Brexit Britain, within wider debates on transformative education, critical pedagogy and challenges to Whiteness.

Finally, the growing presence of spiritual environmental activism within mass protest on climate change is another area for our research. Faith groups and practices associated

with faith traditions such as prayer, meditation and open-air masses outside the "spaces of Empire'' (such as fossil fuel multinationals and government offices) are now at the heart of nonviolent protest events organised under the umbrella of *Extinction Rebellion* and other climate change movements.

At the centre of both religious and secular critiques of the Anthropocene within the climate justice movement is the recognition of the colonial project of empire that historically has treated ecosystems as an endless source of growth and exploitation.



9: Extinction Rebellion Solidarity with the French Citizens' Assembly on Climate

All these arenas emerge as a response to the trauma of the present age that is predicated on racialised, misogynistic, therapeutic, homophobic or "Anthropocenic" violence

## Conclusion

Arguing for a granular, ethnographic engagement with discourses, experiences and activisms we believe that the search for an authentic holistic reconnectivity, that emerges out of a deep despair at, and profound mistrust of, "politics as usual" is what is driving what these case studies are pointing to: namely, a new enlightened approach to political alliance formation. Immense difficulties stand in the way of this agenda. Responding to the demand for independent indigenous research, voice and leadership of cross-cultural teams would be of paramount importance throughout the proposed case studies that would aim to recover lost knowledges for transnational social justice.

These instances attempt to discover new alliances and expressions of solidarity across difference that include at their core a willingness to reject solid binaries between religious and secular identities. All these arenas emerge as a response to the trauma of the present age that is predicated on racialised, misogynistic, therapeutic, homophobic or "Anthropocenic" violence. They seek a profound rethinking of the importance and vitality of intersectionality, authenticity, wide-ranging empathy and the search for new and alternative expressions of belonging, community and the shared search for justice and dignity for all.

In the course of these searches, new practices are already beginning to appear. Based on innovative and experimental experiences of progressive solidarity and partnership, involving otherwise largely silenced voices, these practices will place previously lost knowledges centre-stage and contribute to a radical iteration of a material decolonial postsecularity.

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# A Forest in Three Parts

Pujita Guha reviews Oliver Ressler's exhibition The Path is Never the Same, exploring the conflicts and confluences of activism, ecology and state repression[A].

The obscene matter of extractive capitalism is set against the abundant, life-affirming forest awaiting its death.

## I. The scene of the crime

Exactly halfway through *The Path is Never the Same*, the viewer encounters a striated mound of soil and sand. Seen from a slight distance, the mound appears engulfed by silhouetted tall grasses, shrubs, with a thin bark curving up on the right edge of the frame. A narrow forested trail leads us to the mound, interjected almost rudely into our gaze toward the far horizon. Far in the background is the faint, blurred, barely distinguishable outline of an open-pit coal mine. What Oliver Ressler shows here is the "interfacing" between the drastically reduced Hambach forest in Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia region and energy conglomerate RWE's Tagebau Hambach lignite mine, which is gradually devouring the forest. The Hambach forest lies over lignite reserves, making it vulnerable to the mining industry. *The Path is Never the Same* dramatizes the resistance to RWE's occupation and decimation of the forest, focusing on the counter-occupation by activists in small tree-houses. This dyad or interfacing between mine and forest gives the work its spatial contours. The activists demonstrate a deep elemental attunement to the forest. They learn to observe and read it, transforming their own way of life as they come to understand its light, rhythm, weather, humidity, rain, foliage and animal life. This attunement to the forest enfolds but far exceeds the acts of protesting and resistance to the state and mining company.

The interfacing of the coal mine and the forest edge evokes historical "first contact" myths in which supposed civilizational "progress" encounters its "other". The interface is not just a matter of edges and borders: the condition of the boundary is one of friction or agitation. Distinctions are made.[1] The threshold between mine and forest is only 500 meters wide, or perhaps even non-existent: as the activists in the piece remind us, REW has already gnawed its way 30 meters into the forest. The frame appearing halfway through the film shows how close together these two worlds are in their constant friction, even as the distanced, observational camera work documents each realm separately. Early on in the film, Ressler juxtaposes close-ups of lush and verdant vegetal life – croaking frogs, glistening moss – with landscape shots of the vast bleak lignite mine whose symmetrical ridges are exposed on the earth's surface. Monstrous serrated wheels dig into parched ground. Dark staircases down to the pit zig-zag across the landscape while the spoils of the mine – heaps of soil, sand and gravel – lie strewn among the mounds and hills above. The obscene matter of extractive capitalism is set against the abundant, life-affirming forest awaiting its death.

The mine is initially framed from within the forest, but the camera soon inverts its perspective, shifting to the striated landscapes of the mine before deftly raising the gaze back to the forest behind, in keeping with the film's slow observational rhythm. The roving camera pauses only after allowing aerial view of the forest from over the canopies. In the far distance, two floating red bars cut across each other like an "X" that marks a spot. According to Anthony Vidler, an "X that marks the spot" is the

"place of the body might be marked by tape and chalk on the ground to which it had fallen; the alleged site of the crime might be gridded with painstaking care in order to provide a coordinate system by which to situate the evidence, carefully collected in labeled bags for presentation in court; the tracks of the criminal, the traces of blood, the dispersed weapons, and their hastily jettisoned ammunition might all be gathered together and plotted on the special kind of map that criminologists have defined as appropriate to fix the "scene" of the crime in legally tenable terms."[2]

The "X" marks not just the scene of the crime but also its attendant bureaucracies: the procedures and investigations that follow. It denotes that a crime has taken place, marking both the time and the site of investigation. In the

1    Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, Cambridge: Polity, 2012, p. 51.

2    Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000, p. 125.

Hambach forest, however, the red "X" is not a crime scene marker but a sign made by an activist, indicating the path to the nearest "barrio" (cluster of treehouses and barricades in the forest) and warning police and miners not to enter. Facing inward to the forest, the "X" marks a safe spot for the activists. Outwardly, to anyone seeing it from its interface, it cautions the intruder. It is a sign meant to stop the entry of the so-called civilizational worlds. Lying close to the interface, the "X" at this spot is not the marker of a crime that has already taken place but of one that is imminent: the murder of the forest by the mine. Thus the interface marks not just the site of difference but also the site of violence: the subsumption of all life into civilizational progress. The "X" marks the annihilation of the forest, and more fundamentally, it marks the negation of life and its abundant generosity. It is a murder whose exact time is unclear, yet palpable and imminent. As an unmistakable mark, it leaves no doubt about the forest's future. It makes visible the threat at hand. By its very presence, the "X" demands an immediate reaction at the interface. It is both a "Stop" sign addressed to miners and state, and a call to action and resistance addressed to the activists. On a fundamental level, the "X" collapses the imminent future of the forest's death into the local and immediate present – the urgency of action and resistance in the forest – by pre-empting the scene of the crime.[3]

5     Colin Milburn and Rita Raley, "Red Dot Sight," in: *The Routledge Companion to Media and Risk*, ed. Bhaskar Sarkar and Bishnupriya Ghosh, New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2021, p. 278.

The interfacing of the coal mine and the forest edge evokes historical "first contact" myths in which supposed civilizational "progress" encounters its "other".



### II. Occupying a canopy

Curiously enough, the red "X" is not on the ground. It is held together by cables that suspend it across the forest canopy. As a sign meant to stave off the enemy and to be read from a distance, it is hoisted and held at an altitude. The "X" marks the canopy itself as the scene of the crime, the scene of the death-to-be. A scene of death foretold which points to the life already existing in the forest. The Hambach forest canopy is revealed in the course of *The Path Is Never The Same* to be the film's main protagonist. The film and the accompanying photographic series, *How is the Air Up There*, dwell on the canopy, the camera lingering on towering oaks whose interweaving crowns give the forest an architectural dimension. The viewer is drawn to the symmetrical trunks that soar to heights of 30 meters or more, where thinning branches seem to reach into the sky. Wherever foliage persists, weaved into the interlaced branches, light percolates in. A first glint from the corner scatters into the shade below. Technically a glint is the light facing the camera, the direct address or stare of the light itself. Yet here the glint flickers and disappears, a very particular "moment *as a* moment".[4] It disappears by the time the viewer is able to focus on it, leaving "conscious attention empty-handed."[5] The glint in the forest, then, points us to our own mechanisms of attention, of our desire to attune to light and its fleeting temporalities – and also perhaps to the wind, the rumble, and interwoven foliage swaying gently in the forest where the glint lives. But once again, concerning attunement, more later.

The glint and the shadows fall deep into the forest, but also onto the treehuts and the protest banners now occupying the Hambach canopy. The tree huts built by the activists over the years inhabit a symbolic space in the activist imaginary, peppering every piece of protest news or conversation,

4     Hank Gerba, "The Glint," in: *Real Life Mag*, February 11, 2021, www. reallifemag.com/the-glint/ [accessed March 25, 2025].

5     Ibid.



7     Ibid, p. 54.

heat, humidity or cold withers away from active perception.[7] The film and the activists in it ask: what happens when this comfort is taken away? Confronted by the heat of the mines while refusing subsumption into the energy-guzzling world of architectural heating, the protestors must consider how to live ethically in a forest that interfaces with an open lignite mine nearby.

making the occupation of the forest visible. But these tree houses have often also been admired for their tactical subterfuge. The heights they are built at make the canopy a site of refuge when the police and the mining companies move into the forest to clear ground-level pathways and the bushes. Yet this flight or refuge is not absolute: in its impermanence it borders on anxiety. As the activists mention in the film, when the police move in to evict, they not only destroy their treehouses, they also violently fell the trees that held them. The treehouses, walkways, platforms and libraries are not just *in* the forest, on its ground, they are spread across its many branches, among the mosses, tips, leaves, trunks and vines of the canopy. The oak trees literally afford the treehouses and the activists an infrastructural hold, providing material support and a base for the emergence of activist forms of life.

As the camera looks at the treehouses from below and the wind shifts the glint, a protester's voiceover narrates, bemused, "A lot of people ask – what it looks like here in winter – isn't it cold?" The frame then cuts to another smaller tree house, set against an overcast gray sky, as the activist adds: "[there is] human warmth! I want to answer human warmth." A seemingly innocuous answer about conviviality and communal life in the forest, sharing and huddling together in the library in the winters, becomes an exploration of the energy crisis at hand. The summers are made unbearable by the hot winds blowing over the mine into the forest. And the winters in the forest are uncomfortable too, without heating or energy consumption. The invention and progress of modern western life is predicated not just on the extraction and use of energy from earth (i.e. fossil fuels), but also on social control to regulate ambient temperatures and thereby to increase capacity for work, preservation, and comfort.[6] Comfort, then, is the making and standardization of an "ideal" temperature and a set of desires (for work, sleep, etc.) defined by a lack of thermal sensation: ideal comfort occurs when any sensation of

6     Nicole Starosielski, *Media Hot and Cold*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2021, p. 14.

### III. Swiveling in the branches

The activists speaking in the film quip breathlessly that comfort for them lies in the ability to wake up and notice the squirrels by their window, or to find your tree house moved along with the wind, or even to take a wooden panel down if you want the wind to sweep the dust on the floors away. This lighthearted take on the little joys of the forest becomes a larger conversation on what comfort could mean here. For the activists, it is no longer a matter of heat and sensation, but of attunement: the training and retraining of lived, bodily habits to recognize other non-extractive lifeworlds and their making. Attunement means noticing the details of previously unexperienced sensory lifeworlds in a specific milieu. Attunement is the "cultivation of subtler sensitivities,"[8] "the training and expanding of one's sensate regimes to environmental events and densities that may fall off our attention and perceptual regimes."[9] For the activists, then, comfort is a process of attuning with the minutiae of the forest. The joy that the forest offers is that of playful engagement in these "arts of noticing": the ability or intention to notice squirrels and the changing foliage on the canopied pathways; the process of learning to balance and move adroitly on the canopies, or to wait for the wind to help you in house cleaning chores; learning to balance in the tree house as it swings like a boat.

But attunement is more than the training of sensory perception, it also means learning to navigate and inhabit a milieu. In the shot where one activist speaks of summer winds blowing from the mine into the forest, the camera steadily focuses onto another activist making their way through the canopy. Looping a rope across a branch, the activist first plants their left foot on a bigger branch, pulling themselves up. Then they swiftly swivel around, holding onto a thinner branch above them, bending their knees, staying closer to the branch as they climb higher. Carefully, they curve their feet

8     Natasha Myers, "Becoming Sensor in Sentient Worlds: A More-than-natural History of a Black Oak Savannah," in: *Between Matter and Method: Encounters Between Anthropology and Art*, ed. Gretchen Bakke and Marina Peterson, London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2018, p. 76.

9     Pujita Guha, "Seeding the Forest," in: *Cultural Politics*, vol. 19, 2023.

around the branches to grasp them, taking one step at a time as the branch scythes diagonally across the canopy (and the frame). The branches and the oak leaves move, hiding the activist from our view. Only the rope attached to the harness and the deftness of the whole procedure remain visible. I describe this shot and the activist's movements in such detail because it brings out what living in the canopy actually entails and the kind of attunement it truly demands: a necessary re-orientation of human movement through a space. The modern history of Europe has been deeply invested in shaping *homo erectus* as a cultural (as much as an archaeological) phenom-enon.[10] *Homo erectus* (upright man) is an extinct hominid species whose distinctive feature was bipedalism – the ability to stand straight on stable ground, rolling from heel to toe while striding forward, even when landing flat-footed with a thud. Walking as an embodied condition. This bipedalism depend-ed on stable ground: an even surface on which the walker could remain erect while subject to gravity. But what happens when we no longer have access to the ground? In her work on oceanic phenomenology, Melody Jue cites oceanic deep diving as a mode of attunement distinct from the conditions of life on land, one that involves learning how to move hori-zontally and stay afloat, learning to dive and bear oceanic pressure, learning to regulate breathing patterns with diving equipment and an oxygen cylinder.[11] Being in the ocean also means giving up on land-bound ways of sensing the world. In the oceanic column, perception is altered by the drift of underlit waters, the sensation of floating, and the opacity of the water itself. A world of difference from the stable, upright images produced by the camera on the ground.[12]

How then, we might ask, does one attune to the cano-py? What does it demand that is phenomenologically specif-

ic? The canopy is both on land and at a distance from it. The stable, even ground gives way to unevenly growing branches and leaves, some thinning or dead, unable to bear weight. How is the world seen from the canopy while moving around in it? To clarify, the reference here is neither to an image of the canopy from above (as in an aerial shot with a hovering effect), nor to that from the firm ground below (a stable up-ward view of the crowns of oak). Nor is it a question of using the visual technology offered by forestry. While contempo-rary forest ecology as a discipline depends on massive-scale digital sensing and satellite/LIDAR imaging, its practitioners still work from air balloons with drop-down rafts that place field ecologists in the canopy as they observe the region, or from canopy cranes equipped with a rotating boom and arm

## The "X" marks the annihilation of the forest, and more fundamentally, it marks the negation of life and its abundant generosity.

to place a platform at the desired location or height.[13] These methods provide easy access to the canopy, but observation via roving a craft or the crane-platform combination mimics the stability of the view from the ground. The observation-al platforms allow the scientist to maintain the standpoint of *homo erectus*, observing the canopy as a straight, walking, vertical figure, able to enter and exit at will as an upright man. But this elides what it means to be *in* the canopy and to sense from within it. What do we perform with its branches and twigs? Ressler offers a brief glimpse of an answer by showing

us the camera tied to the activist who moves across the can-opy. The resulting image appears destabilized, oscillating un-nervingly with the activist's movement along the branch. More importantly, the viewer's imagination of the canopy comes un-done. It no longer appears as the stable crowns seen from above or below: rather, the branches protrude like distended arms. Distances are confounded as perspective is broken up by various leaves gently swinging, tending towards noise: an indistinct mass of greenery. To be immersed in the canopy is to lose the sense of the ground, which is unevenly present at most, peeking through at certain spots. As the camera moves through the canopy, the viewer loses all orientation to height and depth. In this state of immersion, the standpoint is lost to noisy engulfment in leaves and epiphytic growth. Orientation returns only briefly when the activist's feet appear between two branches, along with the harness and rope.

The activist's movement around the canopy reveals not just a distinct visual experience, but also a singular kines-thetics and sensory attunement. Moving through the canopy is not just a steady vertical ascent as in tree-climbing, it is more like clambering transversely among a network of small branches. It involves learning how to bend and swirl, to curve toes to grasp branches, or even to hang from and leap be-tween branches using all the body's limbs at once. It can also require learning how to bend elbows and joints inward (to supinate), and to position personal body weight to avoid losing balance and falling the branches. Yet these techniques do not entail a return to "primitive" living or any mimicry of tree-dwelling primates' quadrupedalism: they make up a tac-tical lifeworld, attuned reasonably to what is possible within bipedalism while renouncing the claims of *homo erectus*. Nor are the stakes here solely physiological. To give up *homo erectus* is also to give up the civilizational command laid claim to by the perfectly upright human figure, the dominant specie-sist model of "stiffness and radical rectitude for any military drill".[14] Western modernity has historically projected "more

and more noble or correct regularity" onto the human an-atomical form, the epitome being that of a soldier, ready to carry out any order on command. Perhaps then, for an anar-chist life in the canopy, resisting the militarization of the state comes at the cost of giving up bipedalism and the related aspirations of control in favor of a tactical life in the canopy in makeshift, rickety tree houses and the forms of comfort and attunement this demands. It means clambering in the canopy, slinging a rope and moving around the branches attached to a harness. It is attunement, and it resists the bodily rectitude, the stiffness of the back that comes with the police state.

The activists also extend this attunement to the canopy (and the forest at large) to their prefigurative political organiz-ing, which is attuned in turn to the networked, non-hierarchi-cal nature of the forest, attuned temporally to its impercepti-ble rhythms of growth, decay and renewal. As the film winds down, an activist remarks that organizing in the forest may appear disorderly and chaotic. No two people take the same route to a meeting point, everyone is scattered and arrives at the meeting late. It could be said jokingly that the path is quite literally never the same in the forest. But perhaps it is this scattering that makes it possible to live and walk in unseen, unheard, and unperceived ways, even clambering through the canopy.

10     Adam Arsdale, "Homo erectus: A Bigger, Smarter, Faster Hominin Lineage," in: *Nature Education Knowledge*, vol. 4, no. 1(2), 2013. www.nature.com/scitable/knowledge/library/homo-erectus-a-bigger-smarter-97879045/ [accessed March 25, 2025].

11     Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through the Seawater*, Durham: Duke University Press 2020, pp. 6-8.

12     Ibid. pp. 150-151.

13     Margaret Moffett and M.D. Lowman, "Canopy access techniques," in: *Forest Canopies*, ed. M. D. Lowman and N. M. Nadkarni, New York: Academic Press, 1995, pp. 12-15; Roman Dial, Stephen C. Sillett, and Jim C. Spickler, "'Canopy Trekking': A Ground-Independent, Rope-Based Method for Horizontal Movement through Forest Canopies," in: *Forest Canopies*, ed. Margaret Lowman and H. Bruce Linker, London: Elsevier, 2004, pp. 65-64.

14     Georges Bataille, "The Jesuve," in: *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, edited and with an introduction by Allen Stoekl, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 76.

# Assembling Connecting and Organising

# Towards the 2024 European elections:

**Federico Alagna on how cities and civil society can drive radical reform of EU migration policy. ^A**

The promotion of a deep change in EU migration and asylum policies requires a new centrality for those actors, such as city governments and civil society organisations, that, while currently not pivotal in migration governance, have the desire and the ability to play a crucial role in such change. In the ongoing (and problematic) discussion of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, and in light of the upcoming 2024 European election, current and would-be members of the next European Parliament with a progressive agenda on migration may find a deeper knowledge of these actors, and a closer and more stable engagement with them, particularly fruitful. This is especially the case in terms of strengthening the role of the progressive members of the European assembly in this subject matter.

More specifically, current Members of the European Parliament and candidates at the 2024 European election who intend to deeply reform the existing EU approach to migration – in a way that is more inclined to ensure mobility, safety and human rights – should consider the opportunities offered by developing partnerships with city governments and civil society organisations that are already working together on the issue. This approach could enable them to strengthen their connection within and across territories, to stimulate inter-institutional and inter-party cooperation and to spur the engagement of civil society in the EU policy arena, in an attempt to have an impact on the safeguarding of human rights and freedom of movement in the EU.

### Political Will

Migration has for some time been one of the most salient and divisive issues in EU public opinion and among policy-makers. Although temporary periods of cohesion and (almost) unanimous mourning can be observed when major tragedies occur, EU citizens and political elites have adopted extremely diverse – and highly politicised – stances on the phenomenon. The more migration has become a salient issue, the more its governance has been harshly debated, which in turn has favoured the emergence of different points of view and their polarisation. Remarkable examples of this that have taken place over the past number of years are the proposed reform of the Dublin III Regulation, which was eventually blocked by deadlocks in the Council of the European Union (the Council) in 2019, or

*"The wave of solidarity towards those fleeing Ukraine, which spread across the continent in the aftermath of the Russian invasion, was the exception, rather than the rule."*

the border, asylum and migration management externalisation agreements that were concluded with third countries, such as the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement.

More recently, we have seen a similar trend in the ongoing discussion surrounding the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (the Migration Pact). Overall, however, these divisive and intense debates have not been paralleled by a similar variety in policy approaches and outcomes. Notwithstanding, several (mostly left-wing) Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have continuously attempted to inform EU migration



Credit: William John Gauthier

policy in a way that is more compliant to human rights and international law.[1] But despite significant internal and cross-country divides, an attentive look at both EU and national migration policies over the last number of decades reveals an overall homogenous approach – and continuity over time – based on three main pillars: (a) restrictive migration policies; (b) the criminalisation of people on the move and of those who assist them; (c) the externalisation of border, asylum and migration management to third countries. That this continues to be the case is clearly confirmed by the latest evidence on the Migration Pact.[2]

In this context, the wave of solidarity towards those fleeing Ukraine, which spread across the continent in the aftermath of the Russian invasion, was the exception, rather than the rule. Member state governments, civil society organisations and citizens competed with one another to appear as welcoming champions and to publicly and fully express their solidarity with those fleeing Ukraine. Remarkably, Council Directive 2001/55/EC (the Temporary Protection Directive) was also activated for the first time in EU history. Such unprecedented efforts can be explained in light of several distinctive aspects of the situation, such as the background political confrontation between the EU and Russia – which made the politics of welcoming an important soft power tool – and the characteristics of the people on the move (white, women and children). The difference between such mobilisation and the persistent restrictive approach displayed, among other places, at the EU Mediterranean borders – often times with tragic consequences, as in the recent devastating shipwreck off Pylos on 14 June 2023 - is striking. Overall, the Ukrainian situation has openly demonstrated that a quick, non-bureaucratic response to large inflows of people on the move is possible - it is but a matter of political will.

While the Parliament has become an ambiguous actor in this policy domain, others – though not tasked with any direct legislative responsibility – have consistently and strongly advocated for a more humane EU migration policy, and even for a radical change in the mobility regime. City governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) have been among those who have most strongly engaged in such advocacy, both separately and by establishing a productive dialogue and launching important joint initiatives. As the campaign for the 2024 European Parliament election is about to start, this article illustrates why city governments and civil society organisations can be important allies for current and would-be MEPs who wish to pursue a more open human mobility regime and a migration policy that complies with both human rights and international law.

## "Cities have increasingly become a key actor in defining mobility regimes."

### The centrality of cities

States (and, to a lesser extent, supranational and international bodies) are the ones that make migration and asylum policies. On the other hand, however, people on the move do not live in an abstract national or supranational space, but rather in physical places which constitute 'the local', such as cities. This means that while governments make migration policy, it is cities that develop reception and integration practices.

This situation explains, among other things, how and why cities have increasingly become a key actor in defining mobility regimes. Remarkably, their increased respoilities have also led them to claim a more central role in the making of migration and asylum policy. Examples of a proactive engagement by cities in these policy domains have spread consistently across Europe over the last decade.[3]

At the same time, cities have also started to develop their own migration governance frameworks, promoting inclusive policies and distancing themselves from the repressive and restrictive approaches adopted by the EU and national governments.

The research and dissemination project Moving Cities, which is part of the civil society initiative United4Rescue - Gemeinsam Retten e.V., has provided an interesting analysis of dozens of cities across Europe, highlighting innovative and inclusive policies in the field of migration.[4]

It is not surprising that in such a dynamic context, with the increasingly relevant role acquired by municipalities in the migration regime, there has also been an emergence of horizontal collaboration among cities. This has led to the proliferation of city networks – both within and beyond the EU – with a focus on migration, asylum and integration. A remarkable example of this, at the national level, is the French National Association of Welcoming Cities and Territories (ANVITA). At the transnational level, we can point to the Eurocities-based Solidarity Cities, Urbact's Arrival Cities, Intercultural Cities and the Global Mayoral Forum on Mobility, Migration and Development. Such networks vary significantly in terms of their institutionalisation, membership, goals, functioning and scope. However, as a whole they have enabled municipalities to work more coherently and more closely with each another, while also conducting more effective advocacy and lobbying activities at the national and EU levels.[5]

## "While governments make migration policy, it is cities that develop reception and integration practices."

### Civil Society as Mediator

Over the last few years, civil society initiatives have pursued deep change in the governance of migration throughout Europe in different ways and using various tools.[6] Political participation takes on a wide variety of forms, ranging from conventional engagement in advocacy activities to the most disruptive instances of activism.[7]

In such a context, civil society organisations that are capable of finding ways of productive interaction with institutional actors can be of particular significance from the perspective of MEPs, as they will not only be more likely to engage in dialogue, but may also display some shared understanding and common language.

A wide array of actors match this description: from Brussels-based research organisations and think tanks – such as the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) or the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM) – to national and pan-European collectives that have established relationships with sub-national, national, supranational and international institutions – such as Emergency, Médecins Sans Frontières, and Seebrücke among others. Overall, a strongly reformative agenda on migration requires allies who, on the one hand, can be radical enough to bring forward deeply innovative policies and are also acknowledged and trusted by broader civil society sectors (and, clearly, by policy-makers). On the other hand, they also need to be willing and capable to politically engage at an institutional level, translating a plurality of inputs and stances into institutionally-meaningful approaches.

### Alliance for what?

Cities and civil society actors can be important allies for those MEPs with an agenda focused on a deep transformation of the EU migration regime, towards a more humane, permissive and international law-compliant policy. The question that remains unanswered, however, is which specific campaigns, policy proposals or simple demands can form the basis of a common objective to be sought after by MEPs, cities and civil society.

When From the Sea To the City (FSTC) was first founded in 2020, the initial five demands of the consortium related to:

1        A remarkable example is the work of the Frontex Scrutiny Working Group, see https://verfassungsblog.de/european-oversight-on-frontex/

2        See, for example, the latest Council agreement on key asylum and migration laws: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/06/08/migration-policy-council-reachesagreement-on-key-asylum-and-migration-laws/. An interesting comment can be found at https://ecre.org/editorial-migration-pact-agreement-point-by-point/

3        Alagna, F. (2023). Civil society and municipal activism around migration in the EU: A multi-scalar alliance-making. Geopolitics, 1-27. http://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2250902

4        See https://moving-cities.eu/en.

5        From the Sea to the City (2021). Ideas, Good Practices and Next Steps for a Welcoming Europe. https://fromseatocity.eu/files/2021/05/FS2C_bozza-ESEC-WEB.pdf; International Alliance of Safe Harbours (2021). Declaration of Mayors. June. https://staedte-sicherer-haefen.de/wp-content/uploads/ 2021/06/IASH-Statement_International-Alliance-of-Safe-Harbours_ENG.pdf

6        Alagna, F. (2021). "Breaking (Into) Fortress Europe: Are Bottom-Up Migration Policies Still Possible?". Border Criminologies, 2 November. https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centrecriminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2021/11/breaking-fortress

7        One of the most remarkable examples is those Italian activists who physically destroyed a detention facility for people on the move in Bologna, see https://www.peacelink.it/migranti/a/20110.html

— The establishment of a network of cities and CSOs.

— The protection of people on the move's lives during the Covid-19 crisis.

— Direct access to the management of EU funds.

— The creation of corridors of solidarity towards Europe and forms of relocation from below.

— The protection of fundamental rights.[8]

On the other hand, when the International Alliance of Safe Harbours (IASH) was established in 2021, it had four main demands:

— The enforcement of asylum rights and a ban on camps at the external borders of the EU.

— A system of direct municipal relocation.

— Direct EU funding to municipalities engaged in reception and integration.

— A stop to the criminalisation of solidarity.[9]

These two sets of demands unavoidably present numerous points of contact and overlap, due to the very intrinsic connection between FSTC and the IASH, which mean that they represent the two sides of the same coin. The differences that exist between the two lists are more connected to changes in the political situation during this time period than in the preference of the actors concerned. Generally speaking, in reading the two lists together it can be observed that the main substantive concern of the proponents relates to the protection of the basic rights of people on the move. From our perspective, however, the procedural (i.e. decision-making) demands are even more noteworthy, as they are particularly specific and innovative, while also presenting some potentially interesting policy avenues from a parliamentary perspective. These relate to the establishment of mechanisms of municipal relocation/relocation from below and the direct management of migration/reception/integration funds by municipalities. These two aspects have consistently been further developed by the FSCT/IASH network in more recent years. This has particularly been the case with the discussion of a campaign proposal around the centrality of cities within solidarity and relocation mechanisms (incl. direct relocation and matching), as well as direct access to EU funds and negotiations. On this topic, the

8       From the Sea to the City (2021). Ideas, Good Practices and Next Steps for a Welcoming Europe. https://fromseatocity.eu/files/2021/05/FS2C_bozza-ESEC-WEB.pdf

9       International Alliance of Safe Harbours (2021). Declaration of Mayors. June. https://staedte-sicherer-haefen.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IASH-Statement_International-Alliance-of-Safe-Harbours_ENG.pdf

Caption: From the Sea to the City Conference 2021; Credit: Bahar Kaygusuz & Seebruecke team

recent Strategy paper on municipal relocation in Europe, issued by FSTC on the occasion of the last IASH meeting, stresses the relevance of this approach in order to promote a more humane, sustainable and community-oriented reception of people on the move.

These two procedural elements, which ultimately incorporate cities fully into migration politics and give them more policy responsibility, enable an overall de-centring and democratisation of migration decision-making, creating the conditions for increased citizen participation and for enhanced institutional accountability – based on the proximity of municipal institutions to organised and non-organised civil society. Interestingly, both the campaign proposal (more explicitly) and the strategy paper (in a more nuanced way) express the importance of engaging in this struggle with EU institutions and highlight, in particular, the role that the European Parliament can play.

## What the (next) European Parliament can achieve

While cities and civil society have repeatedly shown – and also explicitly stated – their availability to work with MEPs, they have also expressed increasing dissatisfaction with some of the stances adopted by the European Parliament, as well as the initial signs of some mistrust . Although this makes the construction of an alliance between city governments, civil society organisations and MEPs increasingly difficult, it could

also be argued that it represents an incentive to take advantage of this precious opportunity to send a clear message by marking a break with previous legislatures and other EU institutions.[10]

Current MEPs and candidates at the next 2024 European elections who intend to deeply reform the existing EU approach to migration in a more open way should consider the opportunities offered by such tripartite alliance. In doing so, they may find it useful to approach those cities and CSOs that are already working together on migration-related issues and explore the possibility of becoming allies.

MEPs can prove their connection with different local contexts and, based on first-hand evidence, increase their knowledge of their needs as well as involving local communities and supporting counter-narratives of a European civil society that is allegedly hostile to migration.

Work carried out by MEPs with diverse civil society initiatives and municipal governments can further encourage inter-institutional and cross-party cooperation, which would undoubtedly be beneficial for an actor, such as the Parliament, which strives to make its voice both heard and reflected in policy outputs.

Lastly, they hold the potential to stimulate the Europeanisation of civil society initiatives engaged in migration issues, strengthening forms of cooperation at the transnational and supranational levels and generally enriching the political arena of the EU.

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10       See again activist interviews in Alagna, F. (2023). Civil society and municipal activism around migration in the EU: A multi-scalar alliance-making. Geopolitics, 1-27. http://doi.org/ 10.1080/14650045.2023.2250902

# United We Stand, Divided We Fall

**Lidka Makowska speaks to Ophélie Masson on lessons learnt from the Wom*n's Strike in Poland.[1]**

1       On the occasion of the 'Transnational Assembly of Feminist Solidarity - Equal Rights for All Women*: No Matter Where We Come From or Go To' Organised by European Alternatives & EUmans (18.05.2023, European Solidarity Centre, Gdańsk).

We as activists, organizers, and educators know very well that racism and migrants' experience interact with other fields of struggle such as gender and LGBTQIA+, class differences and labor relations, and climate justice. Being aware of this allows us to struggle more effectively against discrimination, exploitation, and violence.

My engagement with such an intersectional approach started 15 years ago in the context of the struggle for women's rights in Poland. The political transformation with Lech Walesa and the Polish Solidarity (Solidarność) trade union movement, in 1989, was strongly influenced by Catholic bishops. The political position of the Catholic Church, connected to the 'holy icon' of the Polish Pope John Paul II, was very firmly rooted and spread out in our society. The patriarchal system has demanded Polish women to obey the 3K rule – "Kinder, Küche, Kirche" (children, kitchen, church).

That religion-based patriarchy could no longer be maintained. It started to change in 2004 when Poland became a member of the European Union. At that time, a lot of feminist groups were born in the whole country, and more and more were active in changing the conditions of women's lives. The feminist movement here was mainly concentrating on the fight for legal access to abortion, as it was forbidden by the Catholic Church. But despite all of the years spent on fighting on marches and occupations, with petitions and social media campaigns, Poland is now still one of only three countries in Europe, together with the Vatican and Malta, that apply the most oppressive laws against the right to abortion.

This 'failure' - or a lack of a strong win for the movement - made me aware that we need an extraordinary mobilization of a powerful intersectional feminist movement in order to achieve our goal. This intersectional approach worked in practice in October 2020, as the Polish Women's Strike broke out. First, the point was to prevent the abortion ban and to legalize abortion. But immediately it became clear that thousands of people went to protest on the streets against the Polish far-right government. The protesters had the slogan: 'It's about everything!'

> *"We need an extraordinary mobilization of a powerful intersectional feminist movement in order to achieve our goal."*

### The Feminist Struggle in Poland – Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

The 'Strajk Kobiet' (Women's Strike) two years ago showed us very clearly that feminism must be intersectional, including all discriminated groups because of gender/sex, age, disability, ethnic origin, LGBT+ identity, religion/non-religion, poverty, and social exclusion. Feminism should obviously also be about the fight against climate change and in solidarity with non-humans and animals, all living beings in fact. This is the kind of feminism I believe in.



Caption: Feminist strikers in the streets. Credits: Strajk Kobiet.

> *"The feminist movement here was mainly concentrating on the fight for legal access to abortion, as it was forbidden by the Catholic Church."*

Some people might say: 'It is too much! Everything is mixed up! You should concentrate on one priority.' This is the narrative we are hearing from all directions. From my activist and educational experience, I can say: that is not true! Activist single-issue movements with only one goal have no chance anymore to be successful in changing the world, in achieving their goal. Only if we unite our different struggles, communities, and movements, we can win. As we all together need to be the change, we want to see in this world – not just some of us being privileged to represent one particular struggle.

In Poland, we recently faced a very dangerous situation with a government of far-right politicians in power attacking women* and the most vulnerable with draconian measures – not very different from what intersectional feminists in the United States of America are nowadays fighting against. 'Our' right-wing politicians here are - like Putin in Russia - 'going to war' against us. And yet, we are so close to the war in Ukraine already trying to take care of women*, children and elderly persons fleeing to our country to find safety. It's up to all of us to fight for the right to body self-determination, access to healthcare and social services, and reproductive justice beyond the borders of national origin and place of residence. Therefore, I am deeply convinced that we should spread and develop – all across Europe – by all means necessary - alliances and coalitions towards a truly intersectional approach connecting struggles and movements beyond the divisions which are being put upon us. This is especially relevant before the next European elections in 2024.

## How to Enact an Intersectional Approach within Our Daily Political Praxis

In order to enact an intersectional feminist movement practice beyond borders, I want to share my experience-based list of lessons learnt from my involvement in the feminist movement in Poland:

1.    Let's understand our different oppressions, issues, and struggles as interconnected – within and between us – and be vulnerable and brave.

2.    Let's be aware of the invisible power structures and hierarchical and paternalistic dynamics also affecting our communities.

3.    Let's listen and speak with empathy according to the principles of nonviolent communication allowing differences to be expressed.

4.    Let's continuously work on ourselves, raise our awareness, and develop capacities for responsible and resilient movement leadership.

5.    Let's not fight each other but respect our needs, desires, and resources in order to make the most vulnerable feel physically and emotionally safe in our spaces.

6.    Let's raise our consciousness for our allies and how we could inspire, empower and support each other, as we are not alone in this, but together.

7.    Let's not be afraid to ask questions that need to be asked and to raise issues, conflicts, and decisions that need to be addressed.

8.    Let's be aware of the fact that our struggle may have unintended negative impacts on us and on others, and be sensitive, open and honest about it.

9.    Let's think about our struggles from the margins, as it's not only women's struggles which don't represent a so-called 'minority issue', but also people in the so-called 'Global South' represent the global majority.

10.    Let's fight for our collective liberation in a world beyond capitalist and colonial exploitation, white privilege and supremacy, as well as patriarchal domination and violence.



Caption: Feminist strikers in the streets.
Credits: Strajk Kobiet.

## Intersectionality

The term 'intersectionality' was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw - a black American civil rights advocate and feminist, a leading scholar of critical race theory and professor at the UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law School.

Intersectionality is an analytical framework for understanding how a person's various social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. Intersectionality identifies multiple factors of advantage and disadvantage. Examples of these factors include: race, gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, disability, body weight, and physical appearance. These intersecting and overlapping social identities may be both empowering and oppressing.

> *"Only if we unite our different struggles, communities, and movements, we can win."*

**Lidka Makowska**, a feminist activist, educator and intercultural trainer from Gdansk, shares her insights about the Women's Strike in Poland and a list of 10 points we should take into account in our intersectional practice as movements acting beyond the divisions of communities, struggles, and nations.

**Ophélie Masson** is Deputy Director at European Alternatives, where she coordinates the programmes that aim to develop and implement sustainable tools of participative democracy such as citizens assemblies and ECIs. She also co-coordinates the Citizens Take Over Europe coalition.

# Holding Spaces Assembly

**Celia Fernández explores how the use of creative elements in political forums develops interaction and empathy, leading to greater awareness supportive of political change.[1]**

Credits: Marko Tamás

Cluj-Napoca, Romania. A group of local and international researchers, activists, and artists – from Spain, Greece, Sweden, Tunisia and elsewhere, – but also children and elders, gathered to discuss how they inhabit, are deprived of, or imagine the space they live in.

The participants are not strangers. They met five days earlier at the start of the Transeuropa Festival organised by European Alternatives. Each one of them is now carrying a stack of reflections sparked by the performances, exhibitions, and talks on the topic of space. Now, it's time to assemble those impressions in a forum to reflect on who defines spaces – physical, virtual, and mental – and who they are defined for.

The Holding Spaces assembly is atypical – it could be thought of as a peculiar kind of citizens' assembly. It is a place of discussion among citizens with different professional and geographical backgrounds to address issues that affect their lives from noon to doom. No policy recommendations advocating government action will emerge. Yet it could inspire citizens' assemblies to become more relevant, creative, and democratic by using art as a vehicle for political change.

## The blossom of citizens' assemblies

A legitimacy deficit afflicts most of the world's national governments. According to the EU's Standard Eurobarometer conducted in June 2023, only 32 per cent of Europeans trust their parliamentary politicians. The consequences are manifold: less people turn out to vote; populist "them vs us" discourse finds its footing in all corners of society; and technocratic governments are advocated as the panacea. But among these, another response is blooming, which, in the words of politologist Hélène Landemore, is an "inclusive" and "participatory" model.

The citizen assembly, which dates back to Ancient Greece, is a group of residents selected by random sampling that comes together during a set period to read content and listen to experts on a specific topic, and discuss recommendations and deliver them to a government. Rather than attempting to win over others, citizens' assemblies strive to devise a collective solution – a strategy of particular interest to the climate movement.

Given sufficient time, resources, and expert assistance, citizen assemblies offer "one means to solve the problem of taking difficult, long-term decisions in a political system governed by short-term rules", suggests editor Eva Talmadge in defence of citizens' assemblies. Yet an element that tends to be conspicuously missing from climate citizens' assemblies – and climate movement discussions in general - risks holding back the potential of such political forums. It is an element which is present, however, at the Holding Spaces gathering in Cluj: the use of art to further democratise politics.

## Culture talks politics

Portraits of children living in slums on the outskirts of Cluj, the second largest city in Romania and an increasingly "trendy" spot, cover the Holding Spaces assembly walls. Since the early 2000s, gentrification led to successive waves of evictions that pushed many Roma residents to Pata Rât, also known as "Europe's largest waste-related ghetto". Most of the depicted children and families were evicted from the city centre in 2010, when local authorities forcibly relocated 350 people, mostly of Roma ethnicity.

Leaks from the landfill pollute the soil and the water in Pata Rât, and the leaked substances and the smoke of burnt waste can cause infections and diseases that often go untreated, as 80 per cent of Roma people in Cluj do not have a family doctor. Professional opportunities are typically precluded to residents of Pata Rât, which adds to their segregation. The situation is the result of longstanding structural violence and environmental racism against Roma communities, a phenomenon that is not exclusive to Romania.

The representations on the walls are more than photos: the children painted and wrote words over them in a workshop conducted by photographer Marion Colard. Beyond depicting the conditions where these children live, these representations go further by involving the children in interpreting their images, transforming them from passive subjects, reduced to their ethnicity, to active participants; they are humanized, just like the participants of this assembly, showing their distinct personalities, fears, and aspirations.

Someone could have simply told the story of the eviction, but it's hard to imagine that it would have had the same impact on assembly participants as the visual and active representation of those deprived of space. In society's binary terms, the saying goes: data speaks to the mind and art speaks to the gut. However, culture – which etymologically means "cultivation of the mind"– not only serves to uncover our emotional – often neglected – side but also enables understanding and deep connections in distinctive ways with the roots of a concrete situation or concept.

At the Holding Spaces assembly, women from the Pata Rât community tell their story surrounded by images of landscapes that were so familiar to them, and



*"An element that tends to be conspicuously missing from climate citizens' assemblies – and climate movement discussions in general...[is] the use of art to further democratise politics"*

became so to the rest of us. Some assembly participants write phrases that resonated with them on the walls. One sentence reads, "She said...Why don't we deserve a normal house?" and one cannot help but think that this is more than an emotional reaction – it is a mindful action.

## Art to reimagine the future

For citizens' assemblies to foster balanced and meaningful conversations based on factual evidence, resources such as participation methodologies and scientific reports, as well as expert assistance, are extremely important. But the goal of climate citizens' assemblies is to devise solutions, for which the capacity to imagine distant futures – an action ordinary to literature, theatre, and the visual arts – is paramount.

One of the workshops of Transeuropa festival was based on Theatre of the Oppressed methodology. For a couple of hours, assembly participants become simultaneously spectators and actors, experiencing different roles in an imaginary dispute about housing. She or he who five minutes previously was the person serving the eviction order becomes the evictee.

The goal of this type of forum-theatre – created by Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal – is for participants to step out of their personal circumstances, project themselves in another situation and plan today what they would want to put in place for a better fu-

*"It is not solely about empathy with other people's realities but also about strategising towards a desired outcome – exactly the remit of citizens' assemblies."*

ture. It is not solely about empathy with other people's realities but also about strategising towards a desired outcome – exactly the remit of citizens' assemblies. Yet so many forums still follow the traditional institutional processes, reduced to reading and talking.

As Mexican writer Jorge Volpi points out in *Leer la mente* (Reading the Mind), when our ancestors painted mammoths on caves or performed the movements of tigers to a crowd, they were preparing themselves for future scenarios. According to Volpi, fiction is not solely entertainment, but serves to the evolution of our species.

## Art to enjoy politics

As Naomi O'Leary argues, citizens' assemblies can suffer from a retention problem, and the time commitment required tends to filter out all but those who are already politically engaged. However, bringing the methodologies of diverse art forms into the equation would not only democratise access to knowledge – as performance or visual representation can simplify complex concepts – but also make forums more enjoyable and engaging. The inclusion of art would not prevent citizens' assemblies from formulating recommendations to decision-makers. But in a context of growing polarisation and hectic politics, it could foster dialogue and ultimately reinvigorate democracy.

The Holding Spaces assembly comprises people with very different profiles, backgrounds, and ages. Although participants already shared a common sensibility towards politics and arts, the degrees of such and the reasons for their engagement varied. And, despite the burning issue being faced – the rampant privatization of public, virtual, and even mental space – the feel of the assembly is one of empathy, expectation, and hope.

The building where this unique gathering is taking place is a meeting place for artists, academics, and activists, but it was once a synagogue. While maintaining its structure and former decor, over the course of a decade, artists in Cluj have remodelled it into a space for diverse social, ethnic, and professional groups to encounter, talk, and empathise. Just like in this building, art can be the ally citizens' assemblies need to engage more people, enable better dialogue, and ultimately change horizons.



*"Someone could have simply told the story of the eviction, but it's hard to imagine that it would have had the same impact on assembly participants as the visual and active representation of those deprived of space."*

Celia Fernández is PR and outreach associate at the Green European Foundation. She studied international relations, translation, and journalism and has written for various Spanish media outlets, including El País.

# Altaterra



**Izabela Anna Moren in conversation with Aterraterra on interspecies and intercultural dialogue for systemic change.**

For about two years, Luca and Fabio have been cultivating a vegetable garden in Piana dei Colli, nestled between the stadium and the Favorita park some kilometres outside the historic centre of Palermo. In this community plot, they grow wild food plants, flowers, medicinal and aromatic herbs and ancient, rare and organic vegetables delivered by bike to equally passionate residents and even more passionate local chefs.

But taste is not the only thing the duo is interested in. Theirs is an interspecies and intercultural dialogue in which all parameters are continually reassessed and negotiated between all the involved. Their association's agricultural activity flows seamlessly into dismantling neo-coloniality, industrialisation and dominant discourses through the research of plant and culinary histories and collaborations that bring marginality to the centre.

The newly opened AterraterraLAB does exactly that, bringing the agricultural world from the rural margins and peripheries to enter the senses in the urban centre of Palermo.

Izabela Anna Moren: **Soon, you will open the AterraterraLAB in the city, a good time to think about where you came from. You have different and distant backgrounds from agriculture; what did you do before in life, and how did you approach agriculture? Why did you feel the need to start Aterraterra?**

**Aterraterra**: Fabio has a background as an artist and activist, and Luca comes from research and activism. Fabio was born and raised in Germany because he is the son of Sicilian migrants, but he moved to Palermo more than two years ago, where we met. We started almost as a game, shared a passion for plants and began our experiments in a small plot. We created a garden full of rare edible plants, special vegetable varieties and flowers in a short time. We learnt how to reproduce and save their seeds and got in touch with the soil, seeing it as a complex ecosystem of often invisible life forms to be recognised and respected. And it was during this time that we also began to reflect on the relationship between humans and other life forms and wrote the *Manifesto for an Interspecies Collective*. To give a more structured basis to projects like this one and others related to cultivation, we founded the Aterraterra association in 2020.

IAM: **What are the beginnings of the Aterraterra association and your land near La Favorita, what was the path and what did you learn?**

**A**: We started cultivating this small piece of land during the first season, buying seedlings ready to transplant. When harvest time came, we tasted the cauliflowers, chard and other vegetables. To our surprise, they tasted nothing different from the vegetables in the supermarket. Fabio, who remembered well the taste of the vegetables he tasted in Sicily as a child when he came on summer holidays, did not find much difference between the vegetables from our garden and those he bought in Germany. From that moment on, we started thorough research on varieties, retrieving from old farmers and others seeds of 'ancient' and rare vegetables. The large market marginalises these varieties because they often lack commercial characteristics such as homogeneity or are unsuitable for distribution. On the other hand, they taste great and, above all, have great genetic variability, unlike the seedlings we find in nurseries, which are often pro-

*"The aim is to bring together subjects from disciplines unrelated to agriculture, to open a multidisciplinary discussion table to... imagine a more sustainable and perhaps less human-centred future."*

duced by large companies that create F1 hybrids that are very homogeneous genetically, rather tasteless and far from the genetic diversity we see in nature. Furthermore, unlike the non-commercial varieties we grow, these hybrids will give seeds from which plants with characteristics that are not always desirable will be born.

Thus began our adventure with rare and reproducible seed species and varieties: from the lemon courgette to the lychee tomato, from several rare aubergine varieties to the many chillies with exquisite shapes and aromas. Our interest in wild food plants also began shortly afterwards, both for their organoleptic characteristics and their importance for eco-sustainability. At the same time, we began our research into the relationship between food plants and (neo-)colonialism, fascism, anti-Semitism, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination and/or difficult heritage. Examples of this are the Ethiopian red aubergine (Solanum aethiopicum) in Italy, known only as the red aubergine of Rotonda (often ignoring the reasons for its arrival in Italy, linked to colonialism) or the ancient grains that are so much celebrated today and which are not so ancient but largely created during the fascist era.

IAM: **Do you have allies in Italy or the world with whom you can discuss a shared future? How does the network of independent producers work?**

**A**: Fortunately, yes, a network of people and institutions, both Italian and international, has formed

around Aterraterra, with whom there is a continuous dialogue. We have started joint projects with many of these, many of which are taking shape within the AterraterraLAB programme. These are artists, activists, agricultural cooperatives, agricultural labourers, cultural associations, cooks, scientists, etc. The aim is to bring together subjects from disciplines unrelated to agriculture, to open a multidisciplinary discussion table to pose questions from different points of view and to search together for ways and practices to imagine a more sustainable and perhaps less human-centred future.

IAM: **I often wonder about the role of the consumer, how to convince someone not to go to the supermarket but to invest in a product that is healthy for humans and the earth, grown without chemicals and with an attitude that does not extract vitality from the earth or those who grow the produce? What is the role of the consumer in your work?**

**A**: This is a complex and important question that will be a bit long to answer. The c*onsumer* should perhaps cease to exist as an isolated category. The fact that there is such a thing as a consumer, that is, someone who merely consumes, presupposes its separation from the thing to be consumed. Let us take the case of vegetables. In this view, what is consumed is a plant, or a part of it – that part deemed edible by the market – which ends up as merchandise ready for sale, dressed in its packaging on the supermarket shelf.

*"The* consumer *should perhaps cease to exist as an isolated category."*

We think that the only way to have a fairer and more conscious agriculture and food, as well as a fairer market, is to involve the consumer in the growing process, to bring the consumer back to know the plants that are creating food for his or her life. A courgette in the supermarket is ultimately nothing more than an amputated part of a plant. A plant that few consumers will see entirely in their lifetime. Let alone get to know the farmer who grows it. We are not saying that all consumers should come to the fields to see the plants and learn how they are grown. But still, the large-scale distribution model has created an enormous filter between those who produce the food – namely the plants and the farmers – and those who eat it, namely the consumers. This aberrant condition is not good for plants and the environment, not for farmers and consumers. It is only good for big retailers. A solution? Start looking around: there are lots and lots of small farmers near us, and even if contemporary life fits very well with supermarket opening times and often does not allow us the time to look for the producers directly, sometimes it is enough (if our living conditions allow it) to review our priorities a little.

**IAM: Your last year is a year of great growth: you are carrying out an experimental project on a larger plot of land together with the Valdibella Cooperative. You are also opening your first physical space in the city, not dedicated to cultivation. What plans do you have for the Aterraterra Lab?**

**A**: We have a special relationship with the Valdibella Agricultural Cooperative. Last spring, we activated the *From Seed to Seed* project, an experimental field where we cultivate different varieties of special vegetables with reproducible seeds. The aim is to demonstrate that it is possible to grow special vegetable varieties even on a larger scale than a small vegetable garden without starting from F1 hybrid seedlings produced by large seed companies. With this project, we propose returning to working with seeds, re-learning how to reproduce and save them. The problem we are trying to respond to is the following: the huge spread of vegetable seedlings offered by these companies has very quickly led to the loss of a huge amount of local, rare or marginal varieties that have been handed down for a long time and have been supplanted by

*"A courgette in the supermarket is ultimately nothing more than an amputated part of a plant."*

hybrid varieties. This has led to an enormous loss of biodiversity, the dependence of farmers on externally produced seeds and seedlings, and a flattening of vegetable flavours to which we are unfortunately becoming increasingly accustomed. Working from the seeds of rare and special varieties is an important challenge that helps biodiversity and increases the autonomy of those who grow and the quality of those who eat.

This and many other topics will be the focus of AterraterraLAB, our physical space in Palermo that opens on 1 December. AterraterraLAB will be an open place for discussion and creation, where different formats will alternate, and different disciplines will enter into dialogue. There will be space for talks, artist residencies, assemblies, workshops, and screenings. A place that will promote dialogue and the intersection of agriculture, art and activism, attempting to bring about a collective process of thought construction and the activation of new practices.



The AterraterraLAB opened its doors on 1 December 2023 and is part of Studio Rizoma's institutional fellowship program. Studio Rizoma is a long term partner of European Alternatives and an international hub advancing an independent cultural and social program while serving the wider development of its surrounding ecosystem, with a focus on the city of Palermo. Rizoma is a founding member of the upcoming European Cultural Hubs Network of Allianz Foundations.

Izabela Anna Moren (Olesnica, 1990) is a writer, curator and communication strategist. She works on the intersection of art and politics and holds degrees in Curation and Critical Writing from the Royal College of Art. At Studio Rizoma, Izabela curates the node Between Land and Sea and is in charge of Communication and Creative Direction.
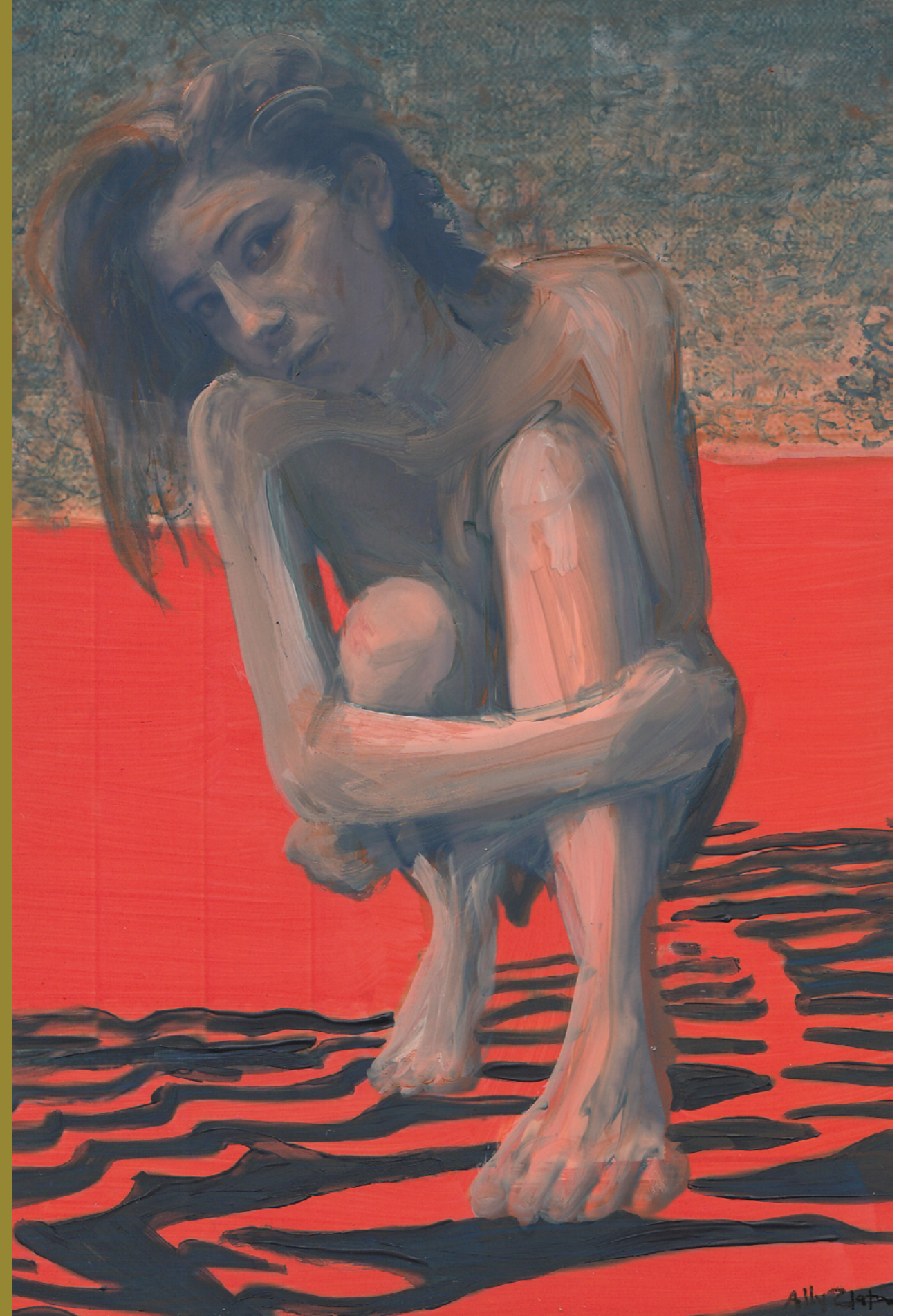
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Art
Beyond
Borders

# The Transformative Power of Art in Healthcare Reform

**A Case Study by "The Starving Artist"**

The transformative power of art in the context of healthcare reform is vividly exemplified through the poignant case study of "The Starving Artist" and the artist behind this powerful journey, Ally Zlatar. Ally Zlatar's journey as an artist living with a severe eating disorder for over 10 years has been both deeply personal and transformative. Her experience as an unwell artist served as the crucible that eventually gave birth to "The Starving Artist." Ally embarked on a path of vulnerability, delving into the very core of her lived experience with this debilitating mental health condition. Growing up, Ally found that her family did not speak about mental health, and medical practitioners tended to view her through the lens of a diagnosis, missing the depth of her struggles. This lack of understanding and support from her immediate environment fueled her determination to shed light on the hidden world of eating disorders and the mental and emotional turmoil they bring.

At first, Ally believed that her approach was simply a trope of the quintessential artist, dramatizing her existence, as suggested by Erving Goffman. However, as she delved deeper into her paintings and artist book publications, she realized that each artwork authentically captured an in-the-moment experience. This journey of self-exploration unveiled a disconcerting truth - Ally's struggle with her eating disorder remained a recurring theme in her art. The underlying thought that "I may never get better" echoed throughout her artistic creations, a reflection of the relentless grip of the ravenous illness.

Ally's art became not only a channel for her personal struggles but a means to engage in a broader social dialogue. Her art was a poignant manifestation of the harsh reality of living with an eating disorder, far more severe and destructive than it initially appeared. Ally's artistic insights aim to provide a lifeline for other artists grappling with eating disorders, encouraging them to engage critically with their experiences and vulnerably share them through their artworks. This authentic engagement within the realm of reflective practice can resonate profoundly with wider audiences and potentially shape a more empathetic society. Autoethnographic research and insights drawn from interviews with fellow artists serve as a testament

to the crucial role of art in authentically portraying the experiences of those with eating disorders and challenging deep-rooted societal misconceptions.

Ally's commitment to authenticity compelled her to be candid and transparent in sharing her daily battles with the disorder. She utilized various artistic mediums to express her experiences and challenges. The emergence of "The Starving Artist" as an organization dedicated to raising awareness about eating disorders and mental health was the culmination of her journey. Through her creative work and advocacy, Ally sought to transform her own pain into a force for positive change, creating a platform for dialogue, understanding, and healing. With over 20+ exhibitions, working with over 2000+ emerging artists in 30+ countries her work has made a lasting impact. Ally Zlatar has received

## "Art has for so long been seen as an accessory on gallery walls and not seen at the forefront of how we can ignite change-making"- Ally Zlatar

the highest accolade a young person can achieve for their humanitarian work; winner of The Princess Diana Legacy Award 2021, King Hamad Award for Youth Empowerment 2022, Lieutenant Governor's Community Volunteer Award from Ontario Government of Canada 2023 and also a special recognition from The British Citizen Award 2022.

One of the central recommendations that emerges from this research emphasizes the urgent need to place lived experiences at the forefront of medical conversations. By elevating the inclusion of personal experiences, we can actively challenge and dismantle prevailing biases and stereotypes that have long hindered a comprehensive and empathetic understanding of eating disorders. In this context, art emerges as a powerful tool bridging the chasm between individual experiences and the broader discourse on mental health. Furthermore,
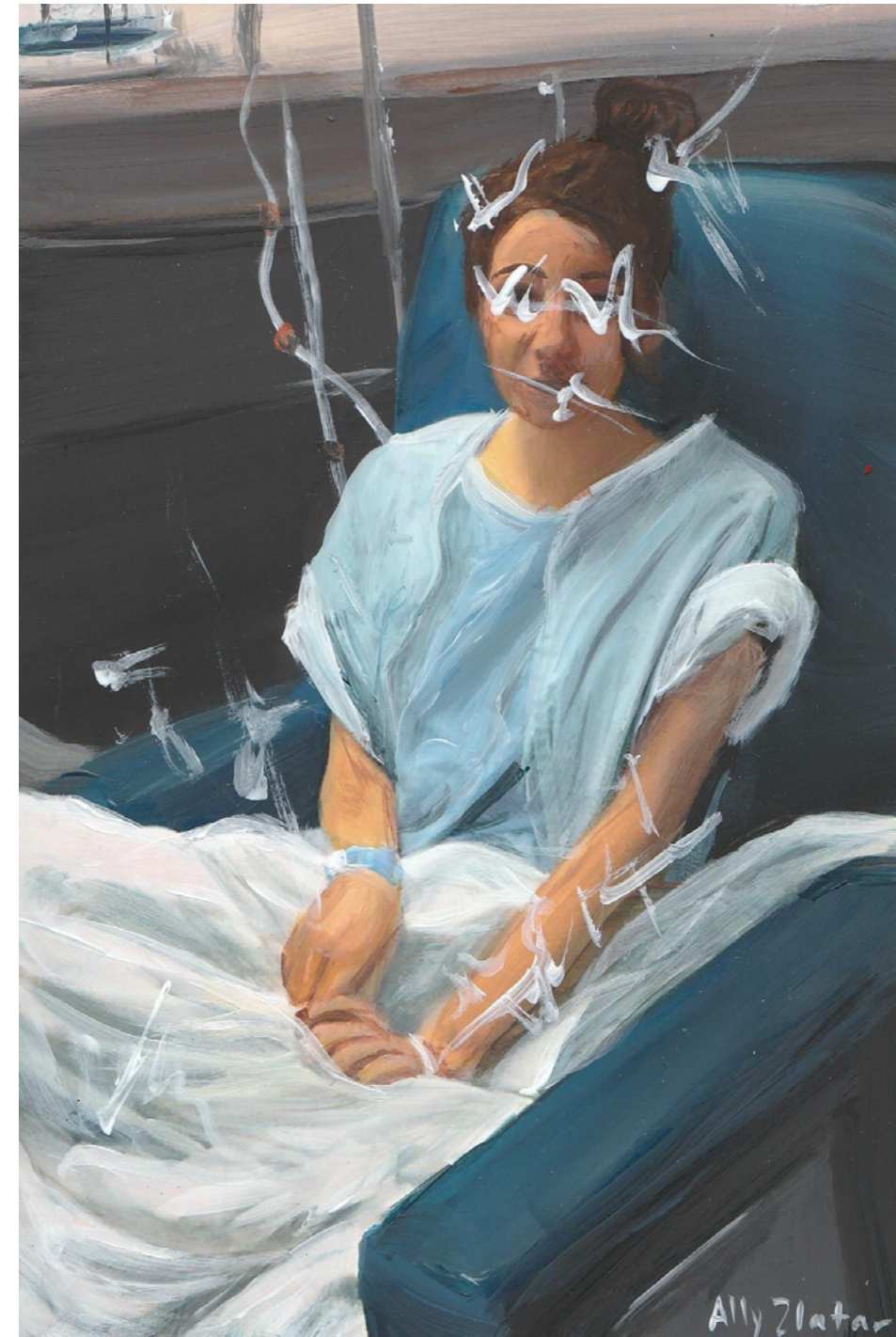


Alexandria Zlatar, I was blind to my Illness, Acrylic, 2022.

Alexandria Zlatar, Worshipping the Porcelain Throne, Acrylic, 2022.

another pivotal recommendation revolves around the imperative of providing more authentic and diverse representations of eating disorders in the media and social spheres. Stereotypical portrayals in the media have perpetuated limiting stereotypes, thus constraining our collective understanding of these disorders and perpetuating harmful stigmas. In response, it is essential that both social media platforms and mainstream media outlets actively promote non-binary discourse and embrace diverse identity formations. Such a shift can empower individuals to challenge and reshape traditional perceptions, particularly those related to the suppressed female body.

**"Ally Zlatar's journey as an artist living with a severe eating disorder for over 10 years has been both deeply personal and transformative."**

The Starving Artist underscores the central role that art plays in unraveling the intricacies of eating disorders. It posits that galleries, museums, and arts programming should be proactive advocates for these disorders, offering platforms for open and meaningful discussions. Art, as an activist tool, possesses the remarkable capacity to foster a deep comprehension of mental health issues, thereby engendering empathy. It is a shared responsibility between the arts community and medical institutions to establish a much-needed "safe space" for conversations surrounding eating disorders. By recognizing and embracing the diversity of experiences and struggles, they can create an environment conducive to healing and mutual understanding.

The Starving Artist endeavor aspires to have a profound impact on the comprehension and dissemination of the challenges encountered by individuals on their personal journeys. At its core, it seeks to establish and nurture networks that

empower artists and individuals to navigate and articulate their lived experiences, transcending cultural barriers, including language, education, and resource availability. Art has proven itself to be a potent instrument for advocating for and amplifying these lived experiences, offering avenues for expression, delving into personal well-being, and transcending systemic barriers.

Art is instrumental in advocacy, giving voice to the lived experiences that often remain hidden behind clinical statistics and diagnostic categories. It amplifies the narratives of those grappling with eating disorders, shedding light on the emotional and psychological turmoil that numbers cannot capture. Through art, these individuals can articulate their struggles and triumphs, fostering a deeper understanding and empathy among the audience. Moreover, art serves as a powerful tool for self-expression. Ally Zlatar's work, including the impactful art billboard campaigns and art-based reflection cards, exemplifies this. These creations offer an artistic medium for individuals to express their inner battles, experiences, and emotions. It provides a platform to share the unspoken, creating a visual dialogue that resonates with individuals who may find it challenging to articulate their feelings through words alone.

Exploring one's well-being and personal journey through art can be a transformative process. It allows individuals to engage with their experiences, confront their struggles, and embark on a path of self-discovery. Art encourages reflection and introspection, enabling individuals to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their relationship with their mental health. Art also innovates through alternative discourse. It introduces fresh perspectives and approaches to discussing mental health, challenging the traditional narratives that have often stigmatized individuals with eating disorders. This innovation can pave the way for more inclusive and empathetic conversations, benefiting those affected by these conditions.

Additionally, art has the capacity to aid in overcoming systemic barriers, language, and education. It serves as a universal language that transcends linguistic and educational boundaries. The visual nature of art enables it to communicate and connect with individuals across diverse backgrounds and cultures. This inclusivity ensures that art-based messages reach a wider audience, fostering greater awareness and understanding. The beneficiaries of

this approach are diverse and multifaceted. Firstly, those with lived experiences engage with the art and research on a deeply personal level. It fosters discussions, encourages them to share their own experiences, and creates a sense of safety and comfort, knowing they are not alone. The art becomes a medium through which they can communicate their struggles and promote further dialogue. Secondly, external audiences, including friends, families, and communities, also benefit. They gain insight into the struggles faced by their loved ones, broadening their perspectives and learning how to provide support. Art fosters empathy, understanding, and positive change, not only within the individuals themselves but also within their broader communities.

In the case of "The Starving Artist," the impact is vividly demonstrated through art billboard campaigns, which serve as public declarations of the importance of understanding eating disorders. These campaigns not only raise awareness but also spark crucial conversations, challenging preconceived notions. Additionally, art-based reflection cards provide individuals with tools to engage in self-reflection, encouraging them to explore their emotions and experiences safely and creatively. These cards serve as powerful aids in self-discovery and healing.

In conclusion, contemporary art, epitomized by "The Starving Artist" and Ally Zlatar's journey, stands as a beacon of hope in healthcare reform, particularly within the context of eating disorders. One quote that deeply resonates that Ally Zlatar states is that ' Art gives voice behind numbers of those affected globally '. What her work underscores is the transformative potential of art, urging action and a renewed emphasis on its vital role in reshaping healthcare reform. Through art, we can challenge stereotypes, humanize mental illness, and empower individuals on their journey to recovery.

"Ally's commitment to authenticity compelled her to be candid and transparent in sharing her daily battles with the disorder."



Still from *Journeys Festival Installation*, Manchester, Photography of Installation, 2021, Artwork by: Alexandria Zlatar, Image Credit: Drew Forsyth Photography.

Ally Zlatar, an artist, scholar, and activist, founded The Starving Artist, an initiative promoting advocacy and systemic reform through creative expression. She also established The Starving Artist Scholarship Fund for eating disorder treatment and launched the "This Body of Mine" campaign, supporting individuals and artists from refugee backgrounds.
She is also a participant in European Alternatives' Democracy, Elections, Mentoring & Organising (DEMO) Project.

Ally Zlatar has received prestigious awards for her humanitarian work, including The Princess Diana Legacy Award in 2021, the King Hamad Award for Youth Empowerment in 2022, and the Lieutenant Governor's Community Volunteer Award from the Ontario Government of Canada in 2023, along with special recognition from The British Citizen Award in 2022. She holds a BFA from Queen's University, an MLitt from the Glasgow School of Art, and is pursuing a Doctorate of Creative Arts at the University of Southern Queensland. Zlatar also serves as a Lecturer at the University of Glasgow's Anderson College and has taught at KICL London and the University of Essex (UEIC).

# Launching: the Room to Bloom Digital Catalogue



An unhierarchical mesh underpinning nature. An ecosystem of shared economy. A 'Wood Wide Web' using electrical impulses to form natures invisible communication tool. Only in recent years has the mycelial network began to be popularly known, quickly growing in inspiration in the art world, a real yet mythical example of the systems we ecofeminists desire.

The mycelium holds place in the ethos of Room to Bloom, an ecofeminist and decolonial network of transnational artists and art organizations that over the past three years has carried out trainings, exhibitions and public events across the world to create platforms for alternative voices, imaginaries, mutual learning and co-creation.

The digital catalogue weaves the mycelium and Room to Bloom project together. Each myco-heterotrophic graphic presents an element of the project, a plant which, like our community, needs mycelial connections to grow. Scan the QR code for your own virtual exploration of select seeds that Room to Bloom has planted, with additional references of our inspirations and guidance.

Works best with a computer & headphones.
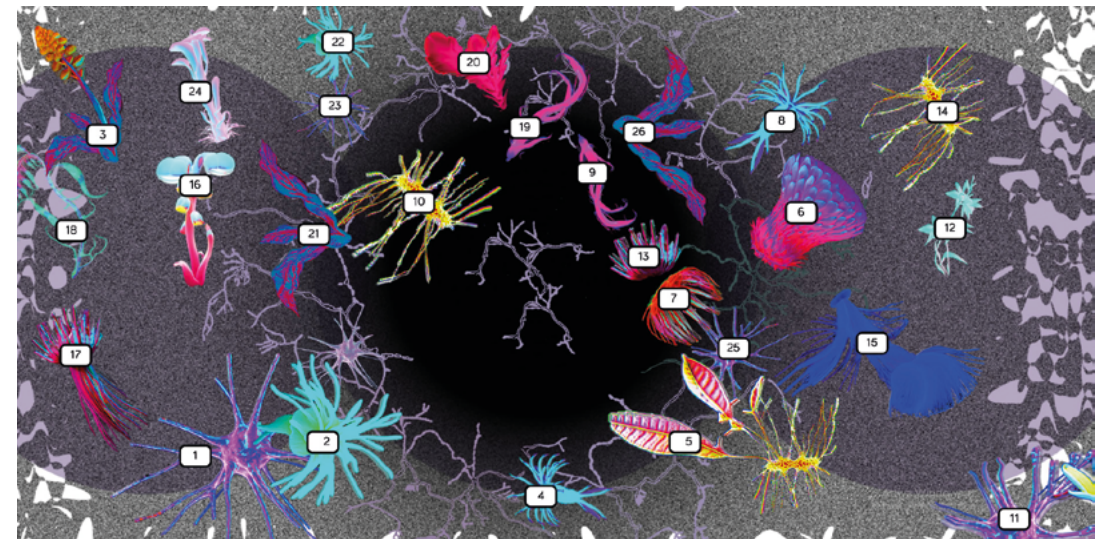


## Room to Bloom: Why we need ecofeminist, postcolonial and decolonial narratives for Europe to change

By Marta Cillero and Ségolène Pruvot

There is something magical about Room to Bloom: when one talks to people about the work we – the Room to Bloom management and curatorial team, its advisors and its artists – are doing with this platform, a spark ignites in the eyes of those who are listening. There is an interest in getting to know more, in being involved, in wondering what direction the group is taking. Room to Bloom is occupying a space that was left vacant and it might well be that there is something revolutionary in bringing together 100 feminist artists from across the world to imagine, co-create and narrate hope and alternatives for our common futures.

Room to Bloom is a new transfeminist and ecofeminist platform that brings together emerging artists to examine and create ecological and postcolonial narratives for Europe and beyond. Room to Bloom recognizes that it is time to contribute to the activation of the peripheries and to navigate against patriarchalism, different types of oppression, exploitation and racism in order to open new spaces for experimentation and to lay the basis for new forms of actions in the art world.

Living up the promises of intersectional feminism into daily practices of art and cultural management is a very ambitious goal. Something that seemed – quite naively – obvious to us when we started the project, the endevour of bringing together reflections and learning from feminism and post/decolonialism into practice to change cultural and art management, appears – one year down the line – to be not only quite unusual but also quite difficult.

As cultural managers and curators, we are aware that decolonising ourselves and the cultural production sphere is part of the journey.

## Room to Bloom Manifesto for Feminist Decolonial Arts and Culture

We are the artists of the future. We are storytellers and healers. We are caregivers and children. We believe kindness is an act of revolution. We create kinship through care. We are acknowledged and compensated for our labor. We work out of joy and decide our own wages. We honour, value, and respect amateurs and professionals. We distribute funding with transparency and consensus. We nap at least once a day. We free ourselves from the pressure of production. We work in studios that are playgrounds. We create nurturing, healing spaces for rest and movement. We grow our own food. We make art accessible to everyone through education. We abolish entrance fees and capital accumulation and profits. We are brave enough to deconstruct and interrogate our own intentions. We dismantle dominant power structures. We inspire consciousness and legislation. We bring forth abundance. We listen to the animals and give voice to the trees. We are mountains, plants, and earth. We paint with the colors of the earth. We cry together with the rain. We make art from the moment of birth. We make art to communicate across species. We tell stories about the past. We dance and hold hands and close our eyes together. We swim with the fish deep in the ocean. We communicate through mycelial networks. We merge with the rest of creation. We experience pleasure and pain in a kaleidoscope of emotion. We are everything and nothing. We time travel. We call upon the Earth, Air, Water, and Fire. We call upon the previously oppressed – people who are Black, Brown, Indigenous, women, queer, and disabled. We reclaim and rewrite our own history, identity, heritage, spirituality, cosmology, territory, culture and our body! We reinvent ourselves. We are reborn. We dream of the future and we wake up within it.

– A manifesto for feminist decolonial art by the Room To Bloom network

Edited by Lena Chen

Room to Bloom brings together feminist artists with a migration background who create ecological and postcolonial narratives of Europe. By associating artists and creators who – too often – occupy a peripheral place in the world of arts and places who are considered to be geographically peripheral (Sicily, Ukraine, Poland, Greece), Room to Bloom aims at building a discourse on European culture that is fully built on the experience and knowledge of the periphery and to bring it back to the centre.

The project partnership involves arts institutions and partners from France (Alternatives Européennes), Sweden (Museums of Cultures of the World, Gothenburg), Italy (Studio Rizoma) and Germany/Greece (AthenSyn). It includes informal partners from Ukraine, Poland and beyond.

# Socially engaged arts for re-imagining technological futures
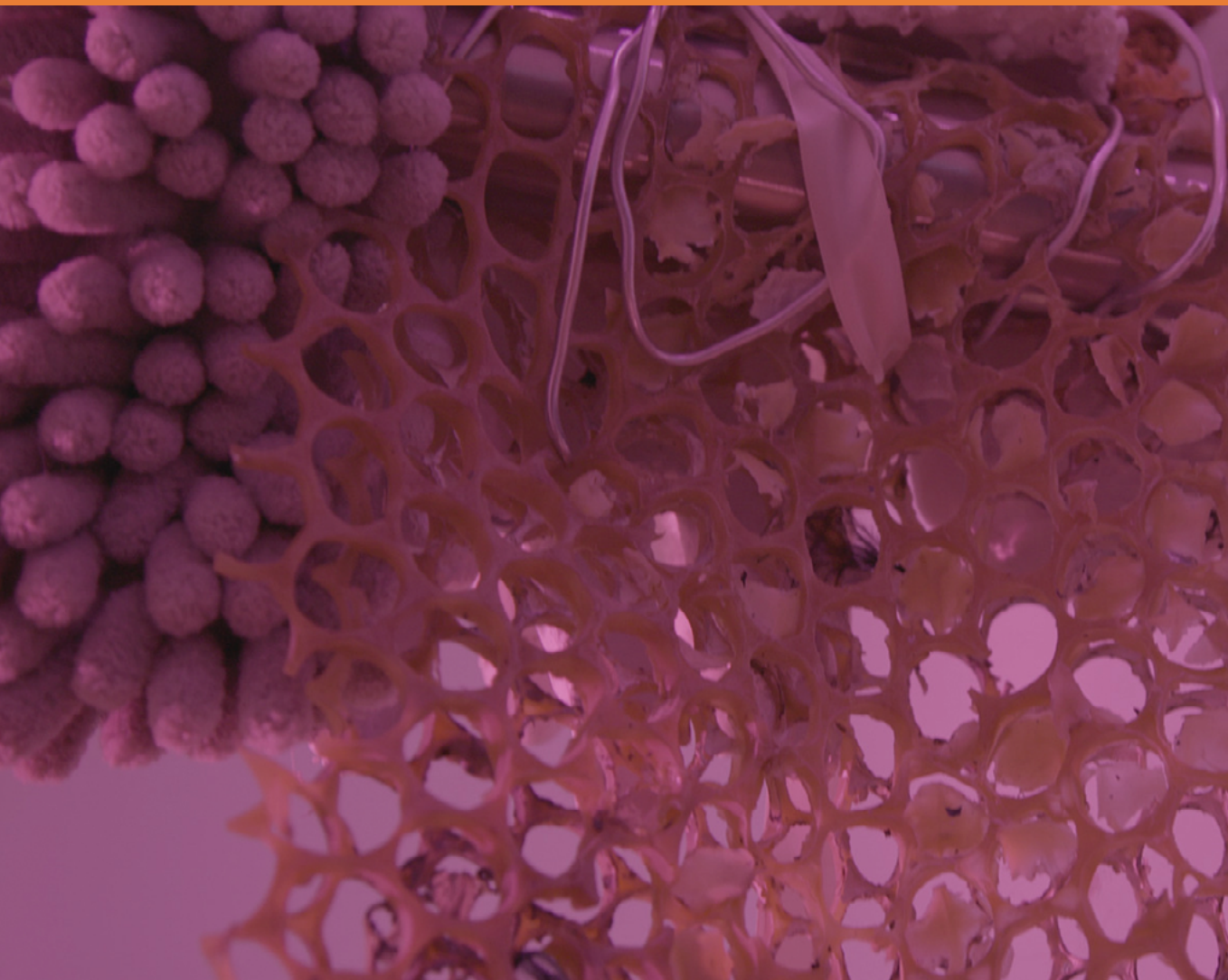
**Kirsti Reitan and Victor Andrés Renza report on the Artsformation project's research into the arts and digital transformation.**

Throughout history, the arts have consistently turned their scrutiny towards questions of societal and/or environmental importance, often acting as a reflective mirror that illuminates our cultural and scientific progress, while also denouncing and preserving the lessons from our darkest periods as civilization. With the advent of the World Wide Web, we find ourselves entangled in a swift and intricate digital transformation, now deeply embedded in the daily routines of many people, exerting a profound influence on our individuality, work dynamics and societal interactions. In this scenario, artists have not remained untouched by the profound impacts that emergent technology is bestowing upon us. They have embarked on artistic explorations that transcend the mere fascination or adoption of digital tools, to critically contest the very process itself. In this report on Artsformation's research, we focus on understanding how artists critically question and/or embrace the profound integration of technology into society and their own creative process, not just as means, but also as a reflecting process regarding the effects these tools have on themselves as individuals and members of specific communities as well as our society in general. Within this complex landscape, artistic projects emerge, articulating and rising awareness of pertinent issues relating to digital technologies, such as the implications of data collection and surveillance. Although the arts express diverse perspectives and ideas, amidst this diversity lies a potential source of inspiration, answers, strategies and methodologies to address pressing societal matters derived from the transition into a digital European society.

During the development of our research, we have had the opportunity to take a closer look at the role of socially engaged and participatory artistic practices, specifically in relation to the digital transformation at local levels and the ways it influences vulnerable and/ or marginalized groups of people. As a relatively novel practice, socially engaged arts is based on the belief of an empowering effect of collective creativity and seeks to engage with societal challenges cooperatively in an exercise of democratic participation by reinventing and confronting the status-quo of current societal structures (Bishop, 2006; Finkelpearl, 2013). According to Claire Bishop (2012), the essence of this practice lies in the active participation of people, since they are both the means and the material of socially engaged arts and thus their participation as co-authors in such artworks is what most differentiates this practice from others.

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This focus on communal participation has also been at the heart of this chapter in Artsformation. Through constantly asking ourselves what might be the role of socially engaged and participatory artistic practices in addressing a diversity of social issues emerging from the digital transformation, we explored aspects of this overall question through close collaboration with artists working within the socially engaged arts

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realm. Starting by establishing the state-of-the-art through desk research and a review of literature on the evolution of socially engaged arts, we aimed to establish a solid foundation of the intertwining between arts, artists and society in shaping desired digital futures in Europe. Moreover, this part of our work encompassed a total of five design fiction workshops and three international workshops, aiming to explore, question and communicate the potential role of socially engaged artistic practices in relation to questions of future digital technologies.

Consequently, we have delivered two types of workshop experiences: design fiction workshops and international workshops, fostering the engagement of a myriad of societal actors, including artists, individuals and communities in vulnerable situations. While the two types of workshops differed in their individual focus, they shared a common interest in discussing the potential of the artistic experience from multiple and inclusive perspectives to address possible harmful effects of the digital transformation as well as highlighting some of the advantages brought by it.

Co-creating and hosting the workshop series with a broad selection of artists and artist collectives, interested in different aspects of the digital transformation, helped us to bring light into some

aspects of the artistic practice of socially engaged artists as well as our understanding of the digital transformation from a creative and engaging process. For instance, while the literature review confirmed a "classic understanding" of whom we might consider vulnerable in the light of the digital transformation, our workshop series added further nuances to the ways in which one might be vulnerable and/or excluded from the process we are currently experiencing. During the workshops, we had the chance to listen to the voices of people who are usually not part of or represented in the technology development discourse. The workshops turned into a "safe space" for many to bring into discussion their hopes and fears about the future we are facing as a society and where emergent and maturing technologies such as blockchain, extended realities and the metaverses are becoming part of our daily life, yet their effects are still uncertain as these technologies continue developing.

Questions of power and apprehension of technology for and by the people were core to the activities carried out as part of our work. Artists and communities involved in this part of the research tried to discover, imagine and design creative mechanisms to understand the implications and evolvement of technologies that are usually unknown to the layperson. Many of the learnings from these social interactions are compiled in our Massive Open

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Online Course that will be freely available to everyone interested on approaching some of the issues brought by the digital transformation through a creative lens.

As such, on the one hand this part of Artformation research was an attempt to create welcoming spaces where, through the incorporation of social

artistic practices, citizens could find a place within the digital transformation mediated by artists who look to enable citizens to engage meaningfully in this process. The artists taking have dedicated a large part of their professional careers to shed light on both the positive and detrimental aspects of the transition we are experiencing towards an increasingly interconnected, digital and immediate world.

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However, it is vital to recognize that not all individuals possess the same privileges or capacities to adapt at the same pace. Some may lack technical skills or resources, while others might intentionally seek alternative paths of societal development, resisting the notion of predetermined futures imposed by certain agendas. These inclusive spaces foster a nuanced understanding of the digital age, embracing diverse perspectives and valuing the choice to chart our own course as a society, moving away from interests that can possibly benefit only a few minorities, accentuating the inequities that we have already observed during the last decades since the emergence of the internet. On the other hand, this part of the research was also a unique opportunity to explore and critically discuss the role of the arts, specifically socially engaged artistic practice, in relation to the digital transformation with a broad range of stakeholders. What might be the strength of the arts in relation to the digital transformation, but also, what might be its weaknesses? And critically, how might we create scaffolding that cares for artists and their "participants" alike, to nurture artistic processes that support the development of inclusive, democratic, and sustainable digital futures? We hope that the results delivered by this part of Artsformation's research not only carry and communicate our excitement of working with these topics, but also inspiration, possible guidelines and/or frameworks, and direction for future studies.

Víctor Andrés Renza holds a bachelor in law and an Msc in international development studies from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. He is currently a Research assistant for the Nordic Centre for Internet and Society at BI-Norwegian Business School and is part of the Horizon 2020 project Artsformation. His main interests lie in sustainable development, digital transformation and gig workers. Particularly, Víctor is interested in how the arts and artists can contribute to face the different challenges of sustainable development within the digital transformation era.

# Democracy, dictatorship, decolonisation

**An Artsformation podcast from the series**
*Resistance: Decolonising the Internet.*

What role does colonisation play in maintaining dictatorships across the globe? How does the digital transformation, through control and censorship of social media, relate to frameworks of repression? How can digital arts break through the barriers of censorship, inequality, borders and language? Artsformation discusses this and more with Samar Zughool, an artist who participated in our Lesvos residency and public assembly 'Resistance: Decolonising the Digital Transformation.' Her art performance at the assembly explored censorship of Jordanian facebook accounts speaking up for Palestinian human rights.

Samar Zughool is a community art director and performing artist. Through her series of practices, "SAMA Community Arts" and "NOT your Scheherazade", she co-creates public performative journeys that deconstruct social communication as free of the enforced binarism of "nation-state" and "state-nation" as both tools and products of colonialism along with enforced gender binary profiling.

Samar is a co-founder of SIDE, a group of migrant women cooking and cleaning politics, cultures, and arts, and a project manager at Povod Institute for culture and development of international relations in culture in Slovenia.

Because of her interest in social movements, she conducted her master's thesis research on "The Role of Women's Rights Movements in Reforming Public Policies after the Arab Spring," which was awarded the Prešeren national award for students from the Faculty of Social Sciences in Slovenia. Currently, within the Povod Institute in Slovenia, she is leading Euro-Med programs that connect arts, activism, and social movements for social resilience and well-being.

European Alternatives is a partner of Artsformation, a research project exploring the intersection between arts, society and technology.

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