

Unearthed / Dissotterrato

group show / mostra collettiva

: to find or discover (something) that was hidden or lost. To unearth a secret.

Thinking about residencies in general, and in particular one which the focal point is sustainability, I found myself contemplating on the ideas of polycultural and monocultural farming. After WWII, Europe started to adopt a monocultural attitude towards farming¹, which poses problems in terms of food shortage, the health of the soils and the general biodiversity. The main technique of this agricultural approach is the replanting of the same crop species in the same field, excluding any other plant types. "Growing the same crop year after year reduces the availability of certain nutrients and degrades the soil. Monocultures may therefore also lead to soil exhaustion when the soil becomes depleted of these nutrients"². Similarly, maybe, we could think of the current art world as a monocultural one. Cultural institutions often reutilize and recontextualize the same voices and ideas, the same art and artists, creating a sort of homogenous landscape that can lead the public to exhaustion. In the same manner that it can be damaging to soils, it is dangerous in the arts as it creates exclusion and a silencing of difference. Polycultural farming, on the other hand, involves cultivating multiple crops and species in the same field, fostering symbiotic relationships and enhancing the overall ecosystem's health and resilience. Likewise, in the realm of artistic practices and, in this case, artistic and curatorial residencies, embracing a poly-cultural mindset entails a welcoming of a diverse range of artistic voices, ideas, and attitudes. Rather than relying on a single dominant artistic perspective or style, a poly-cultural artistic world could celebrate the coexistence and interaction of various artistic approaches, fostering a vibrant and dynamic cultural ecosystem. Perhaps it could aid in the challenging of the notion of a single, monolithic artistic canon and be successful in celebrating the richness and complexity of diverse forms of expressions. By embracing pluralism and inclusivity, these polycultural artistic principles contribute to a more dynamic, and enriching artistic scenery. This is exactly the aim of the residency (such as this one where I found myself) - to promote communication and to rotate crops of ideas. Particularly here, where we find 5 artists from different geographies and contexts, even if all European, working on the same topic with such dissimilar approaches, we can understand the polyvocal, polycultural path of the artistic residency. Perhaps, such as in nature and farming, a poly-cultural approach in artistic practices is a more sustainable one.

This leads us to the title of the show - **unearthed** - to find or to discover (something) that was hidden or lost. To unearth a secret. To bring something to light, to retrieve it from the earth and the dirt. Informed by a sentiment of urgency, we are

¹https://www.internationalonline.org/programmes/our_many_europes/monoculture/175_offsetting_sameness_notes_towards_artistic_and_institutional_polysemy_and_practices_of_monocultures_and_multicultures/

² Baloch, 2021.

digging for answers, solutions, hope, when it comes to global warming and climate change. This was the purpose of the residency, whose results you can see here - to think in collectiveness about this emergency, to propose ideas, to foster change, to talk. In a plural world, solutions to any global problem or concern must pass through plural voices and conversations.

Just as it had inspired Edmondo Bacci in the XX century, so is the background of the industrial cities of Marghera and Mestre a source of stimuli for the Venetian artist Gabriele Longega. “When I started painting the Cantieri, my family lived in Marghera . . . so my encounters with the great smokestacks and blast furnaces were constant . . . my themes were always related to the fire and gas of Marghera, and the lights that emanated from it” (Edmondo Bacci, 1977)³. Similarly, so did the fire, gas and social and labor rights movements stimulated the narrative mind of Longega during the period of the residency. In between the industrial area of Marghera and Parco di San Giuliano, Forte Marghera is at the geographical center of two of the biggest sites of their kind in Europe - one a park and another an industrial complex area - leaving the artists to work in the middle of this juxtaposition between human and nature relations.

How does nature invade and contaminate the body? What is left when we depart? How does the body react and change in order to survive? What animalistic creature does this interaction create? Is it in the future? Is it in the past? These are some of the questions that come to mind while looking at *Perchè non ci rubino anche il sole* (2023). The title, which translated would be “because they can’t steal the sun from us” was inspired by pamphletarian interventions regarding labor rights created during the late 60s/ early 70s. This sentence, that during that period seems like a secure and true statement - that capitalism could take everything from you but not the sun - nowadays stings a bit more, as not even the sun and warmth irradiated from it seem like a guarantee.

Another element that seems to be present in this work is one of ritual, spirituality, and magic. While being confronted with this work, we are placed not only in an inconclusive timeline but in a moment that feels out of this realm. Colored by sadness, “instead of being conceived as a speculative image of the future political economic system, the Anthropocene has been reduced to an apocalyptic fantasy of both human and world finitude”⁴. While looking at this installation, we are placed in a narration that’s esoteric, spiritual, ritualistic. The charcoal background where the body lies mimics the dark skies of fumes, smoke and fire that illustrate factories in our minds. “Although originating from concern from the sciences about environmental issues, the vocabulary of **sustainability** is replete with economic

³ Edmondo Bacci, “Pagine inedite di Edmondo Bacci,” in Toni Toniato, ed., *Edmondo Bacci: Universi del colore* (Milan: Electa, 1989), p. 97. See also Toniato, *filmed interview* (1977), cited in Dino Marangon, “Eventi e metafore del colore nell’opera di Edmondo Bacci,” in *ibid.*, p. 26, n. 11.

⁴ Emmelheinz, 2015.

terms (such as natural capital or triple bottom line).”⁵. We cannot escape the link between capitalism and sustainability, in environmental and social terms. The apocalypse is now. Nature infects all, nature survives all.

Another artist concerned with these human/nature relations is Morgane Porcheron. In her work we can observe this dichotomy illustrated. Nature here is shown invading human creations, as the grid of iron used in construction is attacked by the natural world. The use of construction materials was not an unconscious choice - during our residency period, we found ourselves in a beautiful park that was under construction. This inspired the artist, who makes use of walks as a research practice, to immerse herself in the scenery, searching for inspiration and themes. We build and we build while the very foundation is crumbling. But, as we know, nature will take her place back. These are the feelings that we get while observing Porcheron’s work - that of a post-human world, where the natural equilibrium is restored, but we are no longer there to observe it. “What hope is there for sustainability when conspicuous consumption holds all the cards for pleasure: self-realization, aesthetic transport, spiritual transcendence?”⁶

While in the Venice area, it is impossible not to be attracted by the lagoon. The artist makes use of casts that act as sort of photographs - a point in time captured for eternity. Surely if we were to repeat this cast of the lagoon in a couple of years time, the results would be very different. But for now, we can carry it, take it away, preserve it and keep it safe. But the artist makes use of photography in a traditional sense of the word, as well, making use of polaroid specifically for its immediacy. Taking photographs “[...] is a way of certifying experience, [but] also a way of refusing it – by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir. [...] The very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel.”⁷ Perhaps it helps to ease the mind - to know that even though it’s hard to say if we are going to be able to save any of the nature that surrounds us now, we can keep it safe in our pockets.

Making use of this notion of a polyvocal world we mentioned in the beginning of this text, so does artist Simone Scardino asks to hear the public’s plural voice. In a participatory performance the artist used, as one of the mediums for research, the audience’s participation in order to understand what other possibilities could there be for the Orto Botanico of Venice, which was active from 1811-1887. “We tell stories to explore the alternative choices that might lead to feared or hoped-for futures”⁸. Scardino created not only sheets of paper that contain seeds for future possible growth, but what the artist calls seed bombs. Inspired by the torpedo factory that

⁵ Phillips, P. (2015). “Artistic Practices and Ecoaesthetics in Post-sustainable Worlds”. In C. Crouch, N. Kaye, & J. Crouch (Eds.), *An introduction to sustainability and aesthetics: The arts and design for the environment* (pp. 55-68). Boca Raton, Florida: Brown Walker Press.

⁶ Steiner, 2009, p. 5.

⁷ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), 177.

⁸ Cronon, 1992, p. 1368.

occupied the Orto Botanico during quite some time, namely between 1890s and 1920s, the artist uses the form of what was produced there to imagine possible futures. These bombs would not spread war but hope that new life can grow. As a way to research what new possibilities there could be for the space that used to hold the botanical garden of Venice and that has been abandoned since the 1990s/2000s, the audience was invited to draw, write and think about what the square-like shape on the ground could become. Some answers were as inventive as the creation of an underwater garden, and some were as feasible as the restitution of a garden, but a communal one, for the habitants of Venice to enjoy. Finally, the way the multiple angles of research and artistic production interact with each other leaves us with the narration of a past, a present and future, future which we can still make decisions about.

Are we fixed or mutable? Are we fluid like water or static as iron? How to comprehend the human experience? And how to define it? These are some of the questions that come to mind while observing Daniela D'Amore's work, produced during the residency. Energized by human's relationship with nature and the nature of human relationships, the artist's work here is concerned with self discovery. Inspired by metoscopy, the ancient belief that one could read another by looking at facial features, her artistic exploration during the residency period took form in many ways. Her small sculptures draw exactly from these medieval theories of the lines in our foreheads and what they can tell us about ourselves. This constant search for answers and every little knowledge we can get about us defines the very essence of the human experience. We are looking for a reflection, where we can admire and observe all the little parts that develop into who we are.

D'Amore created a video installation as well, where a clear contrast between the natural and the human is visible. A strong steel structure serves as the base for a visual projection of short videos that the artist took during the residency period. Mainly of water, the piece seems to try to speak again on this idea of reflection and discovery. The flow of the moving images highly contrasts with the stillness of the steel - as if the natural world is ever changing, and the human aspect refuses to move or evolve.

Finally, Iside Calcagnile's work tries to formally mimic the natural. In fact, "choosing to adopt polyculture tries to imitate the diversity found in the natural ecosystems"⁹ so it makes sense that a pluricultural approach to art would produce something that emulates the natural world. Forcing us to bend in order to look in between, we feel as if we are paying homage to nature, in all its bendy and distinctive forms. This piece of installation art is composed of a sort of box that hides the movement of branches. The ramifications of the artist's work, literal and figurative, create a sort of decomposed anthropomorphism. The little limbs serve as well as a

⁹Baloch, 2021.

form of language with a sort of calligraphic demeanor. Perhaps they say something, and we just forgot how to read.

In the second piece we showcase here from Calcagnile, we are now forced to look up to a piece as mighty as the trees. Again, the use of specific portions of branches is visible, but now placed in a solid fabric, fixing this idea of language even further. The selection of these ramifications was not left to chance, but carefully selected by the artist, using solely the branches that steer away from the regular growth path of the tree. The ones that escape the norm. Even though we can find repetition and a sort of perceived sameness, the small differences turn each line into a unique sign.

As I tried to illustrate in the beginning of the text, the artists' participation in the residency period was concluded by the production of various vocal works in multiple media, and with different angles as stimuli. In fact, "the domain of sustainability has as many different adherents as it has variations in its applications. The very fact that it has interdisciplinarity at its core – in its combination of the three pillars of economic, social and environmental well-being – generates a diversity of responses"¹⁰. Speaking now for myself, on a personal level, I will take away from my time with these artists more than a new found love for Chinese food and cheap wine. I will cherish the moments when we discussed what was important to us, at that point in time, and the sentiment of a collective circle where ideas were discussed, discovered, **unearthed**.

Maria de Brito Matias, September 2023.

¹⁰Phillips, P. (2015). "Artistic Practices and Ecoaesthetics in Post-sustainable Worlds". In C. Crouch, N. Kaye, & J. Crouch (Eds.), *An introduction to sustainability and aesthetics: The arts and design for the environment* (pp. 55-68). Boca Raton, Florida: Brown Walker Press.