To Build an Ecological Art Institution: The Experimental Station for Research on Art and Life

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This text, written from the perspective of The Experimental Station for Research on Art and Life, set up by a group of cultural workers including Ovidiu Ţichindeleanu and Raluca Voinea as well as tranzit.ro, narrates the arrival of the artists to Siliștea Snagovului in Romania. The station was tired and weary – worried by the rising heat and dry days and disillusioned by human's extraction from the soil and inability to live peacefully with one another. It asks that we take seriously the questions of institution building, of who and what it is for, and of forging a relationship to the land based on mutuality. The contribution is part of *Art for Radical Ecologies (Manifesto).*

The starting point for thinking ecology from the world cannot be a point that is off-ground, off-world, off-planet, and it cannot be expressed from a being without a body, without color, without flesh, and without a story.
– Malcom Ferdinand, 2022[1]

1. Malcom Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World* (trans. Anthony Paul Smith), Cambridge: Polity, 2022, p. 19.

The wind is blowing at 50 km/h and it is 21°C, plus. For early February, this is excessively warm. I don't mind having the sun defrosting my clayish body of soil, but I fear the trees will misunderstand this temperature and start their vegetation too soon, at the risk of being frozen during the capricious days of March. There are legends in this corner of the world, about an old angry woman who set out to search for the spring, taking out successively her layers of coats in the heat of the sun, only to see the weather change suddenly and thus freezing to her death.

Last year it rained a cold, muddy rain the whole month of March. The people taking care

to transform my exhausted body into a flourishing garden were unable to plant much. I was grateful for their unwillingness to bring the heavy machines that I am so used to, which until recently were tilling my upper strata of soil, to make sure the monocultures they were sowing did not have to compete with unwanted vegetal beings. I still have the memory of the forest that once covered my body, before people started to inhabit these lands; even later, when they were just surviving on my back, their existences were not intrusive; we could exchange gifts and I offered my full sustenance to their temporary stays. The villagers were building small houses, using some of the clay I was providing, mixed with sand, water, horse manure and straws. The houses smelled good in winter, heated by the wood in the stoves. The stoves and their bowls for food were also made using my flesh. Thus, I could feel a continuum between my body and their lives, and I was supportive in growing the plants that provided them with daily subsistence, with materials for clothes, or for baskets and roofs, for medicine and for enjoyment.

It all changed when the threshers and the seeders appeared, with their metallic bodies, big wheels, spiky tails and fuming horns. Their drivers didn't even come down with their feet on my surface, to feel my shivers; there were no ways I could communicate with them anymore, in the absence of direct contact. And yet I was lucky: intensive agriculture wasn't the worst thing that could happen to me. When I looked north, only 20 km away, my fellow lands were pierced through, daily, for their black blood, or south, some 40 km away, concrete foundations and endless rusty pipes carrying shit had forever shaped my sister soils into strata of breathless misery. At least I could still see the sky, the wheat ears were gently listening to my moans, and on my edges there were bushes feeding and nestling the birds.



Container by studioBASAR. Flag by Marx Machines Inc. (Filip Herbert, Anna Olszewska), installed within the framework of the project 'Lectures on the Weather', curated by Anna Smolak, 2022. Cosmos Garden planting, 29 October 2022. Photo: Catrinel Toncu



The Station with wheat and sunflower, July 2021





The New Rural Agenda Discussion with Jatiwangi art Factory, 23 July 2022, 40°C

The lake nearby the Station, July 2021



First collective session of Cosmos Garden planting, 29 October 2022, 23°C. Photo: Catrinel Toncu

When my new owners arrived and started making measurements, I was deeply worried. So were the eglantine bushes, the wild rabbits and the pheasants, the little field mice and the groundhogs, everyone who until then had been able to coexist with the big machines and the cereal crops, with the unshaded heat and the pesticides, but would have had a much harder time with urban people used to comfort, two-storeyed villas, concrete pools and loud music at their parties.

Artists they said they were, these newcomers. Were they the kind of artists who need white plaster walls and grey shiny floors for showing their canvases painted with acrylic paint, or rubber black rooms for showing their videos? And who need outside gas heaters in winter, and air-conditioned rooms in summer for keeping the visitors comfortable?

I had a hard time guessing their profiles. After they bought me, they paid me rare visits; each time they came in different configurations, scrutinized me with a mix of puzzlement and helplessness, took selfies with me, but they were not yet able to get into a proper conversation. When my old acquaintances, the machines, stopped their annual marches at my edges, I knew this was the time that another work was to be enforced upon myself. From my sisters down the road, I knew the order: first they would take samples of my different layers, to read my capacity for holding their buildings, not understanding how much more there was to read in those geological layers, how many sediments of rock, sand, wind, tears, blood and history. At least I did not threaten them with earthquakes, like my relatives in the depth of the city nearby were latently reminding the inhabitants

about their transient little lives.

The second step was for my owners to dig for water. This was painful only once, but after I was grateful, as they were using that water to ease my burnt-down surface during the drought, and to allow for plants to grow, which in their turn were to prevent further cracks. Then I expected they would start the excavations for their concrete buildings, but instead, small holes started to appear on my edges and a rain of little trees started to pour their roots down my body, the kind of roots that tickle first, until they find the firmness to encourage me, to give me purpose. I knew well some of these roots, like the hawthorn or the willow, as they were part of the old forest whose memory still lingers in my stomach. Others were completely unfamiliar – the pomegranate, the fig tree, the kiwi – yet they seemed to be doing fine with my unusually heated surface during the summer, so I became interested in their roots as well. I was starting to wonder if my owners were in fact caretakers, if they were seeking to communicate with me rather than to extract all my strength.



Building of Demeter bread oven, workshop with V. Leac, 1 April 2023



View of Demeter bread oven, July 2023





Tomatoes planted on sand, May 2023

Wheat field next to the Station, June 2023





Tomato from the neighbour, July 2023

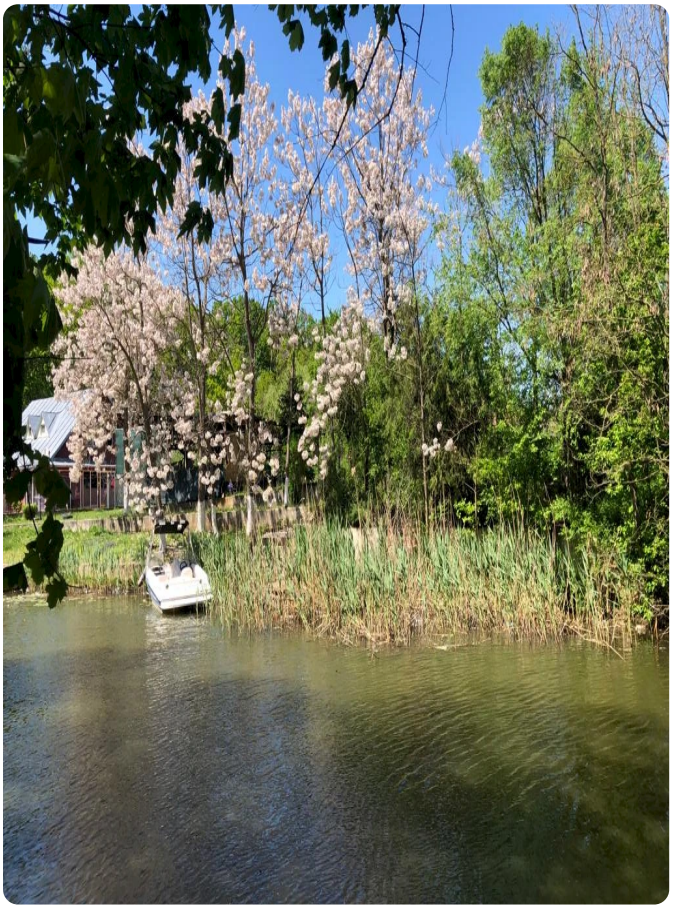
Neighbour's greenhouse with terracotta stove, May 2023. Mapping and photo: Iuliana Dumitru

The winds were becoming more powerful, sometimes resembling tornadoes, and it was they who brought me the news that around 300 km away the lands were bombarded, crossed by tanks, spilled upon with toxic fires, experimental deadly chemicals, and blood, a blood poisoned by despair and senselessness. Were my caretakers as worried as I was? Were they thinking to abandon me? Was I not giving them enough reason for hope, in my patience, my steadiness, my responsiveness to their actions of care, even my warnings about the invasive species such as the topinambur? Could we together, in some way, counter the news of war, the menace of war coming closer, the trauma of war refugees, the sadness of species disappeared under the brutal attack on ecosystems that every war is?!

They called me the Station. They imagined me covered with lush vegetation, when I could hardly breathe during the scorching summers. They thought, and knew it wasn't possible, that I could be alive on my own, while my neighbouring plots continued to be shredded by machinic caterpillars. As if the enclosures had not cut through our nervures, slicing us like a piece of cake, ready to be consumed by people alone, ignoring all the other critters which were giving us life. My owners were, in their turn, sometimes caretakers, other times just consumers, it was hard for them to think more about life than about art, even when their art was not as disturbing as I expected in the beginning.



Cosmos Garden, Jerusalem artichoke invasion, May 2023



Lake nearby the Station, May 2023. Photo: Adelina Luft





Pinus Nigra, the embassy of Jatiwangi art Factory in the Cosmos Garden, September 2023. Photo: Edi Constantin

Forest nearby the Station, July 2023

We were still accommodating to each other. I wasn't hospitable enough, they weren't insistent enough. I wasn't growing their plants fast enough, they were not yet calling me home; we were still strangers. Cultivating the land is not enough to make it your friend. Listening to the birds is not enough to have a conversation with the land. Positioning oneself from the perspective of the land is a good start for an embedding into the world, but it is a long journey until that world accepts the alienated human who has to relearn every skill of being in the world, rather than consuming it.

What change of perspective is to be manifested in politics when the ground slips from under one's feet?

After the terrible management of the pandemic through a disciplinary regime, and of the war in Ukraine through the phantasmagoria of erasing Russia, the political affect that dominates Europe is distrust. The European elites, both from the political class and from the corporate culture industry, have shown themselves incapable of admitting mistakes and changing perspective in the slightest. The European political sphere has become more of an oblivious monoculture, with the forces of the extreme right about the only ones that are still making politics, while the world is moving on, on its own terms and rhythms. The current European elites have shown themselves incapable of learning from crises, defeats and diminishment. Incapable of thinking politically without fantasizing about supremacy

and expansion. Incapable of thinking politically outside the inter-imperial rivalry. Incapable of taking the ecological crisis seriously, without turning it into another round of neoliberal privatization. Throwing more money into the same holes, more force in the same direction, more PR to dress the image.

A systemic change of perspective is needed.

Yet the anti-systemic movements have also already gone through a terrible series of defeats without acknowledging them. The defeat of the anti-war, anti-capitalist and alter-globalist social movements of the 1990s and 2000s may have been caused by the comparatively much greater forces of imperial war, capitalism and colonial liberalism, but that does not preclude an internal weakness. The mobilization was great, but the cultivation was rushed. The seeds have not taken root. It remains a historical defeat, which produces its own consequences. Here and there, only islands of autonomy remain, faithful to their ecosystems, floating precariously on waters patrolled by destroyers and cruise ships. The latter seem senseless and huge in comparison to the opposing small and meaningful, but for the sea they are still puny. The ground has long slipped from under our feet. It’s at the bottom of everything, but it’s getting harder to reach, even to relate to it. We are taken by the flood, without even being aware of it.

A systemic change of perspective is needed, and the change would have to answer to the call of the Earth, one way or another.

First cultivate, then mobilize.



Opening of ‘The Blue Dream’, artistic intervention of Nicoleta Moise within the framework of the recurring project ‘The Last Archive’, 21 December 2023



View of the field near the Station, January 2024





View of the Station with rare snow, 21 January 2024, -1°C

View of the Station with rare snow, 21 January 2024, -1°C





Cosmos Garden, April 2024

Cosmos Garden, March 2024



‘Non-Western Technologies for the Good Life’ – a course led by Ovidiu Ţichindeleanu within the framework of ‘Museum of the Commons’. Session with Hiwa K., 23 March 2024, 20°C

For the seeds to take root, one needs to imagine. Sometimes they don’t even need the soil; water and sun is enough, if the waters are not boiling and the sun is not toxic. If the waters are not filled with drowned brown bodies. If one has the imagination to see the power in the sprouting of a seedling. To cultivate is to mobilize the power of the imagination. Arts institutions were the ones entrusted with this mission. They have long forgotten it, focused as they are on maintaining structures and ways of life that are crushing the Earth, that are raising the waters. In other worlds of this world, art is but one way of relating to the ecosystems among others. It is still a means of understanding, of relating, of seeing and dreaming together with other beings.

The ‘empty field’ of the Station allows us to relearn how to relate and to keep on asking the big questions: What does it mean, ‘ecological’? What does it mean, an ‘institution’? How can one build an ecological institution? How do we relate to the land? To the nonhumans? To our affinities and aversions? What coalitions and embassies are needed? What would be your ideal place of work? What are the tools for dismantling the status quo, for stopping the war on life, and for building a good life?

An empty field is never really empty; it has so many sediments of history, relations, nurturing of species; it is a refuge from the uncertainties around and a warning about a dry, hollowed future if we continue to see the Earth only as a resource to be consumed. Building an ecological art institution is too ambitious a plan. In the process, we learn to adjust our plans to the unexpected. The Station is a communal effort, built on trust. The

Station is a collective endeavour towards a rethinking of the role of art in a society that needs to relearn how to treasure and to cultivate life.

From the cultivated field of the Station, whose depth and potential reveals itself in its own time, to the urgency of the political present, which pushes down immediately the pressure of its multiple crises, we are looking for a coalition able to imagine multiple worlds, to live in multiple temporalities, and to sustain both.