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RESEARCH ESSAY

# Art as a Catalyst

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The socio-ecological challenges of recent times questioned the roles and responsibilities of artists and cultural practitioners. Several artists approached current issues by imagining new ways of living for a more sustainable form of future, attempting to trigger social transformation, a shift in values, changes in environmental issues, or a crucial system change. Is art truly capable of making a difference? The case studies examine the work of individual artists, artist collectives and cross-sectoral collaborations operating in Indonesia, India and Hungary, and through their work explore the potential of art as a catalyst.

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In a world where we are confronting a growing number of sustainability challenges, where climate change, environmental degradation, unsustainable farming practices, food scarcity, the illusion of unlimited growth, housing and human rights violations can happen, it is high time to fundamentally question prevailing systems, our economic, social, and even cultural practices. While the 1987 Brundtland Report (UN, 1987) talks about the three pillars of sustainable development – environmental, economic, and social –, in 1992 it mentions *culture* as its fourth pillar (UN, 1992). The question emerges then, within the context of culture, what the role of art and the artist can be in present times, going beyond the objectification of nature, to alternatively define the environment with a focus on global justice and ecological sustainability (Demos, 2016: 53–54).

Since the 1960's there have been numerous attempts in both art practices and discourse to challenge the dominant – Western – conception of art which is “identified with salable objects rather than with kinds of behaviour or ways of doing that embellish and enlarge life” (Gablik, 1995: 41). Several artists approached current issues by imagining new ways of living for a more sustainable form of future. The task could not be more relevant today. We may ask, why and how should we make art? What should we address and what forms and practices should we use? How can we trigger social transformation, a shift in values, changes in environmental issues, or bring about a crucial system change? Is art truly capable of making a difference? *How can art catalyze a change?*

I

When observing *art as a catalyst*, contemporary art practices of Indonesia and the region in general serve as a great source of inquiry. My artistic thinking and practice are greatly influenced by the approaches present in Indonesian contemporary art since I lived and worked there between 2011–2016. The collectivist mindset so characteristic of the region still exists in the arts as well, both in the attitudes of individual artists and in the shared vision of artist collectives. As Gustaff Harriman Iskandar explains, artists have a social function, “relating to the dharma, the contribution to society. They are not seen in the individual domain but always seen in a social context.” (Ostendorf, 2017: 27) As it crystallized from the *collaborations* I have had and the *interviews* I have undertaken with local cultural practitioners, artists are expected to take moral responsibility for the society they belong to, have a sensibility to social issues, and guarantee the integrity of their work while being conscious of the impact it has on the physical or social environment. This can be rooted back to the tradition of *gotong-royong*<sup>1</sup> or “working together,” where the artist acts as a leader for the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Gotong-royong is an essential element of the Indonesian philosophy, manifesting itself in many forms ranging from working together on agricultural activities to helping at social events like weddings or other ceremonies, contributing by food or energy which will be later given back in return (*tolong-menolong*), or building roads, bridges and houses for a public interest (*kerja bakti*) (Julaikha-Bahri, 2014).

This status is a tool in the hand that can be used to lead, influence, show models and offer alternatives, but at the same time it also requires the leader (artist) to be aware of the needs and aspirations of the community and set goals accordingly, not abusing the power.

*(Artist) collectives* as citizen initiatives are often even more directly engaged in social or environmental issues, driven by a desire to address or tackle them through art and creative practices. They can be understood as means and strategic units to deal with a number of sustainability issues, where members and collaborators come from a great variety of backgrounds – art, design, architecture, sciences. Projects like Soya C(o)l(lect)ure of Xxlab (HONF) targeted to tackle water pollution and poverty in Indonesia by using programmable bacteria and tissue culture to turn soya liquid waste into edible cellulose, biofuel and bio leather (Sick-Leitner, 2015); Ketemu initiated the foundation of the first psychosocial rehabilitation center in Indonesia that harnesses art for mental well-being, and incorporates art and creative processes into community art expression, public education and advocacy programs; the Jogja River Project of Lifepatch has observed and identified problems around water pollution by community engagement and data mapping for more than a decade; projects of ruangrupa address urban contemporary issues through exhibitions, festivals, art labs, films, magazines, culminating in the creation of Gudskul, a public learning space established to practice an expanded understanding of collective values, such as equality, sharing, solidarity, friendship and togetherness; just to give a few examples. Ostendorf (2017) identifies various sustainability approaches that characterize the work of these collectives, namely, the existence of *alternative (art) education* where *DIY and DIWO methods* are applied, the use of *low-tech practices* of a traditional or non-mechanical kind that require inexpensive and widely available materials often referred to as *hacking or making*, building on local leadership and the bottom-up or *grassroot* approach, *re-commoning* the commons, and reviving local or so-called *indigenous wisdom and practices*.

These formats and approaches create a hybridity of tools, methodologies, practices, roles and responsibilities, and could overcome the recurrent dualism and separation of art/life, art/science, or if we observe them in the context of artistic research, the tension between art and the academia. As unfortunately, there are still a number of critical stances from both academic/scientific and art spheres when it comes to research and practices. Artists often fear scientific rules and norms to be enforced on art which is supposed to stem from a much more intuitive domain. As Bishop describes the nature of artistic practice, the researcher-artist immerses into an indeterminate process in which the production of knowledge and/or artefact happens through learning and experimenting. This makes the demand of exact and repeatable research as it is prescribed by academia a limitation and obstacle (Varga, 2013: 32) in the “extraterritorial territory of art” (Wright, 2008). Therefore, there is a still existing scepticism in academia about the relevance of artistic research, and as a result, a risk that artists and cultural practitioners are not regarded as equal partners but rather as “secondary performers” to illustrate, communicate, or disseminate scientific research outcomes. Steyerl argues that artistic research aims to gain benefits from art or create a new type of it with different values, and as such can be interpreted as a new form of applied art – as the applied (applicable) knowledge and art may be used for business innovation, social cohesion, city marketing and various other needs of cultural capitalism. Still, artistic research is belittled and downplayed if we consider it as merely applied research. It can be just as fundamental, addressing the same level of problems as scientific research, and can also help tackle fundamental issues and offer alternatives (Michelkevicius, 2018: 307). We must treat both spheres as an integral whole, which demands an open mind of both the art world and academia, and a willingness to find a common language which is not based on hierarchy but on the acceptance of the different vocabularies and practices.

In this respect and in the context of art as a catalyst, artistic research exists at the possible intersection of the conceptual spaces of artistic thinking, creative practices and curatorial strategies in close, non-hierarchical relation to the ones of science, community/society and activism. As a researcher, an artist, an educator, and an activist I function at the overlap of these spaces, mapping the potential of art in solo and collaborative projects or while curating art events and ecological programs. The methodologies identified in the Indonesian art scene meant a great source of inspiration for me. They are of course not limited to Indonesia though but appear in various cultures and communities, always shaped by and adapted to the specific social context of the artist(s) and the location where the project takes place. My initial solo and collaborative projects were first preoccupied by ecological and environmental issues but these can never be separated from social factors either. The challenges addressed can always be rooted back to human factors as well, and any attempts for intervention or change must take into consideration social needs, at the same time can also operate with the ability of that social group for participation and action.

While researching the condition of soil and land in India with Lilli Tölp – under the duo name Green Root Lab – in 2016, we came across with the shockingly high rate of farmer's suicide in the Indian subcontinent, especially in the state of Maharashtra where we were based at the time. The interviews and talks with local artists, activist, and researchers at the laboratory of Krushi Mahavidyalaya Agricultural University pointed out that farmers' suicide cases considerably increased since 1997 due to various reasons. On the one hand, India opened its seed sector to global corporations like Cargill, Monsanto, Syngenta, and farm saved seeds<sup>2</sup> were encouraged to be replaced by corporate seeds with the promise of more crops. However, these corporate seeds needed fertilizers and pesticides and could not be saved. Farmers soon lost a free resource available on their farm and were forced to buy them each year, leading the ones already at the edge of poverty to indebtedness. The untested, unadapted seeds and the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides – together with climate change and droughts – led to crop failure. The dramatic fall in prices of farm produce as a result of free trade policies of the WTO just further deepened the problem. These factors all spiraled down to a dramatic increase in farmer's suicide cases (Shiva-Jalees).

Our project **Bearth (Figure 1)** aimed to raise awareness on the issue by installations and performances but we also wanted to move beyond mere aesthetic aspects and have an element of social benefit. Having met various farmers and joining a local sustainability convergence, we displayed the concept of a community seed bank that gathers indigenous seeds, which in the end became the part of an already existing seed bank of Gram Art Project, a local collective, as we left the country.



**Figure 1:** Green Root Lab (Eva Bubla & Lilli Tölp): Breathing. As part of Project Bearth. 2016. TIFA Working Studios, Pune, India. Photo: Lilli Tölp. Video documentation of the complete exhibition project available [here](#).

Gram has been dealing with farmers' cases, sustainable farming practices and related social issues for many years now and their success can be attributed to their approach. The collective is present in a village called Paradsinga since 2015, where they carried out public art projects that engaged the local population to bond the collective and the inhabitants first. They are not simply visitors but some members actually stay in Paradsinga. Gram does not want to be registered as a legal body (such as a foundation or NGO) on purpose, to keep a horizontal structure and equality among members of the collective, and among the collective and the community.

The artists and farmers who form Gram Art Project have converted a previously monocultural cotton farm into a zero-budget farm; meaning, all fertilizers and pesticides are made from the materials found around

<sup>2</sup> In agriculture and gardening, seed saving is the practice of saving seeds or other reproductive material (e.g. tubers) from vegetables, grain, herbs, and flowers for use from year to year for annuals and nuts, tree fruits, and berries for perennials and trees.

the farm, such as jiwamrita for fertilizing and neem-chilli mix to keep away pests. Crops have been planted in the form of land art installations using edible leafy vegetables (**Figure 2**), irrigation systems and lakes that store monsoon water for the dry season have been designed and implemented, therefore art and farming come hand in hand. Elders and the local youth are both involved in the projects, relying on traditional practices and giving a purpose for the youngsters of the village, who not only learn about zero-budget farming but some even go on to study at universities in the respective fields. Gram's activities served as a model for surrounding villages as well, who started to open up for their methods. During a Seed Festival organized by Gram, farmers of the region could come together to share their experiences, exchange seeds, and sell their products. Gram is still present in the village, running socially engaged art and social entrepreneurship projects that build on local farms and communities.



**Figure 2:** Gram Art Project: Grow in India. 2016. Paradsinga, India. Photo: Gram Art Project.

Consistent presence is essential if we work with communities. Art that wants to raise awareness is sometimes more symbolic than practical, and yet symbolic actions can be powerful and effective methods of change (Thompson, 2012: 19); when we seek actual solutions to problems while working with communities or social groups, inconsistency in presence and interaction can undermine effectivity. The concept of solution is quite relevant though.

Our collaborative project **Everyday Shortcomings** with PAD Foundation for Environmental Justice focuses on a segregated settlement in rural Hungary to identify and articulate the systemic problems that determine the living conditions of the local population, such as increased environmental risks, lack of public services, and housing problems. Bringing DIY devices and practices here to fix sanitation or public service issues would not solve problems on a systematic level, would not urge the local municipality to deal with unresolved issues which is their own responsibility in the first hand. The lack of public services does not affect the majority of Hungarian society where generally proper infrastructure and social services exist – but victimizes the most vulnerable layers of society living under segregation. This demonstrates how the social context shapes the approach one has to take while addressing an issue, where after careful consideration the relevant steps and practices are chosen.

The target of **Everyday Shortcomings** is multifold. By mapping the specific institutional deficiencies and environmental problems of the area, PAD wants to present the challenges and advocate the interests of the inhabitants for local authorities and sensitize decision makers to provide legal and social environment for sustainable circumstances. By examining the practices and related objects that are created as a result of or a response to the structural deprivations, the project also wants to show the ingenuity and creative coping mechanisms of the locals to mainstream society, in order to reframe the existing visual representation of poverty (**Figure 3**). The inhabitants are not only passive subjects of the project portrayed in powerlessness and apathy, but take an active role in rewriting this narrative: *fieldworks, talks, participative media projects,*

*workshops* and *community events* give means to communicate and exchange ideas and practices. It is important that knowledge is not working one-way: these interactions serve as a form of research where we gain and share information as well, based on which the project elements are constantly being reconsidered and the practices adapted to the needs of the inhabitants and the overall aims of the project. *Communication with locals* is as important as *brainstorming among team members*. Creative practices mean an indirect form of communication which may uncover stories and ideas which interviews do not always bring to the surface.



**Figure 3:** PAD: Everyday Shortcomings. 2019, Hungary. Photo: PAD/Neogrady-Kiss Barnabas.

**Szabadonbalaton**, another ongoing long-term project with PAD addresses the socio-ecological problems Lake Balaton, our biggest lake in Hungary faces. In the first year of the project, the focus was on the coastal vegetation: due to a mixture of unsustainable water management and citizen practices there is a considerable reed die-back in the coastal vegetation (Zlinszky, 2013). Currently, the water level is regulated at a minimum of 120 cm, which is not in accordance with the natural needs of a lake ecosystem. It needs a variable, fluctuating water level. When the water level is kept stable, the natural decomposition of vegetation will create anoxic soil conditions, resulting in reed die-back. Therefore the reed area will decrease in its size, form smaller and smaller islands till the point that it gets floated away. This tendency brings inevitable changes to the micro-ecosystem of the lake, risking even its water quality. Unfortunately, there is a general lack of information among decision-makers and the wider public as well.

The ecological art events<sup>3</sup> and microprojects of our team (which consists of scientists – from the field of ecology, anthropology, social sciences, and water engineering – and artists) address various social groups to familiarize them with the issue, open up a platform for conversation; while initiating a conversation among

<sup>3</sup> The term ecological art is used to describe a wide spectrum of artistic practices that seek to reclaim, restore and/or remediate damaged environments, re-envision ecological relationships, applying socially engaged, activist, community-based interventions that address politics, culture, economics, ethics and aesthetics as they impact the conditions of ecosystems. Ecological art practitioners often include artists, scientists, philosophers and activists as collaborators, who practice ethical responsibilities toward communities – understood as both human and non-human communities of life (Kagan, 2014).

decision makers is also a long-term target. The debut took place at the Blue Ribbon 2019, Europe's oldest and longest round the lake competition, where the camouflaged sailboat served as our visual platform to direct the attention to the challenges of the coastal vegetation (**Figure 4**). We also set up a concept bar at different public beaches of the lake to serve Balaton-specific cocktails which visualize and demonstrate the taste of the ecological changes. People could taste mud formation, algae bloom, reed die-back, and this multi-sensory experience created a perfect chance to talk about these phenomena and raise public awareness about the issue. Operating in *public spaces*, using a variety of media, also ones which are not necessarily regarded as art material but come from our kitchen, bring art and science, and their message closer to real life and to people who otherwise would not visit galleries or read science reports. Merging art and activism softens the separated nature of the former and the often rebellious – therefore separated – nature of the latter.



**Figure 4:** PAD: szabadonbalaton. 2019. Balaton, Hungary. Photo: PAD/Neogrady-Kiss Barnabás.

The shift to public spaces does not necessarily mean turning a back to the white cube though. “Traditional” venues can also open up for various forms of interaction both in the research, exhibition and follow-up process. The white cube can be reinterpreted as an experimental zone, both in terms of a physical and mental space. On the one hand, *interactive and performative* works may appear that engage visitors in reframing what Spivak calls social imagination (Varga, 2019: 78). On the other hand, exhibits can themselves host community-based practices and forms of *alternative (museum) education*. While preparing installation **Designated Breathing Zone** (**Figure 5**), which critically reflects on the problem of



**Figure 5:** Eva Bubla: Designated Breathing Zone. 2019. Galeri Nasional Indonesia, Indonesia. Photo: Ana Setyardyani Putri.



**Figure 6:** Eva Bubla: DIY Air Filtration Experiment. 2019. Sekolah Akar Rumput, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Video: Daniel Okky Primanda Putra.

air pollution, a collateral workshop activity (**Figure 6**) introduced the concept to the citizen level. The installation itself incubated sansevieria plants, which are one of the most effective plants in indoor air purification according to a 1989 NASA study. The audience could inhale the air ventilated from the incubated plant modul, while during the workshop kids were also engaged in creating DIY objects using the same mechanism as the main installation and air purification devices already available on the market. This created a platform to discuss the issues of air pollution, harmful human activities, the importance of plants and green areas in urban planning in order to prevent the dystopian future Designated Breathing Zone anticipates. Sharing and exchanging ideas with the younger generation is as important as addressing decision-makers, given that the mindset of future generations will greatly influence future citizen practices; and our common future.

## II

Early 2020 questioned the foundations and showed the weaknesses of our current systems on both global and local scale. The effects of the pandemic jeopardized community-based, site-specific, and socially engaged art practices as well. Social distancing, the lack of personal contact broke the ongoing pattern of collaborations and public engagement, not only because gatherings and visits to public spaces were prohibited, but because shifting communication and practices to the online realm has proved to be as challenging as contradictory. Besides the hypocrisy of the idea that online zones are a sustainable form of future – just let us think about the ecological footprint of storing data – art practices lose a very elemental feature by removing them from the zone of sensual experience. There are certain social groups as well who cannot afford joining a webinar due to the limitations of their devices, or the lack of them. Internet indeed can be used as a very effective organizing tool but as Becker argues, “we humans need the *agora* – the public square – as it existed in ancient Greece, a site where we come together physically, as bodies, in order to hear one another” (Becker, 2012: 67). Real change occurs in a physical location, where people meet, interact, feel each other and manifest real resistance beyond the illusory digital zone.

Still, it is worth reconsidering and adapting our strategies and practices to what the pandemic situation created, as the discrepancies of our system the virus forced us to face will not be solved overnight. Restrictions may appear in our lives periodically, either due to a further wave of virus or another threat to society and the environment. After all, covid-19 is seen as a rehearsal for the restrictions that climate change brings about. We cannot go back to normal, a new form of normal must be born where a basic skill to be developed is the ability to adapt to the unknown. We may also leave the question of *what the future of artistic research and creative practices is* absolutely open. Should it be a combination of online and offline practices, it must be based on interconnectedness, solidarity and sharing, where we see and approach all elements of the world – humans and non-humans, theory and practice, art and science, activism and pacifism – as an integral whole.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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