

dialogical arts through sustainable communities: acting on the margins, redefining empowerment

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contents

- P.5 social sculpture
- P.6 introduction
- P.8 keynote speaker
- P.9 Reciprocities of decay and destruction | Yoko Akama

P.10 **THEME 1 | The power of the non-visible as the unrecognised or unseen connections between people and their communities (both towards the margins, and from the margins)**

ARTIST TALK

- P.12 Empowering women through fashion in Tilburg North (NL)
Akin James, Els Petit-Carepiet
- p.13 Air Above Us | Lori Hepner
- P.14 Who is coming to dinner? Gathering as an emergency response to the climate crisis | Holly Keasey, Sofie Joosse
- P.15 Placemaking through Performance | Satu Miettinen

WORKSHOP

- P.16 Traditional Embroidery and Technologies | Célia Ferreira
- P.17 Empathy and Design Thinking for Social Transformations
Melanie Sarantou

PAPER

- P.18 Social sphere: Shaping society like an sculpture
Ana María Marqués Ibáñez
- P.20 Arts-based social interventions, 1990-2020: what worked and why? | Andrea Kárpáti
- P.21 Social engagement and critical retrospective on whiteness in communally produced video artwork Possible worlds | Mari Mäkiranta, Outi Ylitapio-Mäntylä
- P.22 Ecology of a Group. Drawing as an ecological relationship
Sonia Mota-Ribeiro
- P.23 Ugly Cutouts | Filipa Rodrigues
- P.24 Effective, relevant, accountable: developmental projects of socially disadvantaged children in Hungary
Ágnes Veszelszki, Eszter Deli, Evelin Horváth

P.25 **THEME 2 | Connection between these people and communities can take place in many ways, and these connections are often complex and tangled.**

ARTIST TALK

- P.27 Shelter Stone- The Artist and The Mountain
Edward Summerton

WORKSHOP

- P.28 Picnicking to care in Health Garden | Vitalija Povilaityte-Petri

PAPER

- P.29 AMASS experiments in Portugal | Teresa Torres de Eça, Célia Ferreira, Raquel Balsa, Maja Maksimović, Ângela Saldanha
- P.31 Ownership and trust - art as courier of social change in North Tilburg | Zsuzsanna Kravalik, Paul Cornelissen
- P.32 Participatory approach to devising a performance - autoethnographic research
Tamara Nikolic, Natasa Milojevic, Mina Ćirić
- P.33 The impact of socially engaged theatre on the audience attitudes toward people with learning difficulties
Milosh Raykov, Raphael Vella
- P.34 Conversation circles and symbolic materialities in Artistic Eco-Formative processes in the development of ecological actions
Rosana Gonçalves da Silva
- P.35 Understanding the collaboration between academics and non-academics in Socially-Engaged Participatory Art Research
Tang Tang, Paul Wilson, Kiwoong Nam
- P.36 Hideaway: poetry and painting in a marginal plotland community. | Judith Tucker, Harriet Tarlo

P.37 **THEME 3** | From certain positions and in certain contexts, the strengths of communities (rather than their challenges or weaknesses) can be overlooked and remain unrecognised. What will be lost and, importantly, what can be gained if such strengths are visualised?

WORKSHOP

- P.39 One Arctic-Thousand Cameras | Anastasia Deyko
- P.40 Terms of Service Fantasy Reader | Darija Medić
- P.41 Intergenerational community theatre as a context of learning based on visual art methods | Tamara Nikolic, Nikola Koruga, Kristina Mladjenović
- P.42 Finding a pathway between margins: an arts-based action research approach to hacking your own business | Michelle van Wyk, Melanie Sarantou

PAPER

- P.43 Then, Now and Always – Museums and Communities. Artifacts, Identities and Practices | Jitka Cirklova
- P.44 Decolonising collaboration: re-learning how to listen to the silenced | Laura Donkers
- P.46 Emancipatory Practice: Research Protocols of the Horizon 2020 AMASS Project | Marie Fulková, Magdalena Novotná, Lucie Jakubcová, Jan Pfeiffer
- P.47 Mandarin promises of Youth –six women in their third age reflect on their life journeys through the process of making community theatre | Isabelle Gatt
- P.48 AMASS-AMAS-WEIRD? | Mirja Hiltunen
- P.49 Narrative Collage: the use of media images to develop filmic stories with young people in South African townships | Andrea Thoma

PAPER AND POSTER

- P.50 A multidisciplinary approach that merges design, art, and pedagogy to empower youth living in marginalised areas | Carolina Gutierrez Nova, Silvia Remotti
- P.53 Service Design to Improve Children’s Visual Literacy by Integrating Visual Methods for Fostering Design Thinking through Unconventional Creative Processes | Amna Qureshi

P.55 **THEME 4** | Challenges may often be difficult (or, at times, impossible) to solve due our proximity to them as some perspectives, often determined by a distance from such challenges, do not enable detailed views.

ARTIST TALK

- P.57 Raising Empathy: Synthesizing Performance Art and Social Psychology | Einat Amir
- P.59 Art is a unifying element that brings people together through non-linear processes throughout the audiovisual and sensory landscape | Abel Andrade
- P.61 Transgressive Bot Forensics | Darija Medić
- P.62 Visual storytelling for Roma Women | Lajos Kovács

PAPER

- P.63 The Art of Face Masks: A Collective Reflection of College Life during COVID-19 | Herminia Din
- P.64 Common Ground - an artistic persona of border-crossing artist Marija Griniuk
- P.65 Visualizer students in a verbalizing educational setting: giving a chance through art | Andrea Karpati, Erika Kugler
- P.67 Museum and art as a space for dialogue | Zsófia Somogyi-Rohonczy
- P.68 Socially engaged arts, marginalisation, and the pandemic. How has Covid-19 affected the AMASS project? | Sofia Lindström Sol
- P.69 Curating social engagement: Care, responsibility and redefinitions | Raphael Vella
- P.70 Art-therapy group for sexually abused women in a gallery space | Daphna Markman Zinemanas

POSTER

- P.72 Using bird’s-eye view for empathy | Nina Luostarinen

social sculpture

Entanglements of social realities may expose or hide the margins of society. One of the key roles of the arts is to elicit dialogue and generate discussion around important societal challenges that often are entangled with, and located at, margins. In his well cited interview of 1976, Joseph Beuys maintained that 'social sculpture' is based on dialogical practices, that he described as 'thinking, speaking and listening with others' (Harlan, 2004, p. 2; Kuspit et al., 1993; Sacks, 2004, p. ix; Thistlewood, 1995). Beuys sought to transform the ways artists would interact with both the wider public and their own audiences. Through these ideas of social sculpture, he would set the trend for a more deliberate strategy for socially-engaged practices as artists began to interact with institutions by way of their artistic methods and approaches (Harlan, 2004). Social sculpture (also re-sculpting or de-sculpting) can be considered to consist of an array or collection of multidimensional actions that shape the arts as a vehicle for social change through dialogue and activism.

Introduction

This conference looks to capture and communicate international, collaborative arts-based research that has been carried out as part of the Art as Social Sculpture Arts as Social Sculpture (AMASS) research project. It also, perhaps, more importantly, aims to create a new set of connections with colleagues and partners who share the values and vision that we hope is clear both in the conference title and through the core question that is central to what we hope to explore:

How can the arts serve as a means to bring people together, from both the mainstream and the margins?

Given the unique position occupied by socially-engaged art and arts-based research, we sought to develop initial ideas and possible directions for the conference by adopting an approach which deliberately foregrounds the creative, the social and the tactile.

Through the production of objects and images, the latent potential of both the AMASS project and the opportunities that occur when openly sharing knowledge and which we experience together in settings such as a conference could be tentatively represented so that latent meaning might be identified and articulated.

As can be seen on the conference website, these images work to harness the power of the visible and the material as distinct objects of knowledge in themselves

and create the means to explore the ambiguities uncovered through dialogue and a process of reflection, analysis and association. Working from the images, responses were generated which attempted to describe and define core themes we think are central to the AMASS project and these become our point of departure for a process of collecting shared and common meaning which became the basis for how we might develop a focus for our conference.

From the suggestions, inferences and inspiration provided by the images, we highlighted the following four key themes which we hope to address over the course of the AMASS conference:

- 1** The power of the non-visible as the unrecognised or unseen connections between people and their communities (both towards the margins, and from the margins).
- 2** Connection between these people and communities can take place in many ways, and these connections are often complex and tangled.
- 3** From certain positions and in certain contexts, the strengths of communities (rather than their challenges or weaknesses) can be overlooked and remain unrecognised. What will be lost and, importantly, what can be gained if such strengths are visualised?

Introduction

4 Challenges may often be difficult (or, at times, impossible) to solve due our proximity to them as some perspectives, often determined by a distance from such challenges, do not enable detailed views.

Taking one (or more) as a point of departure, we received an exciting, varied and creative responses from a broad and diverse community of artists, authors, researchers and community activists whose work illuminates the potential for meaningful impacts when working on the margins.

The submissions to the conference have further inspired a series of open questions which we feel are key for a deeper understanding and development of the power and potential of socially-engaged art and arts-based research with marginalised communities:

How can we understand or even harness the power of invisible, unrecognised or unseen connections between people and communities (at the margins, and from the margins)?

How and in which ways can connections between people and communities take place?

How can we explore and understand the often complex and tangled connections between people?

How can we better understand the strengths of communities and what their sources of strength are?

How can we change or view point and context not to miss how communities gather their strength (rather than identifying challenges or weaknesses)?

What do we lose if we can't see the strengths of communities and what can we gain if we show or visualise these strengths?

How can we overcome our perspectives on challenges that are often approached from a distance and how can we develop our perspectives that enables us to have detailed views on (social) challenges?

We hope to be able to return to some or all of these questions over the time we spend together during the course of our conference. We encourage all participants to offer their own experience and expertise as one lens through which common challenges can be discussed and where marginality can become a space that works to empower, reframe, redefine and activate a community's potential.

Each of our conference themes can be untangled in order to identify further questions and prompts which we hope to be a feature in the dialogue that is developed from, within and between each panel.

Social sphere: Shaping society like an sculpture

Ana María Marqués Ibáñez

Abstract

The notion of social sculpture (Harlan, Rappmann, and Schata, 1984:56-61) was a theory created by Joseph Beuys in the 1970s, based on participatory community projects that would produce a change in society through creative processes. The German artist indicated that everything is art, that every person can be an artist (Berka, 2011:173) and the entirety of the aspects that conform life can be treated creatively (Sacks, Zumdick, 2013). In social sculpture an artistic piece is created that takes place in a social environment, it requires social engagement and the participation of the public for the conclusion of the piece in the creative process. Beuys considered that social sculpture could generate a positive impact of social transformation in its structures and enrich the citizen.

(Thistlewood, 1995: 185)

During his artistic career, Beuys created theories with a social approach and utopian vision. His idea of “plastic theory” (Harlan, Rappmann, and Schata, 1984:102-103) was based on broadening the concept of art and on an artistic process that his development was argued to be social sculpture. The idea of the way in which man can transform himself into a sculptor and model a social system is the basis of his work.

There are numerous ways to approach the broad and enriching legacy based on Beuys’ theories and concepts (Sacks, 2011:90). Beuys’ legacy lives on today and there are artistic notions that link to the ideas expanded art concept (Finney, 2006) that stem from social sculpture such as socially engaged art (Persinger, and Rejaie, 2021. Thompson, 2017), community art (Crehan, 2013), social art practice (Atkinson, Dash, and Dash, 2005), and participatory art practice (Miller, Little, High, 2017. Conrad and Sinner, 2015). A historical overview of social sculpture will be taken and how it has developed into current notions such as socially engaged art, social art practice, and community. By displaying artworks of authors working in these areas, it will be possible to establish a procedure to elaborate an artistic practice with a focus on art education. Finally, it will be presented pieces that can be elaborated in the area of Art Education, as well as the connections that are presented between the idea of social sculpture and its relation with education and the field of pedagogy.

Key words social sculpture, Joseph Beuys, community art, social art practice, socially engaged art, expanded art concept, participatory art practice

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