

# Participatory Arts Initiatives in Europe

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Mobilising the Arts for an Inclusive Digital Transformation

## **Case Studies of Participatory Arts Initiatives in Europe**

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## Executive Summary

This report presents and discusses five case studies of how the arts are currently being used for sensemaking of the digital transformation and how the arts might be leveraged by citizens to express their own voice with regards to their digital futures. We have a particular focus on artistic projects that through various means engage with people who in one way or other are marginalized and/or vulnerable with respect to digital technologies.

The five cases are Daniel G. Andújar with Postcapital Archive (Spain); Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto and UNIDEE Lab 2021 (Italy); Collaborative Learning by Catch, Elsinore Youth Center and artist Jacob Tækker (Denmark); Radiona Citizens' Lab (Croatia); and The Mint and CurrentSea (Italy).

Through the five cases we find that the arts can play a central role in the creation of more diverse, inclusive, and democratic digital futures in a number of interconnected ways. First, our studies show that the arts can facilitate safe spaces for a broad and diverse group of people to engage in and make sense of questions of digital technologies. Second, the arts have the possibility to facilitate recognition and understanding of technological advances through a more understandable language, by artistic practices starting from local communities, and through dialogue. Third, our case studies show that the arts can help build bridges and close/heal fractures by recognizing struggles and acknowledging each other's *cosmovisions* to find common meeting points and agree on the kind of future we would like to imagine and shape together. Fourth, the arts facilitate, support, and develop the use of other kinds of tools so people can express their voices in a critical moment of technical and social change where phenomena such as communication, economy, environment, etc. will face structural modification. Fifth, the arts highlight and demonstrate that we need a broader understanding of skills sets and perspectives in technology development. Specifically, the arts call for a breakdown of the distinction between hard and soft skills and technologies

Finally, the case studies show that facilitating and creating social change through socially engaged and participatory artistic practice is not only or necessarily a question of "long-lasting" projects. Facilitating change and understanding may also be a question of persistently pursuing questions of new digital technology development and adoption through ongoing exploration and development of various approaches, collaborations, and constellations.

We would like to give thanks to all the artist and community organizers that helped us put together this overview.

## Introduction

The continuous development of new digital technologies enables us to create, for instance, better medical treatments, clean(er) energy technologies, and healthier and more efficient work places. New digital technologies have also begun to enable incredible immersive experiences and help us stay connected with loved ones across the world. Some scholars argue that recent developments in blockchain technologies are setting the ground for institutional transformations towards more democratic, inclusive, and redistributive economies (Howson, 2021). Even though these fantastic innovations continue to surprise the world on a daily basis, this rapid transition is also preventing us from keeping up the pace of understanding how these advances impact our lives. Today, in a constantly monitored world, individuals and institutions are adopting new technologies subrogated to a monopoly of few big companies and are vulnerable to possible abuses in handling their data and privacy protection. Therefore, we need to find new mechanisms to be able to comprehend some of the harmful shortcomings of these technological developments (Pedersen, 2016).

In a New York Times article from 2020 Professor Shoshana Zuboff highlights how questions concerning privacy and law in the tech industry were brought to the table already in 1997. People back then were asking themselves where one should draw the line between the interest and privacy of civilians and the business interests of tech giants. Zuboff writes:

The line was never drawn, and the executives got their way. Twenty-three years later the evidence is in. The fruit of that victory was a new economic logic that I call “surveillance capitalism.” Its success depends upon one-way-mirror operations engineered for our ignorance and wrapped in a fog of misdirection, euphemism and mendacity. It rooted and flourished in the new spaces of the internet, once celebrated by surveillance capitalists as ‘the world’s largest ungoverned space.’ But power fills a void, and those once wild spaces are no longer ungoverned. Instead, they are owned and operated by private surveillance capital and governed by its

sometimes abstract issues associated with Digital Transformation and it highlights the important role artists can play as interconnectors in their own communities when facing such challenges. During our fieldwork, we met a certain resistance towards the term Digital Transformation. This resistance generally concerned the way in which this very official term makes digital technologies and digital technology development feel inaccessible to a majority of people. Instead, as noted through our conversations with artists and observed in their artistic practice, many of our respondents preferred to use phrases along the lines of the development of new digital technologies. Asking how the arts can intercede to grasp the development of new digital technologies, we also discuss the ways in which the arts are organized to create long lasting value and social impact.

The five cases presented in this report have been chosen in an ambition to cover a range of approaches implicit to the social practices and socially engaged arts. The cases suggest a wide range of organizing systems for artists’ social practices, with projects addressing different questions related to digital technologies. The cases were also chosen with an ambition to cover different geographical, cultural, and political perspectives of Europe. Data collection took place

through participant observation and a series of 32 semi-structured interviews with artists, creatives and through a snow-sampling approach with respondents taking part in the projects led by the interviewed artists. Primary data collection was supported by secondary data collection in the form of websites, reports, articles, and material that our respondents kindly shared with us.

## Daniel García Andujar

### Introduction: the democratic potential of digital technologies

Many digital technologies contain the capacity to facilitate more democratic and inclusive societies. For instance, by giving voice to a broader spectrum of people (e.g. [megafone.net](http://megafone.net) by Spanish artist Antoni Abad) and giving people who otherwise do not have access to conventional higher educational institutions access to high quality education material (e.g. the international massive open online course platform Coursera). However, more recently there has been an increasing number of critical voices pointing to some of the (democratic) problems associated with widespread digitalization (Flyverbom, 2022; Zuboff, 2020b). An increasingly persistent criticism against the ongoing rollout of digital technologies is evidence that these technologies are often under the control of established power structures and that they are increasingly sophisticated and non-transparent (Pedersen, 2019). While more and more people can add content to the internet, the interpretation and understanding of this content is becoming increasingly difficult due to some of the underlying mechanisms of these digital tools.

While it is one thing to have access to and be able to use digital tools, it is another to be able to navigate and critically analyze the information available. Placing new information and communication tools and the internet and digital networks as extensions of public space, critical voices highlight an urgent need to reclaim freedom in this space that is increasingly under the control of large companies and, in some cases, governments.

Amongst these critical voices are Spanish artist Daniel G. Andújar. Throughout his career, Andujar has explored the ways in which power structures in our physical worlds tend to be replicated in our digital realities. Defining the Digital Transformation as: “the process of transferring every aspect from our physical surroundings into a digital extension of our reality that is also real” (personal communication), Andujar works to create a space of resistance against a world that, in his view, is more and more standardized and more and more under others’ control. Through collaborative research and art projects, his work reconsiders and questions how we can translate, read, and interpret material in an increasingly polluted digital landscape.

In his work, he has paid particular attention to the role of images, pointing out that the visual language is full of capabilities, but it is also a language that is immersed in a battle for control (personal communication). To regain power, it is essential to be able to discover what is behind images by opening the code of the visual framework. Andújar has been exploring how we might do this by adopting and developing socially engaged and participatory artistic practices. In this way, Andújar has been acting as an agent in building and strengthening participative communities, bringing digital injustices and contradictions to light.

### Questioning reality

Andújar is a multimedia artist, who is currently based in Barcelona, with a long career outside the conventional art institutions. His work deals with political and social issues. Especially, he explores the relationship between reality and its representation or simulation in digital worlds. At the heart of his work are issues of power structures in hierarchical social systems and the role of technologies as instruments of (state) control.

According to Andújar, the word “project” is a better description of his work than is “artwork” (personal communication). For Andújar, his work has more to do with the idea than with the actual art object or product. Since starting his artistic practice in the late 1980s, Andújar’s work has also taken a collaborative approach. While the art field is deeply tainted by concepts of “genius” and “authenticity”, he highlights that art throughout time has often been the result of collaborative practices. Reflecting on his own practice, Andújar says:

To me, the best part is to share my process and work with people. I think this approach to my work grows from my practice starting in the 90s, collaboratively working from internet servers as opposed to working with or in classical art institutions. All of these projects were about communicating, sharing, and exchanging - people needing to activate the process to engage with the project. It’s about opening my practice, to share it with everyone. Technology allows and fosters such bidirectional communication. (Personal communication).

Andújar moreover seeks “collective intelligence” (Andújar, 2022), a group intelligence that emerges from collective efforts and collaboration between many individuals. To Andújar, it is essential to foster and be part of communities of people from all kinds of background to create knowledge. Thus, his work also highlights the importance of negotiation of information and knowledge, in both public and digital spaces.

Rather than providing answers to complex questions, artistic practice, for Andújar is more about putting a question on the table and questioning our reality. Eschewing any pretense of an answer, his work aims to encourage and enable people to question their own reality, as a way to facilitate understanding and empowerment: “For me it is very important that people have tools to not be dominated in a world that is increasingly sophisticated and domesticated.” (Personal communication). This focus on empowerment through tools has been at the center of Andújar’s work throughout his career. Reflecting on some of his early work, Andújar says:

In the 90s, we made the *sun advertisement* in public beaches. It was one of my first projects in public beaches. Having done the sun advertisement, I always left the tools that I had been using for other people to use. In this way people could transform what I had created and through this transformation they would criticize, modify, protest, and sometimes even destroy my intervention. I see this as a way of negotiating with people, with the public. It is essential to me that my work is not unidirectional. The technologies with which we surround ourselves do not work in one direction either. You watch and you are being watched at the same time. You consume and you are consumed. You produce something on your mobile and you are a consumer at the same time. (Personal communication).

Empowerment through awareness creation and tools being at the center of his artistic practice, Andújar does also not look for perfection in his collaborative creations. Rather, they are about the process. For Andújar, his practice is about creating works of art in collaboration with others that allow participants and audiences to dig deeper. At first sight, his work is often quite easy to access. But if you take the time to dig deeper, you will find layers and layers of knowledge and discussions related to relations of power in our online and offline public spaces. In *Ways of*

Working, a conversation between researcher and curator Iris Dressler and Andújar, Andújar explains:

I propose creating a true culture of the archive, learning to learn from the context of a wealth of choices—life within the archive, in a knowledge society that gives options and requires us to choose again and again, to learn without limits, to value new opportunities and confront numerous challenges and puzzles; a knowledge society that is unacquainted with genre work, that calls old classifications, control systems, hierarchies, legitimacies, values and so on into doubt. (Dressler and Andújar, n.d.).

### **The power of archiving**

The project *Postcapital Archive (1989-2001)* is illustrative of Andújar's artistic practice. While his work takes many different shapes, his approach is always processual, taking form as open research and art projects. This quality is also characteristic of *Postcapital Archive*, an artwork that is concerned with how western capitalist societies have changed in the absence of Communist Counterparts (Dressler, 2011), while a second layer critically examines processes of archiving, digitalization, and copyright law (personal communication). The project questions the archive as a depository for knowledge production, showing how archives (and knowledge) are always the result of certain selections and interpretations.

Premiering in 2006 with the title *Postcapital: Politics, the City, Money*, the digital archive that the project draws from was created many years earlier, covering the time between the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in 2001. The archive consists of more than 250,000 documents (videos, audio, texts, images, etc.), which were compiled from the Internet, using various search machines and key words.

While few would argue that the two events chosen to bracket the project are important historical events, Andújar seeks to show how the importance of these events is constructed and that their relative importance is the result of alliances between politics and the media (Dressler, 2011). The project makes it clear that the search engines used to create the archive are neither neutral or non-intentional, since there is no neutral technology and no neutral use of it. According to Andújar, it is all important that we discuss choices and power structures related to processes of knowledge creation (personal communication).



Figure 1: Cape Times, November 8<sup>th</sup> 1989. Picture from the Postcapital Archive

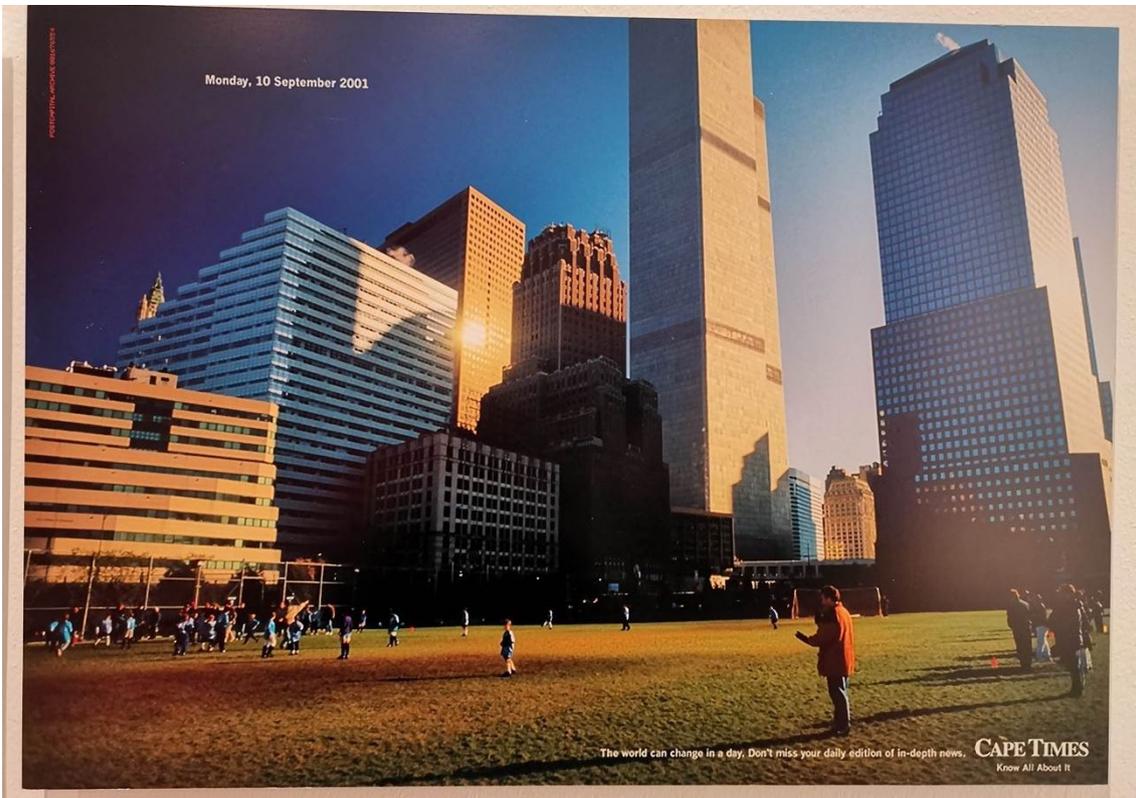


Figure 2: Cape Times, September 10<sup>th</sup> 2001. Picture from the Postcapital Archive

Postcapital Archive has taken many different forms over the years, including workshops, exhibitions, and interventions in public space. Andújar has continuously invited others to organize and archive the collected files with him in an attempt to make collective sense of the vast amounts of information and knowledge. As more people get access to an exponentially expanding body of information, Andújar believes it is of vital importance that we create mechanisms that allow us to transform all of this information into specific knowledge and that these mechanisms have to allow for “a shared knowledge production that uncontrollably runs in many different directions at the same time.” (Dressler, 2011, p. 192). Andujar’s Postcapital Archive in this way puts to light the hidden power of archiving. It makes visible the immense power related to creating categories and frameworks that influence what goes where, shaping our interpretation and understanding of history, culture, people, knowledge – often to be framed as what was right and what was wrong. Postcapital Archive also calls for a celebration of richness and diversity of thoughts and “truths” (personal communication).

Over the years, Postcapital Archive has been exhibited in many places across the world. While the installation has taken ever-changing forms because of constantly changing collaborators and locations, it always starts from the digital archive and employs a modular structure taking the shape of a tower. Placing the tower at the center of the exhibition, with its broken steps, Andújar brings attention to our inability to climb up the steps and take the reins of the discourse. In an interview, he elaborates:

My work is about de-hierarchizing these processes. No one may raise their voice above others’ voices, and so I don’t let anyone do so. This is why I always position the server, the ‘archive’, beneath the tower, as a mechanism for distributing information that works at floor level, feeding the other elements that make up the installation. This is an attempt to indicate that what has held the tower upright for so long is precisely its hidden mechanisms. Let’s learn to use them (Dressler and Andújar, n.d.).

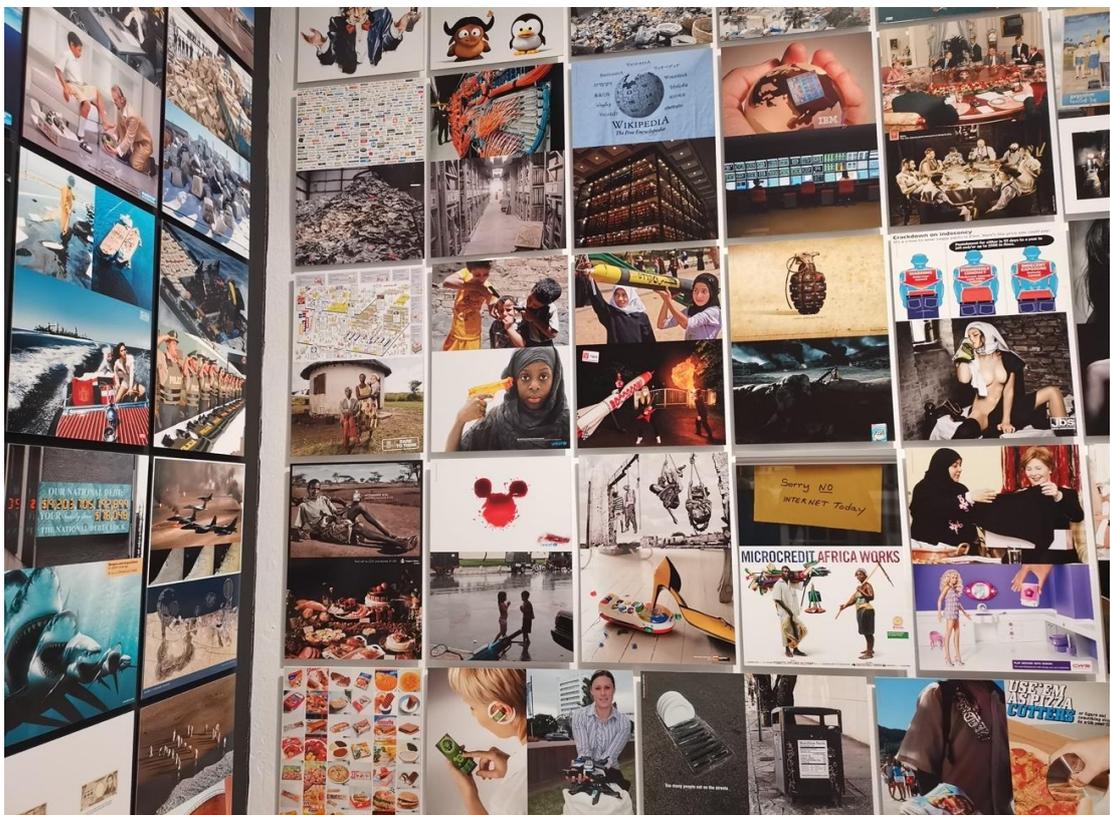
Since 2021 Andújar’s Postcapital Archive has also been part of the permanent collection at Museo Reina Sofia. Entering the installation at Museo Reina Sofia you first meet a large screen playing various video files from the archive. This starts with people jumping the Berlin Wall and ends with the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers. The large box carrying the screen is painted red. Behind the large screen is the tower, symbolically making up the center piece of the installation. On the walls behind the tower are collections of images from the archive.

As an ongoing and ever-changing project, having Postcapital Archive part of the permanent collection at Museo Reina Sofia is a paradox to Andújar, as he states:

So, to me it is quite strange that Postcapital Archive is now part of the permanent collection at Museo Reina Sofia. Throughout the years, this is a piece which has been redesigned every time it moved to a new place. I have created the piece with people working and living locally, adapting the archive to their situation and context. And now, we call it an art piece. Finally. (Personal communication).



*Figure 3: Daniel G. Andújar in Postcapital Archive at Museo Reina Sofía*



*Figure 4: Postcapital Archive at Museo Reina Sofía*

## Spaces of resistance

Andújar's artistic practice has taken different shapes and forms throughout the years, but he continues to use the representation strategies of media in a critical and ironic way, questioning if information and communication technologies really back up their stated commitment to democratic and egalitarian values, while creating spaces of resistance. Through his many projects, he points to the discrepancy between the utopian idea of the Internet as a democratic space, and how it is actually being used, asking what its possibilities are, but also its limitations.

Andújar sees the Internet as an extension of the public space, which forms the basis by which he operates as an artist, reflecting and formulating questions about it. According to Andújar, the public space is a historical constant that is continuously being redefined. Today, public space is very confined and subject to constant pressures. In his view, we need to expand this space: "... and to do so we must be very alert to proceedings directed towards limiting the use and enjoyment of these free spaces." (Dressler and Andújar, n.d.).

As our lives increasingly operate at the intersection of the digital and the physical, Andújar's work highlights the need to enable people to critically navigate and interpret ever increasing amounts of information on the Internet, not least visual information. Reflecting on today's technologies he says:

If it's broken, it's broken, we cannot repair them because inside, they're quite complex. But also, the language and the capacity to understand what is going on inside this machine is quite complex. So normally you say, 'I don't need to understand this. This is just running. This is to make a telephone call.' So, we accept this complexity, sometimes to save ourselves from taking a position. Increasingly our technologies are complexity over complexity, over complexity, and finally, you are very far from the beginning of the code and a fundamental understanding of how to access to modify this and the technology (personal communication).

Facing this reality, Andújar's artistic practice explores how we might critically use (digital) technologies, through the creation of spaces of resistance, and the navigation, interpretation and conversion of massive amounts of knowledge into something that can help us understand our histories, realities, and societies.

## Discussion

The advent of the Internet has given many more people access to information and knowledge. Moreover, the Internet has facilitated a broader spectrum of society to contribute to information and knowledge creation. However, the Internet has also come to be "... owned and operated by private surveillance capital and governed by its iron laws." (Zuboff, 2020a). In full recognition of the potentials of (new) digital technologies, Andújar's collaborative and processual research projects highlight some of the challenges related to their current use, with a particular focus on the underlying power structures controlling current knowledge production. Pointing to the same problems of knowledge creation, Zuboff states:

"Epistemic inequality is not based on what we can earn but rather on what we can learn. It is defined as unequal access to learning imposed by private commercial

mechanisms of information capture, production, analysis and sales. It is best exemplified in the fast-growing abyss between what we know and what is known about us.” (Zuboff, 2020a)

Postcapital Archive is only one of many projects by Andújar exploring the ways in which the historical events recorded in our archives often means very different things “depending upon the respective subjective, political, ideological, societal, and cultural context” (personal communication).

In opposition to the idea of creative work as individualized work, it is possible to see Andújar’s work as an expression of “art as care”, which manifests itself when art facilitates circuits of care for others and care for oneself (Alacovska, 2020). Art may foster community psychology, raise consciousness of community-relevant issues, and plays a pedagogical role in knowledge transfer (Alacovska et al., 2020). Andújar’s work is an example of how artistic practice “cares” in relation to (digital) technologies. He does so by enabling participation in open source and maker communities, acting as an agent in building and strengthening participative communities, bringing digital injustices and contradictions to light.

Andújar’s work can be understood as a central contribution to the growing awareness of the problematic issues related to the Internet, not least questions of power. Along these lines, Zuboff writes:

Anything made by humans can be unmade by humans. Surveillance capitalism is young, barely 20 years in the making, but democracy is old, rooted in generations of hope and contest. Surveillance capitalists are rich and powerful, but they are not invulnerable. They have an Achilles heel: fear. They fear lawmakers who do not fear them. They fear citizens who demand a new road forward as they insist on new answers to old questions: Who will know? Who will decide who knows? Who will decide who decides? Who will write the music, and who will dance? (Zuboff, 2020a)

# **Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto and UNIDEE Lab 2021: Tools and Technologies for Embedded Arts Practice**

## **Introduction**

New types of social practices emerge as social challenges diversify and localize in communities. Developing tools for socially engaged artists and social practitioners has been a challenging task in a field that has evolved empirically and quickly (Helguera, 2011). Embedded Arts practice is an example of an artistic practice where the social artist works collaboratively within their own community. It is an example of the type of bottom-up practice that is deemed necessary to face challenges arising from digital transformation that affect specific groups of people differently. The UNIDEE Tools and Technologies for Embedded Arts Practice Lab (UNIDEE Lab) illustrates how socially engaged artists are organizing themselves and learning how to acquire skills to develop their practices within their own community in order to up-scale the potential positive effects of their work.

The UNIDEE Lab took place during the autumn of 2021 in Cittadellarte – Fondazione Pistoletto in Biella, Italy. The lab aimed to continue and further develop the conversations from 2020's residency: 'Embedded Arts Practice in post-pandemic future' and was guest facilitated by the artist Jeanne van Heeswijk under the curation of Andy Abbott. The residency focused on the different technologies and methodologies that can successfully be applied when working with local communities in difficult contexts such as social restrictions and keeping distance in the course of the Covid pandemic. During the lab, artists from different backgrounds gathered to share their practices within the SEA realm. In this residency, participants were meant to reflect and find mechanisms to disrupt the status-quo and reimagine new societies through social practices such as embedded arts practice and discuss the skills required to build collectively new realities in a society convulsed by the use of digital technologies during pandemic times.

## **Background: Cittadellarte and the UNIDEE Residency Programs**

UNIDEE (University of ideas) started as a residency program more than 20 years ago offering an international program to artists wishing to explore the intersection between different social practices focusing on the collaboration with communities and exchange of learnings in an interdisciplinary setting. UNIDEE is one of the programs from Cittadellarte, founded by Michelangelo Pistoletto in 1994. Cittadellarte is the answer to Mr. Pistoletto's manifesto: "the time has come for artists to take on the responsibility of establishing ties among all other human activities, from economics to politics, science to religion, education to behavior, in a word, among the threads that make up the fabric of society" (Fondazione Pistoletto-Cittadellarte, n.d., p. 2). Cittadellarte is thus an enclave in northern Italy where social networks are created to transform the reality of a society that is in need of closing social ruptures through art and culture. This is how the festival 'Arte al Centro – Art at the Centre' is annually celebrated at Cittadellarte - having the arts as the center for responsible social transformation together with the UNIDEE residency programs. Since 2019 the Accademia UNIDEE offers multidisciplinary courses in design, creativity and social practices as well as a degree in arts for social responsibility.

In words of UNIDEE residency programs' director, the idea behind the UNIDEE programs is "to provide instruments and tools for artists to develop their own practice in their own places to reach a professionalization model, so they can go deeper in a topic they are already researching on". The philosophy of UNIDEE reflects the concept of 'terzo paradiso' engendered by Michelangelo Pistoletto, who proposed the fusion of the first paradise, humans integrated with nature, with the second paradise, which is an artificial paradise developed by us through science and technology. The third paradise is conceived as a balance between nature and the artificial world and where art plays a fundamental role in achieving this stage.

### **Deep dive: The voices from UNIDEE Lab 2021 –Social practice, embedded arts practice and the digital transformation in Europe**

#### **Social engagement, trust the process**

The process of building collective imaginaries offers to redefine the possible ways of engaging and participating within a community. At Cittadellarte, the idea of having the arts as "center" for all human activities leads not only to envision the artist as an active member of the society but also as co-builder of collective future realities. In this collective the artist applies a sense of care in situations where territories or societies are fractured, at the same time as being able to take the arts out from typical scenarios<sup>1</sup> by "creating spaces in which different ways of understanding aesthetics, ethics and making imaginaries can arise" as artist and facilitator Jeanne van Heeswijk remarked during one of our interviews. (van Heeswijk, J., personal communication). In trying to give form and shape to our own futures, the artist as an embedded arts practitioner starts the process within their own community, positioning art in contexts where it was once considered strange and alienated from people:

Art and artists are not a luxury thing, it is not like something that is happening outside of society somewhere, floating, rather, the artist is a valid actor to engage with in different fields and the challenge to be recognized as a valid counterpart in our discussion implies to be engaged to be embedded, to feel yourself as part of something, a part of society and as an artist you can contribute to this society in a different way (UNIDEE residency programs director, personal communication).

The process of re-imagining the future collectively is also understood as a process of "deep listening" where the artist "listens and creates a field of interaction or active field where the artist listens and devises questions" as artist van Heeswijk expressed. The artist thus is required to step into that field of interaction by opening their studio to collective struggles, doing research, making issues open to public discussion, amplifying such struggles and re-knitting relationships while reaching non-traditional art audiences. At a moment in time where the Covid pandemic was making us redefine the ways we interact as society, the question at UNIDEE lab 2021 was how to rethink the process of engaging with people considering the necessity of close interaction when working inside a community but, at the time, social restrictions were mandatory. UNIDEE lab 2021 also responded to the question of how can we make intimate connections through the use of technology, and how can we build trust among equals? These interrogations

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<sup>1</sup> Relate to The Social and Civic Impact of the Arts (Andersen et al., 2020)

are important in social practices such as embedded arts practice and socially engaged arts where a redefined maieutic method takes place in close dialogues between people to advance in a common process of re-building communities.

Asking questions is a crucial aspect of the process of engaging and interacting with communities. The use of science fiction narratives for example, where an imagined post-capitalist world emerges, has been proposed by artist and visiting research curator of the UNIDEE programs, Andy Abbott. Abbott has used gaming to envision a virtual space located in a post-capitalist city and a post-work society to ask participants questions aligned with reflecting on alternative futures<sup>2</sup>. Questions such as “What would you do with your time if you did not have to engage in work you do not want to do and were replaced by robots who can do it better?” spark the process of reconsidering the future we want in which technology is increasingly integrated into every aspect of our daily lives. A digitalized future could bring benefits such as recovering the most valuable resource we have, our time, but at the same time could carry disastrous consequences such as the loss of jobs to robots whom have competences superior to our human ones.

### **The role of the artist as social practitioner in a digital era**

With a need for different imaginaries on how a digital future could look, artists occupied in the social practices have the potential to redirect the process of visualizing a different world where technology retains a human factor. As curator, artist and facilitator Andy Abbott mentioned during one of our interviews: “I think the arts can create conditions for change in such places by offering aesthetic experiences, but also sort of different ways of imagining those places and creating alternative infrastructures for people”. Artists doing social practice focusing on the rapid digitalization in Europe can help to repurpose digital spaces and tools to create genuine social interactions and disrupt the current injustices happening online. Through embedded arts practice, for example, artists may engage with long-term projects dealing with very specific topics and at local levels to bring an artistic way of thinking and link it to urgent matters for society:

I think artists open dialogues. We don't think in a linear straight way, we go more in a zigzag or parallel ways. So we bring this idea...this way of making, this way of thinking in relation to other areas of society, from politics to agriculture or economy, it just produces new things. New ways of doing things, which can work more equal, fairer, more open and sharper. (UNIDEE program director, personal communication).

However, there is a general feeling that great responsibility is assigned to artists as solvers of societal problems that were not created by them. Extra burdens such as having to make income while solving issues they did not produce leads to a sense of precariousness in the social practices. As one of the interviewed artist commented: “We have to do the work but nobody recognize us as workers...” (personal communication). There seems to be a consensus among social practitioners that on certain occasions the public sector wants to transfer the burden of redirecting the harmful effects of events such as digital transformation in, for example, artistic based projects. We found this discrepancy of relevant importance, since art and artists are not only

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<sup>2</sup> See Lutopia (2018): <http://www.yvonnecarmichael.com/andyabbott.co.uk/files/Lutopia.html>

members of the same society that is daily influenced by the technological advances of digital transformation, but at the same time they are also positioning themselves and being positioned for correcting the shortcomings of technology while remaining heavily underfunded. It is therefore perhaps imperious to identify the actors of digital transformation in order to assign responsibilities in a more symmetrical way

We remove the responsibility from those who should be taking care of these issues. If artists are going to fill those gaps, what responsibility is taken by those who created the gaps? (UNIDEE program director, personal communication).

### **The diversity of social practices**

It is problematic to categorize the diversity of arts-based practices addressing social issues that usually belong to fields such as social work, psychology and sociology. In general, fundamental to all social practices is "to think through ways in which we can engage creative processes in the making of spaces, places and relationships" as Jeanne van Heeswijk observed during our interviews. The diversity of cases presented in this report display a variety of processes under an umbrella that allows the coexistence of different kind of practices linked by the art of building bridges between people and raising awareness. When discussing about the essence of embedded arts practice, the director of UNIDEE's residency program mentioned:

I think this is a collective process; it's an engagement process with a community, a group of people. So it's not an idea coming from the artist alone making something that he thinks is good or is crafty or is interesting or is nice. It's stepping aside of the individual work in going towards a collective discussion, a collective way of creating... it is difficult to be embedded if you are not part of that society (UNIDEE program director, personal communication).

The breadth and flexibility of social practice as an umbrella for a diversity of engagement building arts-based practices allows artists to interact and address social issues from different perspectives. In other words, it would be problematic to define social practice in such a way that diverse methods fall outside a closed categorization, and this is particularly relevant for diverse interaction processes. As Pablo Helguera illustrates in his work: "Social interaction occupies a central an inextricable part of any socially engaged artwork" (Helguera, 2011, pp. 8). Following this premise, arts practices that work with social interaction are a potential tool for making sense of our current times, where human relations are being increasingly mediated by digital tools. It is through community interactions where we can perhaps find answers to how we might reimagine a world that is increasingly dependent on digital tools, and how we can not only adapt to such changes but also influence them to become more democratic and inclusive.

### **Closing fractures through social practice and the skills required**

Previous research conducted during Artsformation offers evidence of how, through artistic processes, people are able to turn their attention to problematic issues by a binding effect of the arts as pharmakon and alleviate their pain not just as individuals but as community (Alacovska et al. 2020). In contexts such as the digital transformation, where change is a daily occurrence, fractures are also beginning to arise and art stands as a mechanism to heal the malevolent effects of a phenomenon that seems to advance frenetically and affect almost every level of our

society. In striving to a collective ideation of how the digital transformation should occur, artists like Jeanne van Heeswijk consider that “people are being left out in how their daily environment is being formed, shaped and governed... they no longer feel to have any agency in this”. Perhaps, when we talk about closing fractures we should possibly start from identifying the gaps produced by the implementation of policies that seek for a rapid digitalization across Europe. In this endeavor, we could eventually find that many do not feel part of, do not want to be part of, or cannot be part of the plans for highly digitalized Europe. A multicultural society such as the European one, requires an integrative process to breed trust in a future capable to deliver well-being for the people, but is still looked suspiciously by many. Therefore, it is necessary to restore the sense of agency to people so that they do not feel deprived of the power to decide on their future, as van Heeswijk explained during our talk: “I think there is something profoundly reassuring when people come together to think and unpack not only their relations to themselves but to the world”

In the task of closing the possible fractures generated by a frenetic digitalization, artists working in socially engaged projects are able to create networks and provide infrastructures and conditions to envisage different paths for a digital future in Europe. The healing potential of arts care, i.e. as a form of self-care and care for the others (Alacovska et al., 2020) turns out to play a decisive role in the struggle for a more humane digital transformation. The caring approach, as mentioned by some of the UNIDEE 2021 lab participants, entails opening to each other, considering that we will have to negotiate and navigate in contexts where tensions could emerge when dealing with a multiplicity of stakeholders. In the process of working towards a collective designing of our future, social practice provides spaces for the negotiation of problems that may not have an immediate solution. In Andy Abbott’s words “we don't need to have a linear idea where we are heading with it” enlightening that the process is more important than the possible results and it can change or will need to adapt in order to shape a future that is still uncertain.

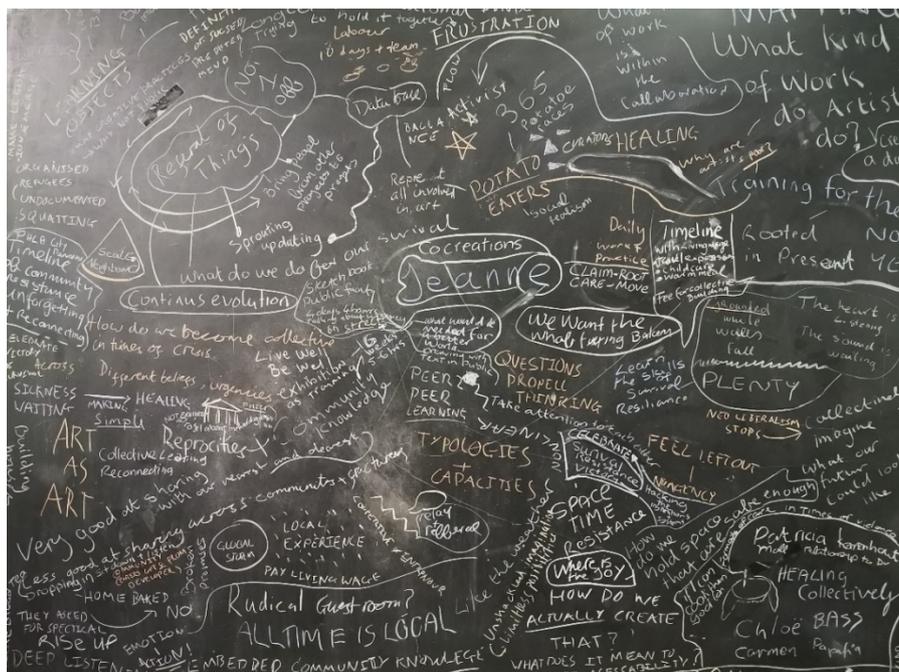


Figure 5: Notes ‘harvested’ by the UNIDEE Lab participants of Jeanne van Heeswijk’s presentation

## Re-imagining the digital future in Europe

What started out as a promise to make a more democratic and inclusive world with the help of digital tools is now turning into a question of how to digitally develop without creating the same dynamics of displacement experienced in previous technical revolutions. To some artists taking part in the UNIDEE lab 2021, the idea of a digital transformation seems to be more rooted to a late stage of capitalism, with the artists particularly concerned with issues such as big-tech companies benefiting from exploiting the personal data of their users - even among people who are well-informed about new technologies and who have the skills to navigate online tools in the web 3.0 era. The panorama may seem a bit overwhelming, as the director of the UNIDEE residency program commented when asked about how the arts and artists can contribute to make sense of rapid digitalization happening in our society:

We are now overwhelmed by this, because this happened very roughly and very silent at the same time. It's not materialized...It's just there but we can't actually see it. I don't know, I don't have an answer because it's a tool that we are using, but at the same time we are more or less forced to do so... it's very complicated, I think now we are even on that phase where you are in the middle of a wave and you can't see the next one coming. (Personal communication).

Conversely, the promising outcomes of a reimagined digital transformation motivate the continuation of a process of "training for the not-yet" as Jeanne van Heeswijk refers to in her practice. The need to reflect on digital spaces as public spaces and how we then want to use the digital world from a societal perspective can inspire projects pursuing collective imaginations. The digital transformation is thus a challenge in itself when we think about building it better for the future generations

The digital transformation that has been happening in the last two years is not really a problem. It is actually an opportunity. Artist working with artificial intelligence for example, have the opportunity to question their own practice and evaluate how it fits in the digital transformation, not only by using new technologies but also challenging them at the same time... highlighting both the positive and negative aspects surrounding the new technologies available and applicable to the arts in general and the artistic social practices in specific. (Director of Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto, personal communication).

In the current circumstance, there is a need to re-appropriate virtual spaces by seeing the digital transformation as a space where artists and citizens can develop their creativity and generate long-term relationships to face long-term struggles such as those brought by the digital transformation. Eventual change in narratives have the potential to strengthen social networks that are already trying to contribute to a more inclusive digital transformation through social practice. Over time, an increasing interest in exploring issues derived from the digitalization process has the potential to function as an attentional call for institutions and other funders to go deeper into such topics. Trying to introduce tools such as deep listening, drawing and storytelling in those virtual spaces could open the doors to start an era where technology is intertwined with human nature in a state of harmony, following the idea of Mr. Pistoletto's Terzo Paradiso mentioned above.



*Figure 6: Imagining alternative futures as clusters to link – UNIDEE Lab 2021*

## Discussion

The ideal of achieving the ‘terzo paradiso’, a balance between the artificial paradise, the one created by humanity and his inventiveness, and the natural state is the guiding ethos in Cittadellarte. UNIDEE labs and residencies, are spaces where participants with different backgrounds come together seeking to advance tools that allow an evolution in the education for facilitating social practices applied to all human activities. The UNIDEE lab in Cittadellarte is positioned as a self-reflective experience that allows both artists, curators, researchers and citizens to embark on the same journey through a collective and democratic experience (also called Demopraxis in Cittadellarte) where they learn through the process of community building. Questions like what kind of community do we aspire to have in a digital world? are inspirational to establish interpersonal relationships that seek to transcend the limits of time (and even of space through the same technology), to imagine new realities and perhaps disrupt the status quo, towards a more inclusive digital transformation.

At UNIDEE we have seen the importance and value given to social processes; we observed that these are not necessarily linear; and they can take various forms under the same umbrella of social practice. The residencies of UNIDEE provide an aesthetic and artistic experience for communities working with artists with the aim of raising their voices and retaining agency over their own futures. Although we are all part of a transformation that never ceases to amaze us, the potential of social practice, socially engaged arts and embedded arts practice allows us to imagine new alternatives that resemble the ‘terzo paradiso’. These practices offer hope for a world with less fractures and where there is room for a consensus to move towards a future without demonizing new technologies and instead openness to take advantage of them for a general welfare.

## **CATCH – COLLABORATIVE LEARNING**

### **Introduction: the digital skills gap**

The data of the EU's recent Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) report 2022 finds that although 87% of people (aged 16-74) used the internet regularly in 2021, "only 54% possessed at least basic digital skills." (EU, 2022, p. 14). The DESI study highlights the risk of falling behind, should one not acquire the digital skills needed to navigate the digital technologies becoming a component of daily life and participation in society (EU, 2022). Amongst many challenges, the report also points to the continued critical gender imbalance in the tech industry, with only 19% of ICT specialists and one in three science, engineering and/or mathematics graduates being women. While DESI 2022 finds that EU Member States have made progress in their digitalization efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, it also seems that we live in a world where the divide between those who know something about technology and those who do not is getting bigger and bigger (Catch, 2021).

To equip young people for the present and near future, there is an urgent need to work with their awareness of technology and rights in a society that is largely based on increased digitalization (Catch, 2021). This concerns both their private use of digital tools, but also in terms of preparing them for the job market. This further goes hand in hand with the evidence of a lack of digital skill sets amongst small and middle-sized businesses (EU, 2022), which means that having such skills will not only be a strength for the individual when seeking jobs, but also something that can strengthen the many small and middle sized European business currently not harvesting the benefits of digitalization.

In a recent report, EIT Digital highlights that: "The entire European public education system, from primary schools up to universities, needs to urgently modernize the largely outdated digital education programs" (2022, p. 6). The report calls for reforms of curricula to make them more responsive to changing technologies and labor markets (2022). Our fieldwork supports the call for reform, but also points to the need for a reform of the overall approach to teaching digital skills, indicating that the arts have important roles to play in educating future digital skills.

### **Collaborative Learning**

Collaborative Learning was a nine-week educational program that aimed to increase young people's knowledge about technology and creativity as a way towards further education and/or employment. Developed by Program Director Majken Overgaard at Catch, Center for Art, Design and Technology, Head of Elsinore Youth Center, Jens Volby, and artist Jacob Tækker, the program was a result of Overgaard and Volby getting together to explore opportunities to create an educational program that could bring into play the expertise and approach of Catch in relation to the young people with whom the Youth Center works.

Catch is an Art, Design and Technology Center based in Elsinore. Funded by Elsinore municipality, Overgaard also actively seeks additional sources of funding and collaborations for projects within the area of creative education and innovation. Running many projects with higher educational institutions in the region and abroad, Overgaard emphasizes the importance of doing projects with local educational institutions. Often working with local high schools, in the case

of Collaborative Learning, Catch approached the Youth Center to develop an educational program targeting young people who for one reason or other experience challenges in adapting to the traditional educational system and/or occupation. Catch is grounded in a hands-on approach to learning. This means that many of their programs have a physical output, they encourage their students to prototype and develop their own works (personal communication).

Volby has many years of experience working with what we might think of as vulnerable and/or marginalized groups of people. As the Head of the Elsinore Youth Center, he is continuously looking for ways to draw out and strengthen the skills, human capabilities and sensibility of young people who experience difficulties in the dominant educational system and/or job market. Having previously worked with young people and having run various workshops with Catch, artist Jacob Tækker was brought onboard to co-develop the program and activities.

The program took place just as the Youth Center had moved into its new location in an old school in the center of Elsinore. Conscious of the curatorial power of space and the importance of inviting others into the process of curating and creating a shared space at the new facility, Volby saw this as a unique opportunity to co-create the space with the young people with whom the youth center works. It was important to make them feel at home and take ownership of the space. Volby believes that if the young people with whom the Youth Center works feel safe and at home when being in the Youth Center, it will also be a better starting point for working with them and getting them ready for further education and/or the job market. Volby emphasizes his and the Elsinore municipality's shared ambition to break down the traditional walls between the municipality and its inhabitants, seeing the municipality as an interactive platform and a facilitator rather than a decision maker. Thus, it was important to the municipality and the Youth Center that the latter's new premises became an interactive space.

With a political ambition of making the Youth Center an interactive space, Volby and Overgaard saw this as a valuable starting point to create a course that could potentially become meaningful at numerous levels and for a wide range of stakeholders. Bringing artist Jacob Tækker into the equation helped translate the direct goals of the program to deliver skills to participants and have them involved in designing the interior to the reception area, and to foster new ways of thinking and approaching challenges and opportunities more broadly.

### **Digital skills through creative practice**

The Collaborative Learning program ran from October 2021 to January 2022, closing with a vernissage at the Elsinore Youth Center in February 2022. During this period, Tækker arranged learning sessions with a group of ten young people twice a week across nine weeks to create interior and artworks for the reception area at the new Youth Center. Thus, the young people taking part in the program were exploring and learning new creative and digital skills while creating interior and artwork for the Youth Center's reception area, and through this also making the space their own.

The program participants were aged between 18 years and their early 20s. For different reasons, the participants had fallen out of the educational system and job market and received financial benefits from the municipality. To receive benefits from the municipality, they were required to take part in some of the educational activities offered by the Youth Center. Offering

various forms of scaffolding and educational activities, the Youth Center aims to empower the young people with whom they work to pursue further education and/or find employment. This means that while the participants in Collaborative Learning had freely chosen to attend this specific program, they were also obliged to follow educational activities to receive their financial benefits. The program participants were comprised of young people who in different ways face challenges in their everyday life, from getting out of bed in the morning to finding social situations and adapting to educational settings challenging. However, the staff at the Youth Center curated the group, focusing on offering the program to young people who possess unique human, creative, and technical skills. Collaborative Learning starts from a belief that these skills can be brought to life and further developed given the right environment.

Starting from a hands-on approach to learning, the course spanned different creative approaches, cutting across the digital and the physical. For instance, it included poetry writing and drawing, working with digital tools such as 3D design, building prototypes, and working with big machines such as laser cutters and CNC machines. This diversity in creative approaches gave the participants an opportunity to both feel familiar with and be challenged by different activities. The digital tends to inspire people who like to spend time on computers (e.g., gamers who feel at home in this media). But the program also attracted people who find larger production machines exciting, as well as those who simply like to be creative. Reflecting on the program Overgaard says: "While such diversity can be hard to manage it has been extremely interesting to bring these different skills together and make them work together and contribute to each other's work. They have helped each other. They know who is good at what. This is interesting both in terms of understanding own qualifications and skills and learning to be part of a community and collaborative project." (Personal communication). In addition to practical skills, the program aims to create space for and nurture human and social skills - while also fostering creativity, constructive critical thinking and being able to give voice to this thinking.

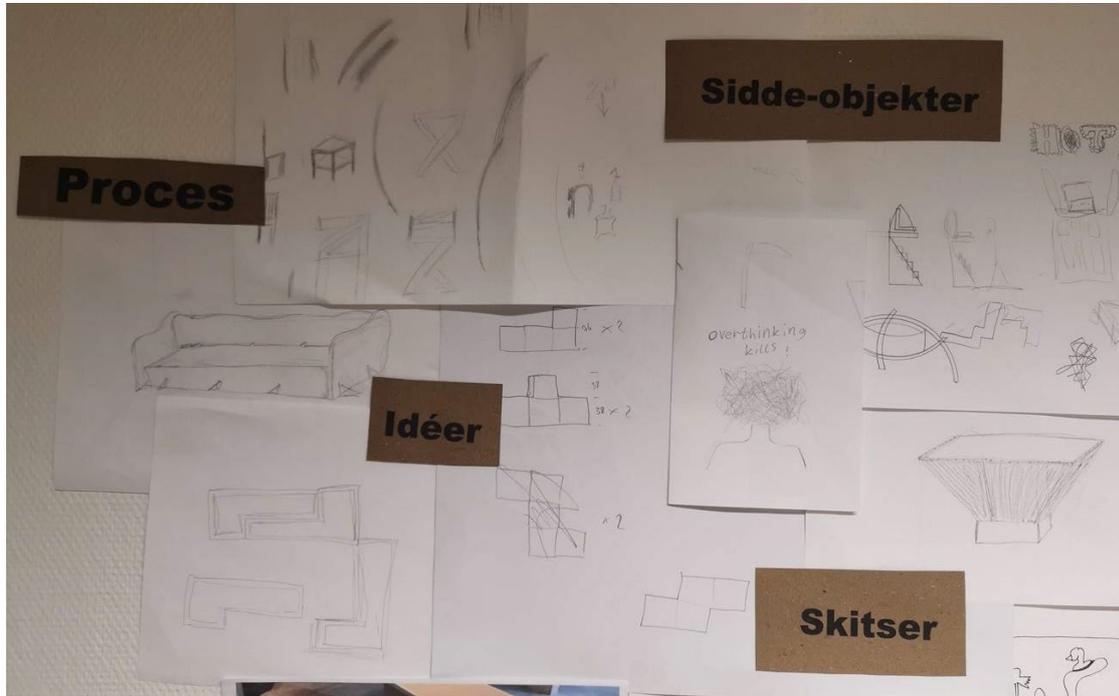
To foster creativity, Tækker found it important to talk about creating the interior, including the artwork and sitting objects for the Youth Center's reception area. In Tækker's words:

I purposely try to avoid saying the word furniture too many times. I try to talk about sitting objects. If you start talking about furniture or a chair, then you have a clear idea about what a chair looks like and then you start drawing that. If you tell people to not think of an elephant, they start thinking of an elephant. So, I try to avoid talking about furniture. We don't want to create furniture. We want to create objects that people can stay and sit on. I believe this to be a slightly different starting point from telling them that we are to create chairs and tables (personal communication).

Guiding the participants through the creative process and rethinking the reception area, it was important to Tækker to frame the process as an artistic investigation and experiment rather than being solution oriented. He explains: "Being an artist, I do things maybe in a somewhat different way. I would rather make a failed experiment than a safe solution."

Throughout the course, he encouraged participants to think differently and creatively about the Youth Center's reception area by asking questions such as: How might one change a room? What does it mean to you to arrive at the Youth Center? Participants conducted interviews with

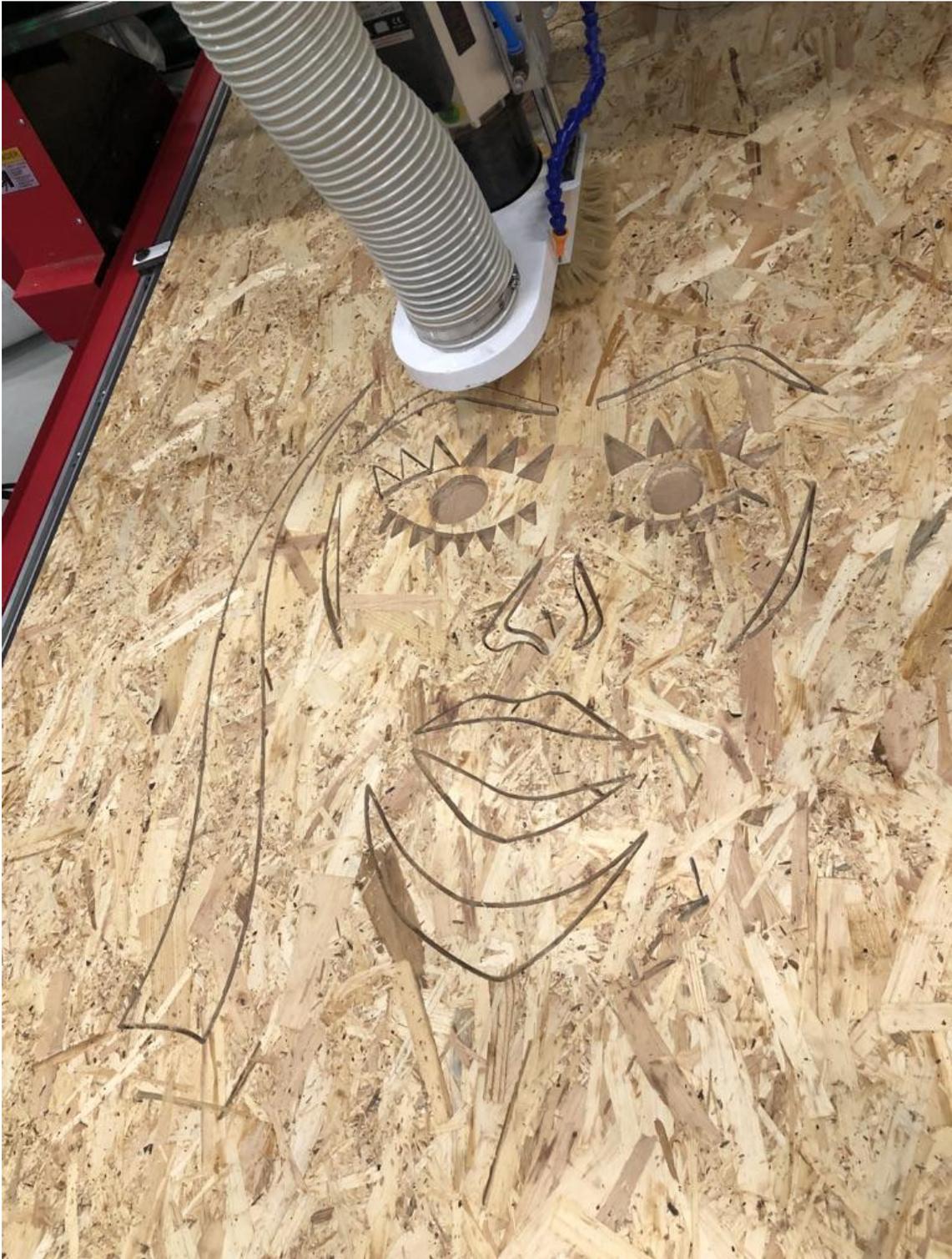
people working in the reception to build on their many conversations about what it means to them to have to go to this place in order to be entitled to their benefits. These conversations were followed by iterations of ideation that resulted from exploring the challenges and opportunities identified, prototyping, and producing.



**Figure 7:** The process - developing ideas



**Figure 8:** Prototyping. Photo by Jacob Tækker



**Figure 9:** Laser cutting. Photo by Jacob Tækker



*Figure 10: Sitting objects in development. Photo by Jacob Tækker*

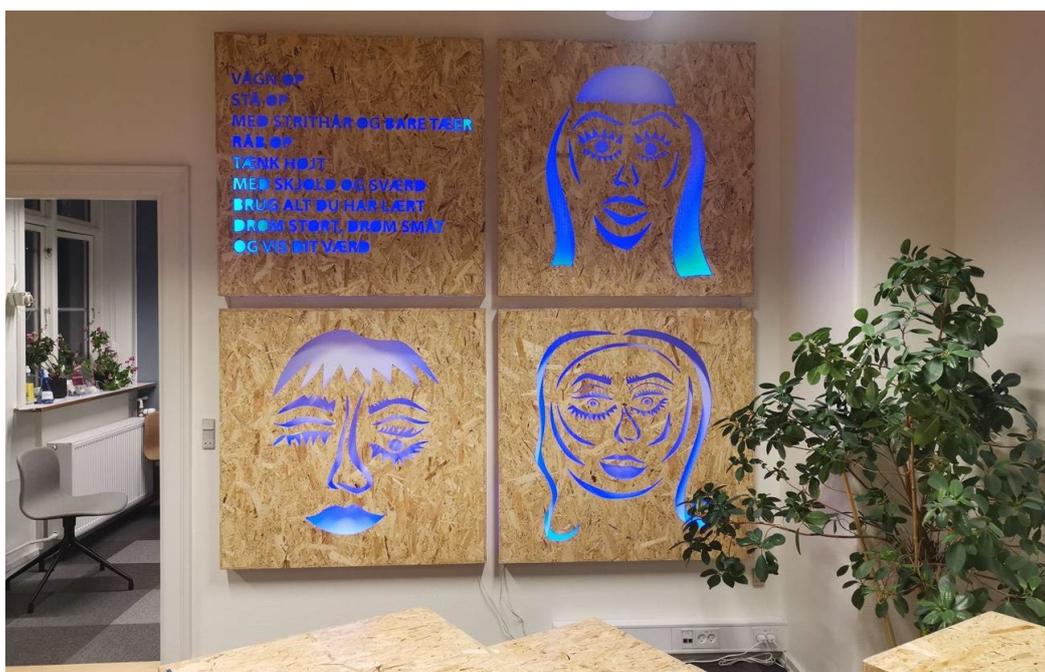
### **Gaining confidence through creative practice**

While Collaborative Learning was designed to give concrete technical skills, the course creators stated that a nine-weeks course is only enough to give a taste and introduction to some of these skills. However, Tækker believes that engaging the participants in the co-creative process that

the program is built on results in both primary and secondary learning. The program offered primary learning via concrete skills connected to using, for example, a 3D design program or a laser cutter. The secondary and perhaps more important learning was an understanding of how to work together and how to think differently about challenges and opportunities, to be willing to experiment and explore. This gave a strong foundation to continue exploring and building skills.

Tækker acknowledges that the collective process was not always easy. For instance, it was challenging to make communal decisions when some participants were missing. At times he had to make decisions which he had imagined being made as a collective. In spite of such challenges, Overgaard and Volby highlight the role of the artistic and creative process as a way of empowering the young people, realizing, and acknowledging their own creative potential. Collaborative Learning finished with a vernissage at the Youth Center. The invitation to the event was shared through the partners' social media and by the participants themselves. In addition to the participants' friends and family, local politicians and creatives also attended the event.

For some of the young people participating in the program, being at a public event like the vernissage was a victory. Being able to invite family and friends and share their creations was important. One of the participants agreed to briefly present the joint work, specifically the art piece she had been working on, which is now on the wall in the reception area. Speaking in front of everyone, the young woman showed a new pride and self-confidence. Participants generally agreed that through the project they realized they had something to add to the creative process. The program highlighted that the participants possess important knowledge and skills but can also learn something new, given the right circumstances. In this sense, while Collaborative Learning offered concrete insights into the creative process and using various digital tools, arguably the most valuable learning was the program's ability to foster curiosity, critical thinking and self-confidence in the participants.



**Figure 11:** Artwork in the reception area.

### **Discussion: Art makes a difference**

While Collaborative Learning was a short program in the lives of ten young people, it exemplifies how art can foster social change. In the words of Tækker: “Art is not just whipped cream on top. It is much more foundational. I believe there is a need for history and storytelling. I believe that art contributes to that. When I’m working with the participants, I can tell it makes a difference.” (Personal communication). In her defense of useful art, artist Caroline Sindors (2020) highlights how art allows for confrontation, exploration and systemic problem solving. She writes:

Artistic approaches to problems allow for collaborations that might not happen in other fields, and in this way art’s role in social justice and human rights projects ‘makes space’ for new kinds of work in a way that other fields traditionally could not let those projects exist.

In the case of Collaborative Learning, the artistic approach was drawn upon as a way to give participants certain skills or capabilities (Alacovska et al., 2020). While introducing capabilities in the form of digital technology and creative skills, the program was also established to give participants opportunities for working together, for learning from each other and to induce critically important feelings of self-confidence among participants. In appreciation of the importance of human sensitivity and sensibility – also for job market success - Collaborative Learning worked to diminish the distinction between what is often understood as hard and soft skills, believing that they are *all* essential skills.

Collaborative Learning delivered value to the local and broader society. While such a program cannot single-handedly secure and prepare this group of young people for further education and the job market, it is a step towards these goals for the young people in question, just as it is a step forward in terms of our understanding of how to develop educational programs that are more inclusive and in respect of human creativity and capacity. In this way the program delivered value across a network that consisted of individual participants, Catch, the Youth Center and the municipality in terms of our understanding of how the arts can play a role in the creation of more just, inclusive, and caring (digital) futures (Sindors, 2020).

# RADIONA

## **Introduction: representation matters**

Recent years have shown increased attention to the lack of representation and inclusivity in technology development (Andersen et al., 2021; Bastian, 2021; EU, 2022; Marcus, 2015). For example, the importance of representation becomes clear in the well documented biases of numerous digital tools. Artificial Intelligence (AI), an area of computer science that enables computers to perform tasks that have traditionally required human intelligence, can offer incredibly powerful innovation, just as it can be prone to human-originated programming or data bias. In the words of Bastian (2021): “When the right perspectives, identities and experiences don’t go into building, training and testing AI, the outputs can range from embarrassing to life-threatening.”

The role of education in the development of our digital futures has been a recurring topic in our fieldwork for these case studies. Creative computing Artist and educator Jazmin Morris highlights the need not only for formal education, but also informal education, arguing that it is all important to create safe spaces for people to explore, question, and learn about digital technologies (Morris, 2021). Lack of appropriate representation for certain social groups is not “only” a question of education, but also a question of dominant cultures in the tech industry (Marcus, 2015). Nevertheless, we see a persistent call for safe spaces to imagine, discuss, reflect, explore and be critical in the belief that this will also help change cultures and ultimately address some of the representation issues and biases in technology.

## **Radiona**

Radiona is an association for the development of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) and Do-It-With Others (DIWO) cultures located in the city of Zagreb, Croatia. Established as a Makerspace in 2011, Radiona grew out of the maker culture to include a media lab, artists in residency program, repair café, and maker space. Today, Deborah Hustić, Co-founder and Project Manager (PM) of Radiona, prefers to call Radiona ‘a Citizens’ Lab’: “Radiona is about the citizens. It’s about people creating for people. They can use the space to create whatever they feel like. They can also work with us, if they feel like it” (personal communication).

Hustić has a background in arts and humanities. This influences her approach to technology. Moving at the intersection of genres, Hustić holds a strong belief in the value of interdisciplinary collaboration, not least in the development of new technologies: “... when you have more experience, you have a broader understanding of what is necessary in what area.”( personal communication). In addition to her role as Co-founder and PM of Radiona, Hustić develops educational programs within the framework of Radiona and has her own artistic practice.

## **A human interface**

From its very beginning, the team behind Radiona has worked to create a space for interdisciplinary, explorative, and critical collaboration, specifically connecting the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics (STEAM). Bringing disciplines together is one thing, making them appreciate the value of each other’s skills is another. Radiona is well aware that

managers, the technology-oriented, artists, etc., all speak different languages. Often, there are big gaps between these professions. According to Hustić:

It's really important to have comprehension of each area. You don't need complete understanding. But it's not enough to scratch the surface. Trying in these areas, even to be unsuccessful a little bit. This is something that gives you a perspective of having respect for someone else for doing something in which you have failed. Maybe you don't have the skill, but you understand – wow – it takes skills to do exactly that job." (Personal communication).

Radiona insists on being a place that is both open to and thrives from diverse and open-minded communities and conversations. It also insists on being a space of discussion and reflection. To facilitate such organization, Radiona has developed a [code of conduct](#), which remains at the heart of the organization, underlining and making explicit that it is a place where everyone is welcome and can feel safe. For instance, Radiona's code of conduct spells out that:

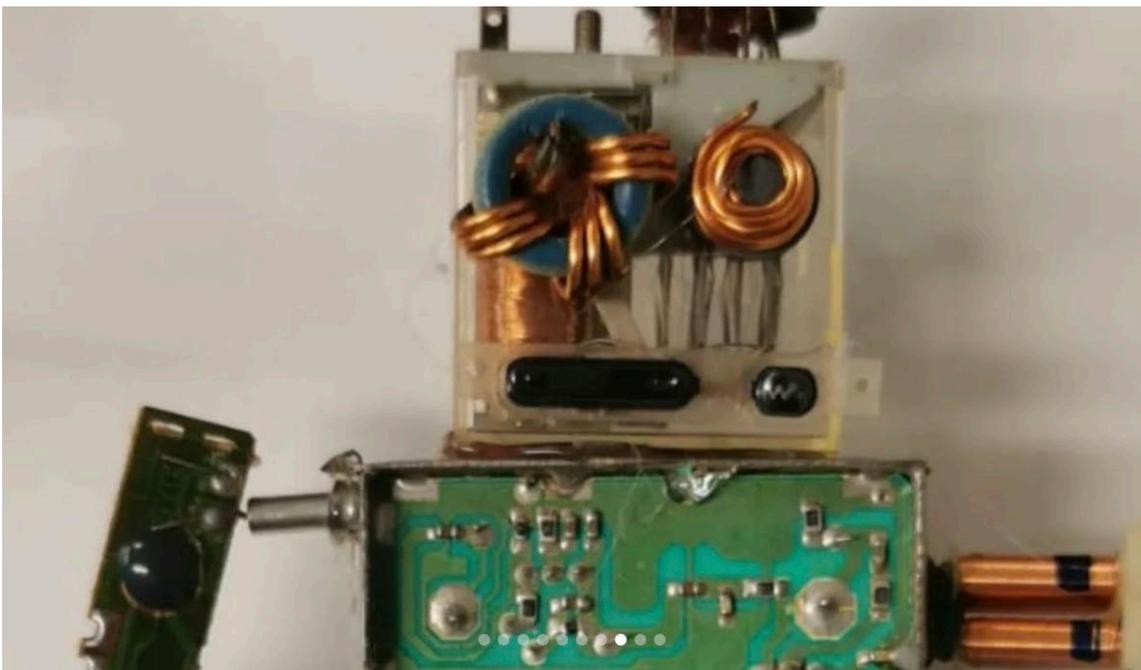
- Our lab is a safe and welcoming place for everyone, regardless of gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, body size, age, race, nationality, ethnic minority, subculture, geographical region, knowledge, marital status, family status, social status or religion (or lack thereof), or technology choices.
- We expect everyone to maintain an environment of mutual respect, tolerance, encouragement and friendliness. Be nice to each other. Do not insult or act in a derogatory manner towards anyone else. (Radiona, Code of Conduct)

In line with the Code of Conduct, Radiona insists on approaching questions of technologies and technology development from multiple angles and in more or less outspoken ways. This enables the organization to attract an audience and community that is markedly different from that of most European makerspaces. Radiona's acute sensitivity to diversity and inclusivity marks how the community designs and hosts activities. For instance, writing a call for workshop participation on the future of cities, Hustić advises to not use the term 'smart city': "Smart City means another type of workshop. I would really recommend that we remove 'smart' from the title. ... only engineers will come to that workshop, and it should last longer than one day, because then we have a hardware workshop for tech geeks." (Personal communication). This does not mean that Radiona would not host a smart city workshop, but it shows acute awareness of language use.

Hustić is often asked how she has managed to create such diverse community. She replies: "It's because we're different. The three of us at the heart of the organization, setting the direction, we're all completely different." (Personal communication). Thus, while the topics explored by Radiona differ in nature and approach, questions of representation and inclusivity in technologies run through all activities in more or less explicit ways. Bringing people into the same room to work on different projects, together, Radiona continuously works to create a *human interface* to bridge different approaches and perspectives.



**Figure 12:** Two-day workshop on retro robot making (2022). Photo by Radiona (<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cjna2Y0sGiG/?hl=en>)



**Figure 13:** Two-day workshop on retro robot making (2022). Photo by Radiona (<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cjna2Y0sGiG/?hl=en>)

### Demystifying technologies

Radiona runs different interdisciplinary art and technology activities both inside and outside of its workshop in Zagreb. All activities occur between genres and typically employ new media and technology practices in line with DIY and DIWO. Hustić explains: “The activities that we do, sometimes they are more artsy, sometimes more techy, sometimes more on the topic of inclusion,

sometimes more nature oriented.”(Personal communication). In this way, Radiona positions itself as a cultural space that also deals with technology. Radiona runs and hosts everything from sewing workshops, to robot building and music creation, to mention but a few. While some workshops are developed by Radiona’s community members, others are developed by guests and artists in residence.



**Figure 14:** Workshop on capturing and analyzing biological samples (2022). Photo by Radiona ([https://www.instagram.com/p/Ciu0cx4s\\_rM/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/p/Ciu0cx4s_rM/?hl=en))

Electronic Wonderland is illustrative of Radiona’s activities and approach to creating long lasting impact. Founded in 2019 and organized by Radiona since then, Electric Wonderland is a week-long international maker/hacker camp in Croatia (Radiona). It was originally developed within the Creative Europe project Feral Labs (2018-2020), in which Radiona was a partner. Ending in 2020, Feral Labs continues via the project Rewilding Cultures (2020-2025) and Electric Wonderland has also become a key activity in this new project. Electric Wonderland combines art, technology, culture and science with DIY, DIWO (do-it-with-others) and DITO (do-it-together) cultures (Ferreira, 2022). Speaking to the aims of the camp in an interview with Pejić (Makery Media for Labs), Hustić says: “We want to lose ourselves in the idea of co-creation and creative re-thinking of technology, science and art combined with nature. Electric Wonderland is a very bucolic, pastoral comprehension of innovation, DIY/DIWO community combined with nature and biodiversity.” (Pejić, 2019).

Domestic and international guests are invited to collaborate, teach or do a residency during the camp. However, participants in the Electric Wonderland camp are also actively invited to take part in leading workshops, facilitating OFF the Grid labs, guiding field and hiking trips, or coming up with ideas for what they think other camp participants might find interesting. Additional activities include presentations, public small talks around the campfire, sound performances and night sky watching (Ferreira, 2022). Creating a program that is marked by diverse voices and playful approaches to questions of technologies enables Electric Wonderland to attract very different groups of people to its activities and discussions.



**Figure 15:** Kids corner at Electric Wonderland 2021. Photo by Radiona (<https://www.instagram.com/p/Chq8Z3WkaCZ/?hl=en>)

Radiona has a long tradition of taking its work to where people are. In its initial years as an organization, Radiona has periods where it did not have a space. The team then took its activities to parks and cafés in Zagreb, making it clear that a strong community is not a question of having a space and expensive equipment. It is about people. In the words of Hustić: “But most important, the people. You can have money, but if you have no people, you have nothing.” Today, Radiona runs many workshops in towns and schools outside of Zagreb, for example engaging children in questions of technology development from an early age through playful workshop activities. Within the city of Zagreb, Radiona has worked with the Technical Museum Nikola Tesla since 2012, running numerous workshop series and exhibitions.

While Radiona’s activities are often funded through specific projects with a start and end date, e.g. the Feral Labs (2018-2020) project, the Radiona team does not perceive their activities as

time-bound. Rather, the team finds ways to build on everything they do, making sure that workshop formats continuously evolve, develop and adopt to contexts and thereby making long-lasting impacts.

### **Discussion: Safe space(s) for imagining alternative presents and futures**

Through interdisciplinary and diverse collaborations, Radiona wishes to imagine and create new realities of networked and collaborative intermedia. Artistic and creative approaches are actively used as sources of imagination, as is the diversity of voices brought into the conversation (Alacovska et al., 2020).

Radiona's work suggests valuable approaches and directions. First and foremost, Radiona demonstrates a unique ability to create a **safe space** and that this is all important in terms of getting a diverse range of people into a conversation about future digital technologies. In this context a safe space is understood as a space for people to explore and discuss; a space where there are no "dumb" questions, in combination with physical surroundings that both encourage and awaken creativity and curiosity (also towards digital technologies). The creation of the **community** that supports and creates such a space is something that Radiona has built over the years, starting from its very explicit code of conduct.

Identifying as a citizens' lab and cultural center, rather than a maker space, Radiona removes the "tech barrier" which currently tends to characterize many maker spaces. Moreover, Co-founder Hustić highlights the criticality of its interdisciplinary network and the value and gift of having people with different skills, backgrounds, and orientation in Radiona's network. Due to the community's interest in and willingness to share, learn, get excited and work together, Radiona manages to bring very diverse (including what we might consider as marginalized) groups of people into conversations and speculation about current and future (digital) technologies.

Radiona's approach shows that by speaking to challenges and opportunities that are close to peoples' heart and working with these through creative approaches, you open a door for people to engage with and explore digital technologies. While not ignoring disciplinary differences (and similarities) between approaches of art, design and making, paying less attention to these boundaries also seems to create a space that allows for valuable exchange of knowledge and collaboration.

## The Mint and CurrentSea

### Introduction: Imagining alternative futures

Creating frameworks for artists to work as mediators between “clashing worlds” and consolidating their practices in local contexts are some of the challenges that social practices are currently facing when meeting the digital transformation in Europe. Developing social practices from a recognition of people’s daily concerns brings new perspectives to the discussion on how to imagine alternative futures. Recognizing such concerns requires an appreciation of society’s inequality, inequity, and fragmentation. Often responding to that which causes social divisions - be it economic or cultural differences, a South vs. North dichotomy, lack of opportunity, or tragic social phenomena such as forced immigration - imply that social practitioners are becoming the conveyors of a political message in their attempts to rebuild fragmented communities from inside. The importance of the social practices and participatory arts derives from its facilitation of an agora where the cries for social justice of those affected by the frenetic pace and outcomes of digitalization are heard. The tireless work of artists working within their local context are generating values such as trust, solidarity, respect and hope for an inclusive future. An interesting example of such work is The Mint, a space where artists, academics, citizens and other local actors meet to imagine and create new narratives focusing on their own reality and bringing topics from technology into the arts field as a typical characteristic of the socially engaged art (Helguera, 2011).

### Background – The Mint and CurrentSea

The Mint is a creative space composed by the duo of artists Silvia Maglioni and Graeme Thomson, the professor and social researcher Clelia Bartoli and her students from the University of Palermo, and some vendors of the second-hand market, *‘mercato dell’usato dell’Albergheria’* at Ballarò in Palermo-Italy. This space for engaging in social discussions through arts-based practice developed from professor Bartoli’s research at the second-hand market in Ballarò. The market, considered a “temple of law” professor Bartoli notes, is a place managed by traders of used products and where an alternative economy has provided for many people who have not had the opportunity to be included in a formal economy. Since 2021 the market has been undergoing a regularization process through the collaboration between vendors and law students, and so challenges such as trusting in a legal system and trusting in each other have been necessary to overcome the history of a market that for years has been stigmatized by the influence of crime. Consequently, artists Silvia Maglioni and Graeme Thomson together with the other participants initiated The Mint, a space where people meet to build bridges and employ art as a common language to do so. By using a diversity of techniques including storytelling, drawing and Do It Yourself (DIY), one law student commented on the importance of the arts in their process of working with the vendors of the second-hand market: “[The Mint] opened a space to create a connection with people, to make people feel comfortable and create links between two worlds, using the artistic activity as a mechanism to engage with each other”.

This is how the Albergheria market became a laboratory of imagination founded on an existing economic system using bartering, circularity and mutual help. Considering that the second-hand market is a place that welcomes people who are not part of the formal economy, including

irregular immigrants and people without access to tools such as banking system, credit cards or loans, in addition to the precarity of a daily income often does not exceed ten euros, the idea of establishing their own economy became popular within The Mint. Implementing an alternative currency stemmed from a period of economic crisis aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Such an alternative currency represented an energetic response to a futuristic discourse of decentralized economies based on cryptocurrencies and Blockchain, but at the same time it was presented as a protest against a digitalization process that could once again leave behind a sector of the population that was already vulnerable. While traders from the second-hand market do not have access to such technologies nor do they have the skills required to cope with them, however, the Albergheria market in Ballarò already functioned within a specific kind of “decentralised” economy where there was no clear enforceable authority to mediate the transactions between actors. Hence, while on one hand a process of inclusion in the legal system began, on the other a door was opened to imagining a decentralized economy with an alternative currency inspired by Blockchain technologies, cryptocurrencies and NFTs. Developing this latter direction, The Mint launched the CurrentSea project which was then presented during the Between Land and Sea festival in Palermo during October 2021.

#### **Deep dive: Creating spaces of dialogue for communities**

Changes in history have always brought uncertainty and fear of what the future may hold for society. In parts of the world where different realities are clashing, social practices and participatory art play an important role in creating an environment conducive to recognizing each other's realities and creating the trust to generate inclusive narratives where changes brought by technology can contribute to the construction of a fairer society. The use of an alternative currency built around decentralized economies as a tool of empowerment are emerging for the new types of social interaction inherent to the web 3.0 revolution. The disruptive feature of Blockchain-based technology, cryptocurrencies and Non-Fungeable Tokens are attracting the attention of artists who not only see it as an opportunity to expand their artistic practices but also as the opening to a new era in the struggle for social justice, redistribution of wealth and more equitable opportunities. As one participant of the workshop exemplified while discussing the implications of exploring alternative currencies in the market of Palermo: "a series of people who are taking a piece of our income every time we do our work, will be cut-off, and this will give us complete control and power over our assets". Thus, even though these new technologies can install fear, people are also starting to think how to shape and take advantage of them for a better common future.



*Figure 16: An example of an alternative unique physical currency.*

By running a parallel exercise of using an alternative currency inspired by new technologies but one which is tangible to ordinary people such as in the traders at the second-hand market, it is possible to introduce new concepts that belong to a technological world to an otherwise less tech-enabled group. In this way, acquiring digital skills and being able to understand concepts that can be very abstract is facilitated through collaborative artistic-based practice. In The Mint's alternative currency experiment, each participant produces a unique, tangible and special type of imaginary currency to create an ecosystem where each piece has a unique value and where trust is generated to keep the currency in circulation. This example strengthens the need of building a community so the idea of introducing an eventual alternative currency is protected by their members. Moreover, these kind of inspirational fictions are more easily realized through the mediation of social practices such as the one carried out by The Mint. Chiara, one of the market leaders, provided further insight on how the artistic practices can contribute to build platforms for social transformations:

When the artists started to work with us, it was much easier to attract the attention of other vendors and generating trust in a group that has not always been so united... the members of the market are very different people and each of us was looking out for their own interests, so there was no trust in each other... (personal communication).

### **Discussion: building community**

The artist as social practitioner is displayed here as an actor who initiates inspirational dialogues for change and one who takes part of the struggles of their own community as an equal, that is, as another citizen concerned about the reality of their own community. The artist also takes a role as researcher and political actor in looking to strengthen the links inside their communities. At social level, The Mint wanted to propagate a questioning of the current economic and monetary system, questioning the morality of the current economic order or whether it could be transformed to a more inclusive and sustainable one. They sought to respond to and question feelings of desolation, abandonment, debt, the ideal of independence and the fear of lacking on the skills and opportunities to catch up with novel economic models based on new technologies. While questioning the potential utopic and dystopic futures, the artists offered a scenario to forge a political statement. This was also reflective of the sense that, as one artist at the Palermo workshop put it, “all art is also political, because it involves a practice of questioning social struggles without necessarily having to find the right answers”. The creation of spaces for safe dialogues about how we want our future to develop gives room to a process of imagination, inasmuch as “we need to imagine new political, social and legal realities to envision the possibilities of changes”, as Professor Bartoli explained during one of our conversations in Palermo. This process of picturing new political, legal and social systems is thus materialized inside the framework of an artistic practice. In this case, abstract ideas from a digital world and which can be distant and frightening to a large portion of the society were able to take a physical form, a distinctive token that could work as currency in an imaginary economic model for the second-hand market.

It is likely that for many of the participants of The Mint, life will continue the same given few radical changes are predicted in the near future. However, the initial seed to think about an alternative economy was planted. Their imaginary currency, inspired by new technologies, yet, embedded in the dynamics of a fragile market, had the power to motivate market participants to take charge of their community. This practice then contributed to continued community building process which, more than anything, serves as a social glue that strengthens links of a small community that lives off an economy based on "one day at a time" philosophy. Communities like the one in the Albergheria market are often very vulnerable to any abrupt change, whether it be a pandemic (the market was close during the whole lock-down period and the vendors lost their only income opportunity) or a digital economy that advances frantically. Without the capabilities to face such changes, those who have already been relegated by the economic models of our era will be placed in an even more disadvantaged position.

## Discussion

The five cases introduced and discussed in this report ask and explore questions related to the digital transformation. Asking different questions and approaching those questions in various ways, the five cases work to create a human interface in technology development, while investigating challenges and opportunities in relation to our digital presents and futures. In doing so, they demonstrate not only the usefulness of the arts, but also the ways in which art may take care and be used as a means of making sense of the world (Alacovska et al., 2020; Sinderson, 2020).

For our study we adopt an understanding of sensemaking that is characterized by an active processing of information to achieve understanding. Thus, “sensemaking involves not only finding information but also requires learning about new domains, solving ill-structured problems, acquiring situation awareness, and participating in social exchange of knowledge.” (Pirulli and Russel, 2011, p. 1). Of particular relevance to the socially engaged and participatory cases that we have looked into are ideas of collaborative sensemaking. Collaborative sensemaking examines the way in which groups of people work together to create a collaborative sense of the information that they hold (Kirschner, Buckingham Shum and Carr, 2003). Drawing on Weick’s understanding of sensemaking (1993), Pirulli and Russel (2011) highlight how “groups of people making sense of complicated and dynamic information need to coordinate not just their information sharing, but also their intents, their interpretations, and revisions of past theories based on newly arriving information.” (p. 5).

The five cases introduced in this report show the breath and variety in which socially and participatory forms of the arts can help explore, bring awareness to, and make sense of the digital technologies with which we engage. Step by step the arts can empower individuals and groups of people to have a say in relation to the technologies that they do or do not use. While the five cases that we showcase in this report share a critical sense towards the digital technologies that we are surrounded by, this criticism is generally less directed towards the technologies themselves, and to a much greater extent take up concerns with the systems in which technologies are currently being developed – highlighting issues such as relations of power, lack of regulation, representation, etc. Thus, all five cases both use digital technologies as sources of inspiration and perspective, as tools to collectively make sense, and as vantage points to questioning fundamental aspects of the digital transformation. The five cases show an approach to technology development characterized by interdisciplinarity and a dissolution of the so-called hard-soft skills and technologies distinction (Le Guin, 2004). In this way, the cases discussed in this report try to invite and bring a diversity of people and perspectives into discussions of technology, often through playful and explorative approaches to technology development and through ways in which we knowingly or unknowingly are affected by and interact with digital technologies.

### Organizing for value creation

While different in their constellation, the five cases share the fact that they largely operate through networks established outside of traditional art institutions. Having operated at the borders of the art world for decades, Andujar specifically speaks to the paradox of his project Post-capital Archive now being in Museo Reina Sofía, his work finally being accepted by an established

art institution. While the socially engaged and participatory forms of art have been gaining better understanding and recognition through the important work of artists, educators and historians such as Jeanne van Heeswijk, Pablo Helguera, Caroline Sindere, and Claire Bishop to mention but a few, organizing for social change and measurement of value creation through the socially engaged arts remains challenging.

The artistic practices presented here by Daniel Andujar, UNIDEE, Collaborative learning, Radiona and The MINT are meant as inspiration for how some of the challenges and opportunities in organizing for social change in the digital transformation can be overcome and achieved through careful, considerate, and imaginative ways of facilitating, organizing and supporting artistic and creative practice. Arguably, there is no one size fits all, and the five cases clearly demonstrate how organization benefits from being tied to local realities. Daniel Andújar has managed to create and take part in different networks through which to create impact, while organizations such as Catch and Radiona are taking on the role as facilitators of the arts, giving the arts a space to create long-lasting impact and giving a voice to artists less recognized by established art institutions. Operating at the borders of different disciplines, our five cases show that organizing for value creation often demands artists and curators being able to navigate and speak different languages to onboard and secure the necessary funding, which distinct from the language needed to speak about ambitions to create long-lasting social change.

This said, the five cases also indicate how hard it can be to bring marginalized and vulnerable groups of people into these discussions, the Arts itself often being perceived as rather exclusive. In this sense, artists working to engage marginalized and vulnerable groups of people in technology development need to overcome barriers to both the arts *and* to technologies when inviting others into their processes. Interestingly, the five cases presented here indicate that one way to engage marginalized and/or vulnerable groups of people in these discussions is to begin with issues that are close to their own realities, e.g. city development (Radiona), body images (Andújar), and alternative economies (The MINT). By starting from their own realities, it may be possible to also start working with questions of how these issues are also tied to questions of digital technology development. While our studies have a focus on marginalized and vulnerable groups of people, our many conversations and observations doing fieldwork for this study indicate that we may need to broaden our understanding of whom is vulnerable. Thus it seems that citizens but also the artists themselves are in some state of bewilderment when it comes to technology development. This is not bad or good per se, but it can be difficult to catch up and take a moment to understand where are we heading to.

Asking what might be the role of socially engaged and participatory forms of art in the digital transformation, the work by Andújar, UNIDEE, Collaborative Learning, Radiona and The MINT demonstrate how the arts work to disrupt the status-quo by appropriation of spaces that have been dominated by few in the post-capitalist era. All cases, in one way or other, also consider the transition to a decentralized web3.0 that promises in a way a redistributive community economy. That said, all of the five cases are also careful in (or refuse to) promise to make a change as such. Rather, they have a focus on the social process, expressing a certain faith in the long-term impacts of what the artistic process might initiate.

## Conclusions

This report presents five case studies of socially engaged and participatory art projects that in one way or other ask questions related to digital technology development and the digital transformation. All five cases call attention to and/or explore ways in which to create more inclusive and democratic digital futures. The five cases were chosen based on an ambition to cover different artistic approaches, different sets of questions, ways of organizing, as well as different geographical, cultural, and political areas of Europe. While the chosen cases are not representative of the broader fields of socially engaged and participatory artistic approaches to digital technology development and adoption, we nonetheless believe that they are illustrative and instructive examples of some of the ways in which the arts work to create social change.

Grounded in local contexts, the five case studies highlight that although the digital transformation might seem like an unstoppable force that we, as citizens, are powerless to influence, new digital technologies are an outcome of and mirror to existing structures of power and knowledge creation. In other words, the digital transformation is not a force on its own, but represents changes to our society which are also being shaped by our societies. This means that we can influence the very same developments. While the case studies illustrate real challenges in engaging marginalized and vulnerable groups of people in questions of digital technology development through the arts, they also indicate ways of doing so. While none of the artistic projects presented in this report claim to come up with “solutions”, they all exemplify how the arts may initiate and facilitate dialogue between different stakeholders affected by digital technologies, thereby also giving voice to those not usually brought into the discussion. In this sense, it is also possible to see them as examples of the arts taking care, in the different aspects of care taking.

## Appendix

Case	Respondent
UNIDEE Lab	Artist
	Artist
	Director of Residency Programms
	Director of Citta dell'arte
	Curator of UNIDEE
	Facilitator and Artist
	Artist
The Mint	Artist
	Artist
	Professor
	Market representative
	Student
	Student
	Festival organizer
	Festival organizer
Radiona	Co-Founder
	Team member
	Team member
	Workshop participant
	Workshop participant
	Workshop participant
	Representative, Technical Museum Nikola Tesla
Collaborative Learning	Director
	Head of Youth Center
	Artist
	Course participant
	Course participant
	Representative from municipality
Daniel G. Andújar	Artist
	Professor
	Collaborator
	Collaborator

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Norwegian  
Business School



Copenhagen  
Business School  
HÅNDELSHØJSKOLEN



Trinity  
College  
Dublin  
The University of Dublin



waag  
technology & society



KEA  
EUROPEAN AFFAIRS



FA  
FACT LIVERPOOL  
CI



EUROPEAN  
ALTERNATIVES