

The group exhibition *HABITAT. The Relational Space of Being*, curated by Simóndi Gallery in collaboration with Marguerite Kahrl, explores the visible and invisible networks that surround and connect the living systems of our society, suggesting and promoting strategies for a more inclusive and relational future vision, pushing us beyond the limits often imposed by the society, space, and body that we inhabit. In addition to Marguerite Kahrl (Beverly, Massachusetts - 1966), artists invited to participate are: Alessandro Manfrin (Savigliano, Italy - 1997), Marjetica Potrč (Ljubljana, Slovenia - 1953), Eugenio Tibaldi (Alba, Italy - 1977).

“Hope means exchanging knowledge...”
– Marjetica Potrč¹

This many-faceted exhibition expands the conventional boundaries of ecological art, which actually should have no boundaries at all. Four artists born in three countries, whose birth dates range from 1953 to 1997, have created works that do not reflect nature's predictably beautiful and bountiful treasures balanced on the edge of extinction. Instead, they take an active or participatory role in restorative relationships to nature – onsite and local.

The encompassing term “relational” - which is also found in the title of this exhibition, *HABITAT. The Relational Space of Being* - is based on Bruno Latour's distinction between relational and causal dynamics. In this context - an attempt to transcend dualisms and classifications by mixing them up to go beyond the borders - Marguerite Kahrl defines her “relational objects” as artifacts created to strengthen our relationship with the living world including human and non-human actors.

Kahrl's works from the Irrigators series consist of two groups of terracotta vessels *Underground Conversations* and *Fertility vessels*, both reminiscent of “Ollas,” ceramic pots used in the eponymous underground irrigation technique. The humorous shapes of her *Fertility vessels*, resembling hands/paws/claws/nipples are at home in both garden and gallery. The porous pots are designed to be buried in the ground with colorful necks protruding from the soil. When the soil is dry, moisture pulls through the pot to equalize humidity levels, illuminating what happens underground and also exposing the scarcity of fresh water for food cultivation. “Being hidden” - says the artist – “soil has remained a mystery for centuries.”

The irrigational vessels *Underground Conversations* have been tested in neighbors' gardens as tools with which to “build a sponge of organic matter and source of humidity,” increasing fertility and decreasing erosion and weeds. A similar project, in its use of funky terracotta forms, color, and eco-consciousness, is Kahrl's *Relational Nests* (2021), clay bird houses built as part of the artist residency project *TELL_US*. This initiative was promoted by the Messy Lab Cultural Association in collaboration with the Ecovillage Torri Superiore (IM) and saw the active participation of the resident community of the ecovillage.

Marjetica Potrč is an artist and social architect who has been the mentor for many in this community; she and Kahrl have collaborated for many years on “the exchange of knowledge and practices between holistic and linear thinkers.” Potrč's projects, all over the globe, combine collaborative projects with marginal communities on the ground and a research or theoretical overview. Her rubric Participatory Design is clearly admired and absorbed by all of these artists. Her diagrammatic *Earth Drawings* concern “the vital role of indigenous knowledge and practices in the contemporary world... [to] form an intelligent organism.”

Her most recent major work, a collaboration with Ooze², is a public art project *Future Island* (2023), an island of rocks in Sweden, divided between a north zone (heated by renewable energy) and an unheated south zone, which visualizes how fauna and flora adapt to the climate change in the years to come. In this living artwork plants evolve differently in the two zones. Potrč's work transforms

community arts into something much more broadly applicable, sophisticated, and theorized.

Multidisciplinary artist Alessandro Manfrin's sound sculpture *Quintetto* (2022), consists of five metal pipes found in his daily wanderings around city streets, seeking his materials – “shards of thought serving as the city's punctuation. Things given to all and belonging to no one, not quite waste, suspended in limbo, awaiting judgment.” The pipes are laid out in a flowing form. Next to this abstract sculpture, connected by electrical cables, is its technological twin – the Dolby Surround 5.1 system paraphernalia that animates it, amplifying sounds sampled in subway stations. The two dissimilar forms collaborate to communicate the artist's message in a particularly contemporary manner. He calls it “a sort of organ that brings together the ethereal and the urban.”

Eugenio Tibaldi, another colleague of Potrč's, describes his “temporary landscapes,” chaotically complex collages, or palimpsests, with their myriad architectural references, as “records of cultural signs that are necessary and induced by what power imposes and the economy regulates, the communicative codes that facilitate exchange and the alliances between these fabrics in suburban areas. I document and record the transformations in the relationship between legality, the economy and aesthetics.” He is a nomadic surveyor of multiple cultures, who has worked in Cairo, Caracas, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Naples, Thessaloniki, and so on. “Walking through the city,” – he says – “becomes a game of mapping the scars of acceleration.” His work *Heidi* is based on the 1890s novel by Johanna Spyri. Like the novel, it creates a landscape of “remote cultural baggage” set in “a bubble of non-place like the Swiss mountains,” contrasted with a nearby industrial city.

These four multidisciplinary artists in their many-leveled approaches are upsetting firmly established conventions and looking to ground-up and marginal cultures that, as Potrč puts it, “have survived colonialism and capitalism and still generously share knowledge of the Earth with the rest of us, even when only fragments remain.” They join the number of visual artists interacting with ecologies and communities that is expanding by the minute, heirs to the iconic works (in the U.S.) of Agnes Denes, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and Patricia Johanson, and engaging with newer works by Future Farmers, Basia Irland, M-12 Studio, Tristan Duke, Aviva Rahmani, Lauren Bon and the Metabolic Studio, and so many others.

Kahrl, Manfrin, Potrč, and Tibaldi demonstrate the role of creativity in different contexts: Manfrin focuses on the urban, Tibaldi on the suburban, Kahrl on the rural and systemic, while Potrč provides analytic overviews and diagrams for action. In a sense they are all collagists, cutting and pasting “shards of thought” – materials, experiences, convictions, communities – to create new realities. They tend to be mentored by what they observe around the globe, what works, or has worked, or could work, rather than being ruled by current, often corporate, conventions.

— Lucy R. Lippard

1 All quotations are from personal communication sent me to prepare for this essay, and from the artists' websites.

2 OOZE is an international design practice operating between the fields of art, architecture and urbanism. Founded by Eva Pfannes and Sylvain Hartenberg in 2003, OOZE is based in Rotterdam, and works internationally for governments, property developers, arts and cultural institutions and private clients, 07/28/2924, <http://www.ooze.eu.com/en/ooze/>.

