

## From humans, birds and insects

This essay reflects the Supertrama public art project in Vivares<sup>1</sup> from the perspective of a conversational witness. Conversations tend to happen on various levels: with words, with gestures, with others and sometimes internally with oneself. I spend my time having random and deliberate conversations while being present in Vivares. I know, being myself an artist in this field, that the process of such artworks starts long before it become accessible and visible for people. How the Supertrama vision transformed from an invisible idea to a very tangible cultural action, is a process that I will bypass in this essay. Instead, I will inform the reader from a relational perspective gained by conversations and observations.

I am starting at the end of my three days visit to Extremadura, a place I had never been to before. In a car conversation on a highway from Vivares back to Madrid, I spend three hours with the cultural manager Rebeca Castellano<sup>2</sup> from the Goethe Institut Madrid. I learned from her, why a German cultural Institute supports a project in rural Spain with no Germans involved<sup>3</sup>. Rebeca explained to me that the main voting population in Spain is based in rural areas with very limited exposure to contemporary art. Culture in Spain is centralized in few urban hubs. To have a contemporary art project based a rural context of a village in Extremadura is a rare occasion and therefore politically very important; as contemporary art can open mental and physical space for new understandings and allows for a different dialogue based on non-everyday experiences. A project like this allows politics of the everyday to merge with art in the aspiration to transform the presence, to prototype together new possibilities of a peaceful future togetherness under contemporary global conditions. The aim of the Goethe-Institut is to foster democracy via art and culture and Supertrama is a welcomed and rare approach to participatory art and democracy in rural Spain.

### **"In the museum you can decide how close to be to the art. But in life you can't control the art."**

I took this sentence from a text by Guillaume Désanges, a french curator and art critic. His text "Art in public spaces: Space, Time, Ethics, Passion" inspired me in many ways to look at the Vivares experience from these four angles. Désanges claims how fascinating public art projects are under the perspective of a confrontation with and direct contact between a democratic ideal through art projects and a democratic reality in public space. "Art no longer has the need to invest in public spaces in a reactive manner but, rather, in an active manner".<sup>4</sup> I will therefore focus on the potentials and challenges of such activating event in Extremadura.

## SPACE

Désanges describes the public space as not being the space of art, but space of daily life. It is therefore not a place to occupy, as it always continues to be a space for sharing: Sharing of activities and experiences next to each other. On the evening of my arrival, there was a

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<sup>1</sup> 10-13th July 2018

<sup>2</sup> R. Castellano works since 2008 at the Goethe-Institut Madrid programming cultural events.

<sup>3</sup> but myself as 'conversadora'

<sup>4</sup> Désanges, Guillaume Art in public spaces : Space, Time, Ethics, Passion in the revue "Mouvement", 2007, <http://guillemedesanges.com/spip.php?article43>. A short version was published in 2007, in the frame of the manifestation "Madrid Abierto 2007"

fashion show on the main square in Vivares. The next day the same place was a playground and being cleaned by a person from the village who was taking up a different role the night before. A work of art in public space will always perturb an existing situation and question its own identity. The artworks in Vivares were invitations to disrupt a routine, to make everyone enjoy but also reflect on the why and what of daily life. Public space is never a neutral and passive territory. It is in the nature of such work that not all people will have liked what they saw or experienced. Various negotiations needed to happen on how things could be done. This type of artwork exists to invite for thinking, feeling and negotiation. Socially engaged art work is the ability to think outside the box and to operate beyond the existing parameters of subject-specific, professional problem-solving.

## TIME

The time of a project in the public space is not art time. The projects remain ephemeral. It requires attention and a significant amount of preparation time. Marina Fernández Ramos from Supertrama, the mayor, the artists and people close to the process know that the artwork began long before the first moment of appearance in Vivares itself.

Artist Alberto Crespo looked in his work ‚Genea-Logo‘ at time from the perspective of a family chronology. Alberto: “The peculiar social fact of a group of people, the village inhabitants, with a very recent history of only 52 years, made me take part in this process.“ The fascinating detail of this village was its moment of creation in 1966, when it was erected as one of the last 42 white or colonial villages by Franco’s National Institut of Colonisation as part of the „Plan Badajoz“ which dealt with populating and developing rural areas of Spain.<sup>5</sup> By creating an abstract pattern of family genealogies on the floor of one of the squares, he welcomed the possibility of creating a large-scale participatory design: „I think the key words of this project would be " contact" and "game" as part of the designing process.“

One challenge for Albertos work was to face the possibility of more than 700 people wanting to tell their story. In the end there were 400, a number that was still almost impossible to face in four days. The public space requires knowledge of the terrain, which is acquired from the place itself. This is a huge compliment to the villagers or better: the experts of their every day, who shared their knowledge so generously with strangers.

Together with his team, artist Susana Soria Ramas and a group of helpers from Vivares, they had limited time to realize the work. The schedule had to accommodate the temperature conditions, the mosquitoes and the work schedules of the employees of the town hall.

Désanges points out that the preparation time for such a project is never enough, given that the reality of a project in the public space is dependent on the experience and will remain an undetermined adventure: one knows how it begins but never how it ends. In the public space the work of art is mobile and dynamic, challenged and engaged and therefore alive. Its force will also reside in its capacity to resist disappearance. It can have prolonged consequences that are not measurable. „I had to modify some graphic element due to the "unexpected" new list that the mayor brought the third day of the intervention, with new names, new families for which I had to generate new codes that I had not raised, but it is the game part, right?“<sup>6</sup>

As time is the material of such participatory work and makes an execution of four days an extremely intense process, Alberto resumed afterwards: „Without doubt, I would have defined all the families and codes in advance, if I had the final list beforehand and I would

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<sup>5</sup> The original plan dated back to 1902 to an idea called Plan Gasset.

<sup>6</sup> from an e-mail between Alberto Crespo to Susanne Bosch, 19th July 2018

have subcontracted two or three people more to collaborate with the project, not at the expense of long hours for volunteers that might have other obligations and did not expect such a demanding commitment.<sup>7</sup>

A success for him has been the opportunity to realize a large scale "participatory design". He further mentioned his emotional satisfaction, the warm encounter with some locals<sup>8</sup>, peoples feedback and finally having managed to generate this project as a team.

## ETHICS

"By shifting the metaphor from "Earth as mother" to "Earth as lover" we aim to entice people to develop a more mutual, pleasurable, sustainable, and less destructive relationship with the environment."<sup>9</sup> Documenta artists Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle introduce with the idea of nature as lover a new degree of love between humans and nature in the aspiration that lovers might be treated better than mothers: „Ecosexuality is a new approach to current thinking about global ecological crises, eco-art and environmental activist strategies.“

Artist Lucia Loren<sup>10</sup> arrived in Vivares with her work, *Hábitat'*. A habitat signifies the type of natural environment in which particular species or organisms live. A species' habitat is places where it can find food, shelter, protection and mates for reproduction. Generally speaking, animal communities are reliant on specific types of environments and plant communities. Lucia works on the interface of natural and cultural landscape, in the case of Vivares a landscape consisting of agricultural industry. Nature as such turned out to be a blind spot in relation to this rural village. Here, nature means industry. Yet, the mosquitos regulate the villager's daily routine; and still no connection is made between the birds, the crop growing and the insects. This is where Lucia's artwork was located. She invited the population of Vivares to participate in the enquiry of replaced and decimated birds and insects in the region to find out more about the other inhabitants of the region, generating an exchange of experiences and knowledge through the artistic process. As there is no eco-initiative in the village to hold that consciousness and represent the caring aspect of a responsible relationship between humans and nature, she faced the challenge to have no natural alliance onsite to anchor the vision of 're-colonisation', a different, loving, conscious behaviour towards the environment. For her, balancing the artistic process with a basic experience and therefore education about a shared habitat, was hard work. The ethical issues, meaning how an art projects respects the inhabitants and context of a space, also nature, animals, humans, architecture, hierarchies, history, ... are more acute than in other cases because it intervenes in this space of the real. The assumption that 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe provides enough common knowledge about eco systems proves to be questionable. Lucia spoke about her responsibility in contemplating the consequences of her findings in Vivares. She invited a group of children to a friendly, playful exploration of the natural habitat that might seed a loving, attractive relationship with their environment that grants their overall survival.

## PASSION

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<sup>7</sup>        ibid

<sup>8</sup>        „The initiative of Supertrama, the organization, the know-how of Marina has been key in the execution of the proposals. The problems are minimized and everything works. With the people, Susana and I have worked with, both volunteers and contracted by the city council, we have established a wonderful personal bond of friendship and mutual admiration. I admit that today, a week later, I miss Joaquín, Tere, Juani ... they understood the proposal and as such they got involved. I can only say "thank you".“ From an e-mail between Alberto Crespo to Susanne Bosch, 19th July 2018

<sup>9</sup>        <https://theecosexuals.ucsc.edu/>

<sup>10</sup>       <http://lucialoren.com/>

According to Désanges, to organize projects in public space it is necessary to find artists who have a special interest for these places. But it also requires a space/place that has a special interest. The public space requires exceptional engagement on the part of the artists, the curator but also in this case of the village. In Vivares, one could experience villagers, artists, curators, a documentation team, family members of the artists, helpers, a mayor and neighbours with an obvious engagement in the artistic processes. In the public space, the artists do not have any obligation to obtain results, but an obligation to the means. Supertrama expects permanent traces of the ephemeral process and stresses on the importance of the invisible process and intrinsic learning as well as a visible result that transforms space in the town and remains after the departure of the project.

Estudio el Palmeral, a team of ~~four~~ five young architects based in Barcelona<sup>11</sup>, applied with an intriguing proposal, introducing the concept of a Opereta Popular, a village opera based on the collection of historic scenes of the village.

In order to realize such a complex undertaking of an hour or more long stage programme with music, costumes, stage setting, dance, light effects, the group arrived a week earlier and brought along a group of 20 friends and family, all holding different expertise in the necessary fields. A camp was erected at the edge of the village and multiple activities started from teachings, dance and choreography classes, collection of stories, painting, fashion shows, material connection for the stage set, ... In many diverse sessions of subgroups, the opera emerged out of a process from day one until the last moment before the show in a fully booked village hall. The village cheered. In case of the Opereta, a large team of fantastic people acted like a group of friends, colleagues and even family that complemented each other with skills but also with a convivial attitude of living and working together for a limited period of time.

A good project involves a passion for experience, immediate confrontation and risk. A good project in public space never “works” and therefore requires certain humbleness. A project in the public space can be very simple in its objectives, but its consequences will always be extremely complex, states Désanges. In case of the Opereta as a ‘first off’ by a group of people who met as ‘first off’, the challenges, risks, confrontations and experiences were diverse. One example within the content was the nature of representing village stories as comedy, where at times the sharp edge of a cabaret artist or the reflective role of contemporary art was missing, contextualizing the problematic of some scenes. As a ‘first off’ large-scale team, the communication of process, content and progress hardly excited the group. But lack of communication is a pre-destination for conflict and misunderstanding. Leadership internally (group dynamics) and externally (village, colleagues and project management team) raised questions of power, decision-making and responsibility. Passion as a feeling of intense enthusiasm towards or compelling desire for something raised the question if a village is a good playground for young practitioners to make first steps with a new technique where getting through the ambitious idea is absorbing most attention and energy? “We anticipate a week of wonder, in which fantasy is mixed with illusion, and a work is produced that changes the history of the town, of the world.”<sup>12</sup>

## HOSTING AND BEING HOSTED

This type of art invites the human being itself to shape an art project consisting of process and outcome. A project like Supertrama tends to engage an unprecedented relation with its possibilities and solicited participants and spectators. The initiation of such a project opens

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<sup>11</sup> <https://vimeo.com/estudioelpalmeral>

<sup>12</sup> from an e-mail between El Palmeral to Susanne Bosch, 5th July 2018

up new spaces, also for people involved. It can change the course of a town or even the world.

Young architect and curator, Marina Fernández Ramos, together with the governmental "Dirección General de Arquitectura de Extremadura" opened the potential of public art projects for villages in her home region Extremadura. They are working to build this new initiative in Extremadura through as "Collaboration agreement between entities".

The role of a curator and technical production manager in such a project is manifold, from merging diverse expertise of guests and villagers to negotiating conditions, space, resources as well as mediating this type of public engagement to a wider audience including the media and funders. And overall, this role requires to constantly hold up a vision and a quality level for such art projects, as these projects require to pass in terms of ethical and aesthetical standards. Similarly, the role requires relational skills such as the facilitation of the processes in the town and the mediation between different agents. "Before starting an experience of this nature, in which the unexpected is a fundamental factor, I try to be open to what is going on, without prejudice. For me it is very important to perform a constant exercise of "putting yourself in the role of the other", to try to promote processes with a broad view. For this, communication with all agents is basic. I always miss more time for conversation and reflexion during the project development process, but it may be good for this to happen before and after the experience. When there are problems of communication, understanding, or collisions, the work becomes more complicated."<sup>13</sup> Hosting meaningful events and conversations in a non-artistic environment is an art itself. If the host is excellent, one does not even notice the effort, work, skill and care behind such a position, almost like the perfect host of a party where everything seems effortless.

As guest, I observed Vivares as hosting village with an equally skilled mayor Sergio Diestro, a trained political scientist and a strong town council team. There were no previous links between Supertrama and the locality and for Marina Fernández Ramos it was a new context. „Vivares has a very strong associative fabric: Cronistas Honorarias, Asociación de Pensionistas, Asociación de Amas de Casa, Asociación de Revitalización Rural "Vivares Despierta", Club Deportivo Vivares, AMPA, Asociación de Mujeres Gitanas. As well as a life story linked to solidarity and collaboration among the settlers, the first inhabitants of the town. The involvement of these groups is crucial for the development of Supertrama."<sup>14</sup>

The choice of Vivares was made through a public call, to which towns with less than five thousand inhabitants of Extremadura could respond. The criteria of the jury was oriented towards the positive evaluation of the diversity of the rural environment, its singularity as a recent rural heritage, and the desire or need to consolidate and strengthen its own patrimonial criteria, as well as to carry out actions that keep small towns alive and prevent them from deriving in marginalized spaces.

"A very pleasant surprise has been to discover a town with very open people, that has got involved easily and with much generosity in the three projects. Although they claim not to have experience in artistic practices, it is a community where participatory democracy is exercised."<sup>15</sup>

Vivares as host meant to welcome a group of strangers in their home territory, to invite them into their daily routines, to share their expert knowledge with them and to make them feel welcome. At the same time, the villagers were invited to take part in activities, to leave their

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<sup>13</sup> from an e-mail between Marina Fernández Ramos to Susanne Bosch, 27th July 2018

<sup>14</sup> from an e-mail between Marina Fernández Ramos to Susanne Bosch, 7th July 2018

<sup>15</sup> from an e-mail between Marina Fernández Ramos to Susanne Bosch, 27th July 2018

comfort zone, to try new things. „In terms of involvement between creators and neighbours (participation) I consider the art project a great success. The neighbours have welcomed the projects and I think they will keep them carefully in the village, and they will continue to elaborate them. I have been able to see how positive affects and learning have been generated, as several neighbours have told me after the experience.“<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSION

„For me it is fundamental that Supertrama works in contexts that have needs, problems or questions that can be treated or worked through art such as depopulation, care or sustainability of the heritage, the collective image of a context, integration, co-existence, ecology, diversity, and a long etcetera, taking into account everyone, or as much as possible of the agents affected by these issues.“<sup>17</sup>

Through random and deliberate conversations while being present in Vivares and through e-mails, I could anticipate at the generation of knowledge, skills and energy through a creative process; oral knowledge transmission between generations, the practice of drawing and painting, “and the activation of the creative process itself as a pedagogical process that transform an educational space.[...] I consider that the conversations that have been generated about the ancestors among the neighbours and their memories in Genea Logo have been very enriching, the opening to a new way of graphic representation, and the transformation of an unfinished floor of the public space into a precious space linked to the being of the inhabitants. [...] From the Opereta work, I consider a great learning experience to work with a very large group and generate very varied tasks and processes: scenography, theater, music, choreography, production, costumes. I would highlight the playful nature that they have generated.”<sup>18</sup>

„About the artistic formats, I consider that the inclusion of different and multiple ways of seeing, through the hybridization between disciplines, generates wellness spaces open to experience and learning. This is one of the reasons why the call for creators of Supertrama is open both for artists, architects, designers, and creators in general who work within the framework of Public Art.“<sup>19</sup> To share a deeper understanding of creation of such hybrid moment, I would involve in future Supertrama village projects a representative of the village into the decisions making jury. I believe by witnessing the complexity of decision-making one will learn what needs to be considered beyond the obvious. It also opens up an understanding what experts of culture carry as criteria and value. To maintain and sustain such processes, these skills are not superfluous but delicate and rare.

Equally to Marina, I was surprised and moved about the fast ability to connect between strangers. “I also learn from perspectives very different to mine. I believe that mediation is fundamental to reach common agreements or learning. I also learn the most common issues (daily habits) are determinant, and very difficult to address in a short period of time. I also think that to identify invisible issues, and to be able to transform them, more time is needed.”<sup>20</sup> As conversational witness, I appreciated the embodied experience and the knowledge harvesting mission through the logical nature of processes in their space. My role

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<sup>16</sup>       ibid 27th July 2018

<sup>17</sup>       ibid

<sup>18</sup>       ibid

<sup>19</sup>       7th July 2018

<sup>20</sup>       ibid

as 'harvester' made sense in this rural context of Vivares. Lots of fruitful observations and crops for sure are remaining the unspoken, unseen, invisible, uninvited, untouched. Some get harvested by the birds and the insects to sustain their habitat. And that is necessary for our overall survival.