

## Proceedings of the Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA) 50th Conference

Sustainable Urban Environments

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Photo by Jessica Morris



## Description

This conference explored how environments at all scales can be designed in support of a more sustainable world. While cities are contributors to the causes of climate change and other environmental problems, the urban setting will be the proving ground for many of the solutions that address environmental, economic, social and behavioral issues across the globe. Environmental design research is integral to shaping urban design and changing environmental behavior at the global scale.

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# **Sustainable Art for Sustainable Cities: Sustainable Art for Sustainable Cities: A Performance and a Screening Afternoon at EDRA50 Brooklyn**

## **Sustainable Art for Sustainable Cities: A Performance and a Screening Afternoon at EDRA50 Brooklyn**

by Diego Mantoan and Lara Gaeta<sup>1</sup>

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### **1. A collateral program of sustainable art activities**

On the occasion of EDRA50 Brooklyn, held at NYU Tandon School of Engineering and devoted to the topic of "Sustainable Urban Environments: Research, Design and Planning for the Next 50 Years", it was decided that a collateral program of sustainable art activities could widely enrich the conference impact and scope. Furthermore, it provided an interesting opportunity for conference attendees, mostly involved in the fields of research, education and planning, to discover projects or ideas that spring from creative practice and evaluate emerging trends such as the visual arts devoted to sustainability. According to the principles of sustainability, the program had to be organized involving local constituencies and keeping the budget at a low by drawing on the collaboration and commitment of the NYU community as well as

the budget was low by drawing on the collaboration and commitment of the NYC community, as well as on guest activities from cooperating universities. The main goal of the program is to provide an interesting overview helpful to investigate the role of sustainable art for sustainable cities in the forthcoming years. The implicit goal was thus to present examples of artistic creativity and research applied to sustainable urban environments – and to do it in such a way as to enrich the collateral activities program of EDRA50 Brooklyn.

In partnership with Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy, who runs a program devoted to art and sustainability through its office Sustainable Ca' Foscari, at the beginning the collateral program for EDRA50 Brooklyn was titled "Sustainable Art for Sustainable Cities". At the planning stage in February 2019, the draft program comprised a strain of different events or activities, each with its organization and feasibility scheme, in order to keep at a later stage only those which had reached full maturity on the way to the conference and drop the remaining options. In order to supervise each step in the making of the collateral program, the organizing committee of EDRA50 Brooklyn kept constant coordination with Dr. Diego Mantoan, researcher at the Department of Humanities of Ca' Foscari and an expert on sustainable art. The involvement of the Venetian university was indeed instrumental, since Sustainable Ca' Foscari in collaboration with the art fair ArtVerona launched the Sustainable Art Prize in October 2017 reflecting on sustainability issues. Aim of the project was and still is the promotion of behavioral change, fostering a stronger consciousness and stimulating engagement towards sustainability by means of artistic practices, in line with the 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promoted by the UN. The prize is handed to an artist at the art fair and entails the commission of an installation, an exhibition or a performance which relates to sustainability, to be hosted at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. The project shall involve students and researchers, thus granting a unique opportunity of dialogue between art and research. For the first edition of the prize in 2017 the jury awarded the artist collective Vinci/Galesi, presented at ArtVerona by the art gallery Aa29 Project Room. The dedication of the artist duo to deal with environmental, social and political sustainability was met with enthusiasm as well as their capacity to translate their commitment in an aesthetically interesting project that was particularly striking in a communication perspective, and their honest community involvement, one of the key features of their projects.

In the end, with the approval of the organizing committee, EDRA50 Brooklyn invited Dr. Mantoan together with Sustainable Ca' Foscari, represented by the project manager Anna Bonfante, to support and coordinate an array of sustainable art activities within EDRA50 Brooklyn at the NYU Tandon Campus. The decision was made to reenact the winning art performance of the Sustainable Art Prize, which in 2018 saw the involvement of Venetian students for the project *The Republic of Marvels* (2018) by the winning artist duo Vinci/Galesi. Furthermore, the committee was interested in having a screening afternoon upon a call for video artists to provide clips on pioneering sustainable urban projects, which was to be organized together with Lara Gaeta, a graduate of Ca' Foscari involved in sustainable art projects and at the time occupied at the exhibition space Hangar Bicocca in Milan. These activities would thus provide a showcase of artistic outcomes by living artists engaged in sustainability, but foremost of the contribution that art and artists may give to behavioral change in favor of the sustainable development goals. The present paper is intended for the conference proceedings and thus aims at displaying the contents and scope of the sustainable art activities carried out for EDRA50 Brooklyn.

## 2. Art can be thousands of flowers in New York City

A parade of flowers and music took the streets of MetroTech Commons on a lovely Springtime Sunday morning for a visual arts performance created by Sicilian artist Sasha Vinci together with the soprano Giulia Alberti and the composer Vincent Migliorisi. Indeed, the art project *A Human Flower Wall* (2019) by Sasha Vinci, winner of the Sustainable Art Prize 2017 promoted by Sustainable Ca' Foscari, consisted in the creation of a live flower wall with a conclusive march of people walking between and inside the buildings of NYU Tandon at MetroTech Center. This civic and artistic action focused on the sharp contrast between today's gradually hermetic society and an ideal inclusive community that meets the 17 Sustainable Development Goals set out in the Agenda 2030 by the UN. On Sunday, May 26, as a conclusion to the urban environmental sustainability conference EDRA50 Brooklyn at NYU Tandon, a group of people metaphorically constituted a biological and moving wall, made of flowers and humans as empathetic elements of life and transience, which went beyond any form of separation or division, rather



building bridges towards a more equal and inclusive society. The moving and flowering party, which derives from an ancient Sicilian tradition, symbolized a growing energy derived from humans and nature. At the end of this ritual procession through downtown Brooklyn the flower carpet entered the Pfizer Auditorium meeting upon the voice of Giulia Alberti performing *The Symphony of the Republic of Marvles* (2018) by composer Vincent Migliorisi, accompanying the opera singer with live electronic equipment.

Fig.1. Picture from the performance *A Human Flower Wall* by Sasha Vinci in NYC



The action started ideally from Venice, Italy, from the project *The Republic of Marvles* in Spring 2018, when the students of Ca' Foscari University reflected on a utopian society living in harmony in full sustainability. In Venice the Sicilian artist duo imagined the optimal place of Thomas More: a utopian island, a surfaced land where to imagine forms of social renewal and sustainable development for a peaceful society, where culture regulates human life.<sup>2</sup> In an alternative dimension to reality and by means of flowers, symbols of rebirth and marvel, Vinci and Galesi organized workshops, labs and panels with the students in order to think of an ideal place, an unexpected and extraordinary place where humans debated on art and life, as well as on the responsibility over all beings.<sup>3</sup> *The Republic of Marvles* was thus garnished with a musical harmony, a drape, various symbols, a constitution, a territory and a population that marched through the narrow streets of Venice.





Fig.2. Picture from the performance *A Human Flower Wall* by Sasha Vinci in NYC

The performance on the Venetian lagoon came as a natural continuation of a dialogue started in previous performance in the South of Italy, hence marking the constitution of a land of freedom and participation for sustainable development. Indeed, Vinci had adopted flowers in his projects with the artist Maria Grazia Galesi several years earlier: together they started to cover objects of individual memory and finished up blending Scicli's tradition of horse garments with proper performance art. Hence they created relevant experiences to stir environmental and sociopolitical consciousness of local communities, starting with their own, and later spread the word with the speed of seeds carried by the wind. The first step of this artistic research was *Mutabis* (2016) in their hometown Scicli in Southern Sicily, when Vinci and Galesi dressed themselves with a mantelpiece of flowers and wandered like shamans along marvelous landscapes and buildings soon to be doomed by human greed.<sup>4</sup> This action convinced the local community to stop these destructive urges, at least temporary. Thanks to the encounter with the art gallery Aa29 Project Room the flower parade moved to another troubled strip of land, the province of Caserta near Naples that is tormented by illegal landfills, where Vinci and Galesi transformed the poisoned "land of fires" for one day into a desirable "land of flowers", the *Terra dei Fiori* (2017).<sup>5</sup>

The story goes that the echo of these performances reached the board of the international scientific society EDRA, the main organization for scholars in the field of environmental development set to celebrate its 50th anniversary with a large conference at New York University, hosted by Tandon School of Engineering in downtown Brooklyn.<sup>6</sup> Thus the social and artistic research of Sash Vinci was swiftly maturing into its first stage across the Atlantic for the most important conference in North America devoted to urban sustainability, an action which was again supported by Ca' Foscari Sostenibile for the Venetian University in collaboration with the Humanities and Social Change Center of Venice, as well as by the gallery aA29 Project Room with the scientific support of the Department of Humanities. After closely watching the metropolitan context, Vinci created the project *A Human Flower Wall* expressly for the Big Apple, a performance reflecting the contrasts between today's Western society, at a time when it is closing down, and an ideal society projected towards the fulfillment of the 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Like in the previous stages, the true moment of sharing and community building was set in the so called 'infiolata', when NYU students and EDRA50 Brooklyn conveners came together to build signs and carpets of flowers for the improvised demonstration for nature by means of nature. The 'infiolata' is the magical moment when flowers express their sense of aesthetic beauty and of irresistible cohesive power for every community of women and men. Thousands of colored gerberas were applied on the rally instruments, thus transforming every participant in a constructive part of a set, in a brick of a strong and cohesive social being. One flower after another a wall came into shape, though it was the triumph of natural sounds against today's totalitarian trumpets. So it happened that in Spring 2019, while in other places walls and seas were planned for division, *A Human Flower Wall* brought a different idea of urban community into the world, one in which flowers are the social glue between disparities, the bond between differences. This artistic and social action, at the heart of New York, wanted to break free from that sort of consumerist culture, which boosts inequalities and takes away the power of enchantment. At the end of the performance, recalling the action which begun with the Venetian students, the videos of the *Trilogia del Possibile* (the three previous performances in Scicli, Caserta and Venice) were projected at the Pfizer Auditorium accompanied by musician and composer Vincent Migliorisi playing his *Symphony of the Republic of Marvels* together with the lyrical voice of the soprano Giulia Alberti, thus merging notes and flowers into an emotional whole.<sup>7</sup>

Fig.3. The conclusion of the performance *A Human Flower Wall* at the Pfizer Auditorium





Sasha Vinci with *A Human Flower Wall* intended to expose in a metropolitan context the mechanics of predominance that lead us today to believe in the existence of a normality, which implies the utter exclusion of anything deemed alien or different, thus fuelling fear of the others, as if this otherness could contaminate society and drag it down. The Sicilian artist reacted to this deformation of meaning by means of an artwork that praises all human existence and generates a healthy relationship between power and life – life, the bios, intended as the collective life, the life of all individuals in harmony with their environment. In a world that is gradually suffocating politics on supposedly biological claims, *A Human Flower Wall* wanted to stir human conscience and engage in free thought to advocate interdependency between all individuals, thus fostering inclusiveness and environmental respect. As the artist himself maintained: “The wall symbolizes a torn world, an unnatural divide between people, between city and nature, which even physically separates societies in blocks and counterpoised principles. *A Human Flower Wall* thus isn’t a barrier made of bricks, wood, metal or concrete; on the contrary it is a human wall, made of free individuals that strive for a different world. The performance visually recalls the pervasive, beautiful and powerful wave of youth movements that these days are gaining consciousness about sustainable development issues. Through this action I wish to give shape to a possible world which favors inclusiveness among heritage, knowledge, urbanism and nature.”<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Ten video-voices to imagine a possible future

The *Screening Afternoon* at EDRA50 Brooklyn was conceived as a project in April 2019 with the precise intention to collect short artistic videos, from all over the world, which shared the emergent topic of sustainability, though developed with different nuances. Everything started by publishing a very specific open call circulated among several art platforms: both Italian and international one’s like *Artribune*, *Artconnect* or *Transartists*. Later the two curators moved forward making a selection of videos or photo-projects that worked as a sort of ‘restitution’ of urban sustainability projects, according to the topic of the conference EDRA50 Brooklyn as well as with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, especially Number 11 (“Sustainable Cities and Communities”). In the selection process the purpose was to choose artists with different profiles and backgrounds: performers, video-artists, dancers as well as artists deeply interested in environmental, political and social issues. Some of these artists stressed the topic of *Utopia*, hence another reality existing at a moment in imagination, but that could become reality in a possible and close future. Joseph Beuys, one of the most important German artists of the last century, both activist and performer, spoke about a “Real-Utopia”, an oxymoron that wanted to express what today is considered impossible to happen, but could or should soon become reality.<sup>9</sup> As a matter of fact, the artist’s job should

not imply the mere description of what is simply happening in the current world – because that is rather the task of reporters – but also to show different perspectives on matters and create new points of view that may hopefully change things soon.

With regard to the call for video artists, the selected projects were eventually displayed on Saturday, May 25, 2019, at the Pfizer Auditorium of NYU Tandon. Showcasing recent video art devoted to the topic of sustainable urban environments, ten short video art contributions by international artists were presented, since they extensively dealt with issues concerned with the goal of achieving sustainable cities in the near future. The event was part of the ongoing research project curated by the two authors of this paper, who operated the final selection upon the above described international call for artists, in order to discover artistically mature contributions that highlighted sustainability concerns through a savvy and insightful use of the artistic means. The screening afternoon was hosted right at the end of the conference's main session, providing a survey of video art that exploits creative strategies to deliver an innovative and profound reflection on sustainable urban development.

The final selection presented by the curators and screened at NYU comprised the following artists with very recent artistic projects devoted to sustainability, which are briefly described in the following paragraphs together with a short biographic outline of the artists themselves.

### **3.1. Sasha Vinci e Maria Grazia Galesi: The Republic of Marvels (2018) and Terra dei Fiori (2017)**

The duo Vinci/Galesi is the result of the collaboration between artists Sasha Vinci and Maria Grazia Galesi. Their collaborative work revolves around ephemeral elements, profoundly connected to the life cycle of the flower and to its rapid as well as inevitable decay. The choice of the flower as a symbol, a key element in the artists' research, is directly inspired by the ancient practice of the 'Infiolata Sciclitana', a decorative tradition that uses flower garlands as central element occurring for the ritual of the Cavalcade of Saint Joseph n March 19 each year. In the work of Vinci/Galesi flowers have a reparatory function, further being a symbol of rebirth: they try to repair the inadequacy of mankind and amend neglected places. As described previously, *The Republic of Marvels* is a collective action and an itinerant performance through the 'calli' (the narrow streets of Venice) conceived to create a space and time of reflection that evokes the stories and desires of the ancient inhabitants of the lagoon. The site-specific project is the result of the *Sustainable Art Prize*, which the duo Vinci/Galesi won in 2017, as mentioned beforehand, due to the flower parade carried out in the city of Caserta in Southern Italy and titled *Terra dei Fiori* (Land of Flowers). The performance was made using real flowers as a metaphor of beauty, energy, transience of time and frailty.

### **3.2. James McColl: The Monolithic Dome Cap Unit (2019)**

James McColl is a visual artist based in the South-West of the UK. He graduated from Southampton Solent University in 2011 with a BA in film. His work has a particular focus on mental health, individual struggle and class relations. He uses repurposed footage and text, thus his performances are the direct result of these practices. He showed works across the UK and internationally, continuing to collaborate with organizations like Forest Fringe, (WOW) Woman of The World Festival, NSDF and KARST Gallery to produce art festivals and events that support emerging artists. The selected project is a dystopia-video settled in the future, though not so far away. It represents a geometrical Dome Cap Unit built for survivors of some sort of cataclysm. Inside this unit men and women have everything they need, from food to amenities. The video is introduced by a female voice stating: "The world is an increasingly dangerous place with threats all around us. Whatever the threat, our shelters are built to withstand just about everything. We cannot predict, but we can prepare." This fictional reality, exposes how mankind may end up inside the walls of a unit, which rather resembles a prison than a safe place.

### **3.3. Oriana Haddad: Make My Skin – Intimate Regeneration of the City (2016)**



### 3.3. Oriana Haddad. *MAKE MY SKIN – Intimate Regeneration of the City* (2019)

Oriana Haddad was born in Milan (Italy) from an Italian mother and an Egyptian father. She is currently living and working in Milan, after years spent in the US and in London. She is a performer, visual and healing artist, an anthropologist and a movement analyst. Her multi-disciplinary background began with an early training in ballet, followed by modern dance and theatre. In New York she trained in contemporary dance and received a diploma in Body Movement Analysis at the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Advanced Movement Studies. She returned to Italy to get her BA in Ethno-Cultural Anthropology in Bologna and then moved to London where she received an MA at Goldsmiths College. Today she conducts transdisciplinary work as an embodimentalist: an artist, researcher and healer of human embodiment. *Make My Skin* embraces the art of living the city, through a revolution of its physical experiences. It is a transdisciplinary project, which merges art with science, by combining contemporary dance, performance and visual arts, together with cultural and body anthropology, spatial and choreutic analysis, somatic and urban studies. This project presents and displays a practice of embodiment that offers a groundbreaking perspective on the poetics and politics of the body in regenerating the everyday urban environment. The

outcome of the project is a photographic collection of urban practices and performances composed of 6 photographic series, which represent the research on 6 different public locations around the City of London.



Fig.4. Film-still from Oriana Haddad's *Make My Skin*

### 3.4. Marcha Schagen: *Flood the Landscape* (2019)

Marcha Schagen is a Dutch artist born in 1991. She creates wearable objects, sculptures, installations and performances based on artistic research regarding society. She studied Theatre Design at the University of the Arts in Utrecht and further completed an internship with Iris van Herpen. She is the creator of Project KOVR in collaboration with designer Leon Baauw. With her latest project *Mineral Waste* Marcha Schagen explores if it is possible to create CO<sub>2</sub> negative objects and sculptures, using the mineral olivine. While processing raw materials, olivine has the potential of purifying the atmosphere. This mineral, richly to be found in the Earth's mantle, has the unique characteristic of being able to sequester CO<sub>2</sub>. In the natural process of weathering the mineral insulates CO<sub>2</sub> from the environment. It then alters the captured CO<sub>2</sub> into a magnesium bicarbonate solution, a residue that is not polluting. This natural process occurs relatively slowly but can be accelerated by putting olivine in

This natural process occurs relatively slow but can be accelerated by putting *OHVINE* in contact with water. *Flood the Landscape* is an installation consisting of mineral olivine in pulverized sand, which is combined with natural glue to create solid shapes. When water floods into the installation the glue dissolves and the mineral's reaction is being maximized to insulate CO<sub>2</sub>. The water is also a metaphor for the rising sea level that affects the 'landscape'.

### 3.5. Isabella Pers: When Mind Becomes Form (2018)

Isabella Pers develops her projects through the use of different artistic languages, such as painting, participatory installations and performances, video, photography, drawing. The main themes of the artist's research are the observation of social, natural and cultural

ecosystems, political crises, the impact on the planet caused by anthropocentric domination, and the deep changes of contemporary times. Together with her sister Tiziana, she is co-founder and co-director of RAVE East Village Artist Residency, an artistic project that deals with the role of contemporary art in relation to otherness and the need to rethink ourselves through biocentrism and antispeciesism. "If you fight or feel anger, throw away the water on your table. If you laugh and feel love, drink all the water on the table, because it is precious." This ancient Bulgarian popular saying reaches the recent researches of scientists and physicists, including Jaques Benveniste, Emilio del Giudice, Eugeny Germanov and many others, who investigated the memory of water from different perspectives. The Japanese researcher Masaru Emoto has shown how the human consciousness has an effect on the molecular structure of the water by photographing the crystals, thus developing a technique that allowed us to discover the manifold signs with which water responds to external stimuli. The geometry of the crystal is the information itself that crystallizes. Water listens, memorizes the vibrations of thoughts and responds by modifying the forms of its molecules. The installation allows everyone to be the author of the water he will drink, thus evolving those primordial rituals that strive around the centrality of water.

### 3.6. Martina della Valle: One flower, One leaf (2019)

Martina della Valle was born in Florence, Italy (1981) and graduated in 2003 at the Istituto Europeo di Design in Milan, Italy. In 2007 she was selected for the Corso Superiore di Arti Visive at Fondazione Ratti in Como and was offered a two-month residency program in Paris by the DENA Foundation, at Centre des Recollets. She was invited in 2009 at Onomichi University to a one month residency in AIR Onomichi (Japan). Her research starts from the basis of the photographic technique, from the study of the physical and mental traces left by light, through time and space. It is developed often with different languages and forms, having the shape of photos, video, as also site-specific installations. She currently lives and works in Berlin. *One flower, One leaf* is an ongoing archive of still-lives. The images of the project are the result of workshops held in different cities to investigate the ruderal green. Through still-life images, the investigation attempts to observe the rich diversity of spontaneous plants in underrated urban areas. The comparison between the results in each urban landscape, underlines seasonal and site-specific differences, and helps to reconstruct the paths of their proliferation. The archive of images of each episode creates a very specific portrait of the city in a particular time of the year. *One flower, One leaf* calls people to be active part of the project and focuses their attention on underestimated green areas and to create compositions to be photographed, using spontaneous vegetation and being inspired by the principles of Japanese Ikebana.

### 3.7. Tiziana Pers: ART\_HISTORY/Vucciria (2018)

Tiziana Pers was born in 1976, she lives and works in Trivignano Udinese (Italy). She studied Languages and Foreign Literatures at the University of Udine and developed her PHD investigation on the dialogue between visual arts and literature. She participated at the last edition of *Manifesta 12* (Palermo) and showcased her works also at MAXXI, Rome; PAV, Turin; Biennial of Architecture and Urbanism, Seoul; Circolo de Belle Arti, Madrid; Ita-

TIZIANA PERS, *DIAGRAM OF ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM*, SEOUL, CIRCUITO DE BELAS ARTES, MADRID. Her research is especially focused on activism for animals and human rights. Together with her sister Isabella, she is co-founder and co-director of RAVE East Village Artist Residency. *ART\_HISTORY/Vucciria* is an artistic procedure that Tiziana Pers conducts since several years. The project consists of a bargain between an animal to be butchered and an oil painting by the artist of the same height and dimension of the saved animal. This action, so elementary and immediate, unfolds different perspectives and raises many questions, such as whether it is possible to give an economic value to life or to an artwork; or even further, whether art has the possibility to rescue lives. The performance took place in two specific moments: at first Tiziana Pers was at the Vucciria, the famous marketplace of Palermo (Sicily), where she urged merchants to bargain a fish with its painting. Secondly, the artist painted the animals to be saved, nine in total, to fulfill the contract with the merchants and later free the fishes on the seafront of Palermo.



Fig.5. Film-still from Tiziana Pers' *ART\_HISTORY/Vucciria*

### 3.8. Giovanni Scotti: Cinnamon Heart (2019)

Giovanni Scotti was born in 1978 in Naples and now lives and works between Naples and Milan. He graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Naples in 2007. Through the years he experimented different kind of artistic media such as painting, music, video-making and photography. In 2008 he got the Master in Photography and Visual Design at the private academy of NABA, Milan. He took part to the *European Photography Festival*, Reggio Emilia and he got into the collection of *Imago Mundi Campania*. His artistic investigation is focus on the idea of post-truth. Cinnamon Heart is a photographic project inside the buildings of the former NATO Command in Naples (the largest in Southern Europe from 1954 to 2013). The journey of the artist inside the 'war rooms' found all things still set exactly as the Americans had left them (furniture, decorations and several items, photos and some confidential documents). As a child, Giovanni Scotti heard of the NATO building as an incredible as well as inaccessible place. But he didn't know what it was, exactly, and what they did in there. What he knew was that anyone could buy peanut butter, marshmallows, Marlboros, VCRs, cameras and JVC stereos. All typical American stuff. Now the artist is older and he still doesn't know exactly what NATO is and what it does. But he knows that was a place of power. And he knows that power has an effect, a cost. It digs deep furrows. It always leaves a trail alongside. "In those rooms, they decided to bomb Belgrade."





Fig.6. Film-still from Giovanni Scotti's *Cinnamon Heart*

### 3.9. Andreas Zampella: Your Light (2017)

Andreas Zampella was born in Salerno in 1989, but he now lives and works in Milan. He graduated in Decoration at the Academy of Fine Arts in Naples. In 2016 he took part to the poetry festival *La Luna e i Calanchi* (Aliano, Basilicata) where he realized the work *Respirabile* (Breathable), an organ that breaths for the south of Italy and exhibited inside the Carlo Levi writer's house. In occasion of *All Night Long II* in Milan he made a work that reflects on the revolutionary condition and was called for that reason *Inner Resistance*. The presented video instead shows another way to live the cities by night. It is a reflection on the changing habits in the city, especially the bad ones. Here the reflection that the artist wants to offer starts from the idea that we all have day and night. Thanks to artificial light we are able to escape from the darkness and acquire the possibility to choose another time to live. If we think about it the night lighting assumes the same value of the sun, since it is impossible to switch off. On the other hand the project wants to underline the important interaction of the citizen with the urban space, an interaction that has to be increasingly aware and dynamic. *Your Light* wants to restore a balance between the natural law of the sun and the artificial law of public lighting. The project "Your Light" was shortlisted for the 4<sup>th</sup> Edition of 'Un'opera per il Castello' competition in 2017 in Naples.

## 4. By way of some conclusions on sustainable art

EDRA50 Brooklyn provided a wonderful platform to showcase what art and artists, when thoroughly engaged in sustainability, may provide very necessary creative solutions as well as an emotional involvement for the fulfillment of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Indeed, the complexity of sustainability issues is paralleled by the indeterminateness of the term itself, urging scholars to resort to multi-disciplinary approaches.<sup>10</sup> The topic was primarily addressed by technological and economic innovation, so far, rather than by solutions requiring significant changes in human behavior.<sup>11</sup> Multidisciplinary and social engagement are now recognized as crucial to tackle long-standing

disciplinary divide that prevents an effective translation of Sustainable Development Goals into widespread actions.<sup>12</sup> The last decade further proved that rigorous scientific communication alone is not enough to inspire an effective response, thus increasing the focus towards art as a supplement to academic research and policy development.<sup>13</sup> Research activism unleashed by these concerns is particularly relevant in North America, where several scholars such as S.Athayde, S.Boettger, M.Miles, A.Connelly, F.Dunaway set the standard in the analysis of the relationship between art and sustainability.

Although these researches draw attention to the phenomenon of artists engaging with environmental problems, they miss to grasp the aesthetic dimension of such contributions and their influence on the way humans conceive of sustainability.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the current debate unleashed three main but separate research strains on the topic. First comes an anthropological approach, which examines the role of art and craftsmanship for cultural resilience, especially in aboriginal or traditional communities.<sup>15</sup> The research outcome is though centered solely on cultural diversity loss and eco-friendly attitudes, while its behavioral impact and research scope is very narrow. Secondly there is a widespread instrumental approach grounded in empirical research, which positions art at the end of the research process, such as to convey scientific contents with artistic means (e.g. scenario building, experience rooms etc.).<sup>16</sup> The serious limit of this approach is that it adopts artistic practices (and not art) as a ready-made tool, a sort of 'emotional' language that bears an environmental message. The third research strain follows a descriptive approach and is grounded in art criticism and further art based research that analyze artworks, projects and various other contributions by artists and art organizations in the field of environmental sustainability.<sup>17</sup> This research strain has pointed at pioneering experiences in North America over the last decade, such as exhibitions on art and climate change in Boulder Creek and San Francisco, but it is solely centered on the representational dimension of art, overlooking its transformational potential on behavior.

The art projects shown at NYU Tandon in May 2019 advocate for a greater role of art in sustainability, which is possible only by dropping the perspective, which sees art as merely one of several possible awareness-rising tools.<sup>18</sup> Art and artists must be fully drawn into the discourse, in order to hope for their works to fascinate people and foster behavioral change. Sustainability needs the creativity of artists and the emotional immersiveness of art, while scientists and scholars shall provide the backdrop and the information for magic to happen.

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Submitted on October 2, 2019, to the EDRA50 Brooklyn committee at NYU Tandon.

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*Department of Humanities, Ca' Foscari University of Venice*

*Aa29 Project Room, Caserta | Milan*





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1. Paragraphs 1 and 2 were written by Diego Mantoan, while paragraph 3 was written by Lara Gaeta. The conclusions were mutually agreed by the authors. [↩](#)
2. Catalog: La Repubblica delle Meraviglie, edited by Diego Mantoan and Paola Tognon, Venice: Ca' Foscari Sostenibile 2018. [↩](#)
3. Diego Mantoan, "Alle radici dell'arte ambientale e partecipativa", in La Repubblica delle Meraviglie, edited by Diego Mantoan and Paola Tognon, Venice: Ca' Foscari Sostenibile 2018, pp.7-9. [↩](#)
4. Catalog: Mutabis, Milan-Caserta: aA29 Edizioni, 2016. [↩](#)
5. Catalog: La Terra dei Fiori, texts by Daniele Capra and Gabi Scardi, Milan-Caserta: aA29 Edizioni, 2017. [↩](#)
6. Further information are available on the website: <https://www.edra.org/page/edra50> [↩](#)
7. Further information are available on the post specifically devoted to the performance on the website of NYU Tandon in June 2019: <https://engineering.nyu.edu/news/flower-power> [↩](#)
8. Statement by the artist in the official press release for the performance in April 2019. [↩](#)
9. Heiner Stachelhaus, *Joseph Beuys. Una vita di controimmagini*, trad. it. di R. Gado, Monza: Johan & Levi Editore, 2012, p.133. [↩](#)
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