

UFOs OVER THE FIELD

A BEST PRACTICES [ANTI]GUIDE FOR
COMMUNITY CULTURAL PROJECTS
IN RURAL AREAS.

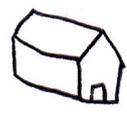


CASE STUDY: RE_EMERGIR



Slowly and hardly noticeable to me, rust began its indestructible advance. Gradually, the streets were filled with brambles and nettles, the fountains overflowed their primitive channels, the embankments succumbed under the weight of silence and snow, and the first cracks began to appear on the walls and roofs of the oldest houses. There was nothing I could do to avoid it.

Llamazares, J. (1992) The Yellow Rain, Barcelona, Seix Barral.



Foreplay

Departing from our experience concerning the Re_Emergir project —developed in 2019 at Borralha, a Portuguese former mining village, within the Tandem Europe program— we've come up with this practical [anti]guide, which we hope will contribute to the discussion about alternative pathways concerning the development of community-based cultural projects in rural and other peripheral areas.

The goal of this [anti]guide is to share our code and to make our methodology accessible, while simultaneously allowing us to cast further reflection over our own experience. It's not intended to work for everyone nor for every territory nor situation: don't underestimate the importance of factors such as flexibility or chance, which will imprint that crucial organic character onto your project.

Rather than hard or absolute guidelines, these words represent the result of an intense emotional and collective process. You should know your context better than us, so don't try to follow our recipe step-by-step. Directed towards nonprofits, policy makers, citizens and local action groups alike, we hope that the following pages may help you reflect on the practices you wish to develop, while proving useful to anyone aiming to engage in actual community projects, participatory art and cultural action in peripheral areas.

Aveiro & Valladolid, February 2020



ARRR! 10



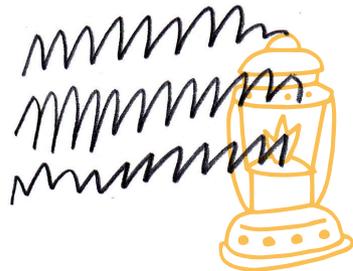
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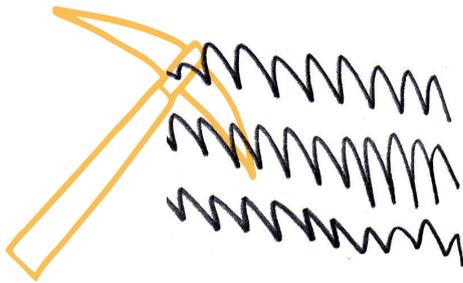
SOMOS O FUTURO

**It was the time at which
children play in the
streets of all the villages,
filling the afternoon
with their screaming.
When the black walls
still reflect the yellow
sunlight.**

[...]

**I walked down royal
street at that time. I
looked at the empty
houses; the chipped
doors, invaded by grass.**

Rulfo, J. (2015) Pedro Páramo, Madrid, Cátedra.



I. Introduction

Before we get started, we should consider the sizeable contrast between two disparate models of cultural production:

- A **top down** approach to culture, in which the centres of cultural power provide entertainment commodities to the public/spectator, who is in turn accounted for as a success indicator. Supported by a precarious “creative class” that struggles to crack the productive system and to come up with any possible commercial usages for its creativity, this model of culture is a byproduct of neoliberalism, and is often considered to have a neutral character, when it is in fact crammed with ideology and very frequently put to the service of mass tourism.
- A **bottom up** approach to culture, collectively developed, which considers all cultural production to be of relevance. Success is measured not by quantity indicators such as number of spectators but by factors such as the quality of the relations that these cultural actions are able to generate. This model of culture is usually slow-cooked at a smaller scale and displays quality standards closer to pedagogy than to entertainment, while generating space for debate and reflection. With citizenship and participation at its main core, this approach is based on a new institutional critique, in which citizens acknowledge and exert their right to cultural production.

While this may be an oversimplification, we believe that the later model may favour the empowerment and critical faculties of each and every collective or individual who plays an active part within it. We also consider the distinction between these two models to be an essential departing point for our work. Although we are definitely more positioned along the lines of a bottom up approach, that doesn't mean that this model shouldn't also be constantly revised.

In fact, during the development of the Re_Emergir project, several questions arose concerning each of the concepts with which we were dealing, from the very notions of community and rurality to others like participation or culture. Along the following pages we hope to untangle these concepts as much as possible.

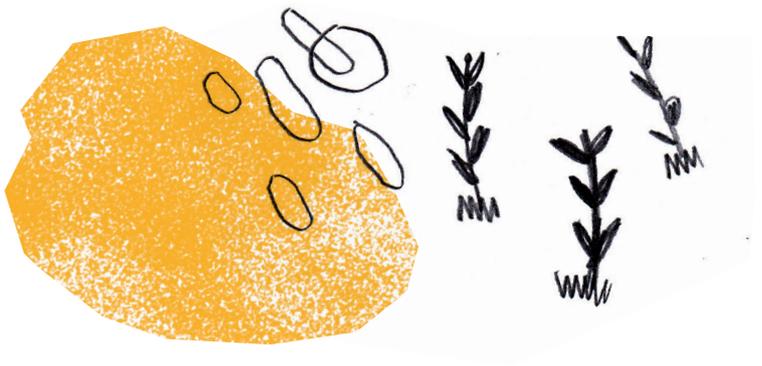




**A person with a
chainsaw plays a role in
the forest, and in doing
so he or she becomes
part of his or her cycle,
of that abstraction
that is the forest
community.**

Hubbell, S. (2017), A year in the woods, Madrid, Errata Naturae.





II. Our recipe

Interested in getting to know our methodology? Read our recipe and try remixing it in different ways. Take into account that not even we followed it thoroughly!

[A] Understand the community

Get to know the community you wish to work with: territory, socioeconomic context, local and regional issues. Try to identify which individuals, action groups and local agents play more active roles within the community. These may prove to be your main allies, since they can collaborate with you, help introduce you to the rest of the community and share all sorts of invaluable insight about the local context.

1 **Go easy.** Whatever you do, don't come in rushing like a forest fire. Start slow and take your time to adapt to the specificities of rurality, as space and time often operate in a different fashion here. Respect local ways and habits, timings, spaces and the general dynamics of the place. In case you are planning more than one field trip to the territory, you'll want to start off with the smallest possible group and then gradually scale up your team.

2 **Mingle.** Approach the social spaces inhabited by the community with humbleness, openness, spontaneity and respect. Engage as much as possible in traditional activities: card games, music jams, table football matches, sports activities, hiking or trails... Getting involved in the cultural and ludic activities of the community is a great way to get acquainted with the actual people that constitute it and to better understand their daily lives.

3 Diversify. Take into account that most public social spaces in rural areas are inhabited by a majority of men, and don't forget to approach the social spaces where the women usually get together. Also consider the existence of other minorities regarding race or disability for example, so that you may perspective and portrait the community in the most diverse, inclusive and representative way possible.

4 Spend time with people. Share free time, meals and other activities without too many plans or expectations: sit, eat, drink, talk, listen, walk, dance... Enjoy your time and live each moment to the fullest.

5 Listen. As important as talking may be, listening can prove to be an even more fundamental aspect of effective communication. Let yourself be surprised by the knowledge, opinions and experience of the community. Get to know the ways of communication—both verbal and gestural—which are specific to that territory, broaden your vocabulary and learn typical sayings and expressions.

6 Don't be a UFO. Try to avoid approaches, behaviours and activities that will deliberately shock or confuse the locals. While a well-balanced dosis of disruption is probably desirable, you should try to come up with strategies of co-identification, rather than those of conflict or opposition.

7 Acknowledge you are a UFO. That said, you should acknowledge that—whatever you may do and as hard as you may try—you're always going to be a UFO anyway. Accepting this fact is the first step towards an honest relationship with the community.





8 **Know the terrain.** Cultivate a deep understanding of the territory: let yourself drift aimlessly across its streets, paths and other walkscapes, and map those into your emotional memory. Let the locals lead you through different itineraries -¿Jane's walks?- and listen to their stories about the place. Then develop your own psycho-geographic experience and share it with them.

9 Research. Make an effort to understand also the historic and symbolic levels of the territory. Take a dive into whatever books, researches and administrative documents you may find, and consider the possibility of conducting interviews: this will help you to better understand the community.

10 Partner up. Try to take into account the different levels of population, the several collectivities and individualities, as well as the local, regional and national institutions that may be implied in your project, and try to establish a consistent and bilateral dialogue with all of them. Don't feel bad if you're not able to check all of those boxes.

11 Join in. Whenever possible, participate and collaborate in activities and initiatives already present in the territory, such as traditions and festivities. Offer your sincere help but try not to get more involved than what you think the community will feel is adequate. Don't try to change or enrich those activities before you really get to know and live them through.

12 Step down. Don't presume to think that you've come to save, help or teach anything to anyone. This is a mutual game and — if everything happens the way it is supposed to— you'll find yourself getting as much as you are giving. So take the time to consider that maybe you need them as much as they need you: it's all about sharing time, knowledge(s) and experience(s).

13 Be Monaco. Try to foresee at least some of the eventual conflicts that may arise during the project and prepare strategies to deal with them in the most diplomatic, democratic and conciliatory ways possible. Take into account eventual existing tensions within the community and —while you shouldn't presume to solve them— at least make sure that you don't contribute to aggravate them.

14 Drop the preaching. Assuming that you have your own ideologies and that you're involved in certain causes to some extent — environmental, political, feminist, antiracist...— please run a full check up on the eventual colonialist character of your own (urban) perspective, and take the time to listen and learn from the methods, practices and issues of rurality. Don't impose your ideologies onto others: engage in horizontal and unbiased conversations, and remember that your actions are worth a thousand words.

[B] Shape your project

Once you know as much as you can about the community —and taking into account that this task will remain a work in progress— it's time to start planning your project.

15 Set goals. What are you trying to do? Are you aiming to address a specific issue, to reinforce the feeling of belonging within the community, to shed light over a particular cause or to enhance the cultural offer accessible to a certain territory? Delineate your project taking into account the several levels of objectives —human, cultural, socio-economical, territory development...— that you aspire to deal with or reflect upon.

16 Co-create. Design your project in dialogue with the community, local agents and policy makers. Checking some participatory practices toolkits or manuals may be a good idea. Although you probably already have a rough notion of what you want to do, consult the population and other involved parts to understand their opinions. This should also contribute to enhance the community's sense of ownership regarding the project.

17 Hybridise. Mix different fields and methodologies from both the artistic and rural worlds: installation, knitting, vídeo, agriculture, illustration, gastronomy, sculpture, heritage and sports can

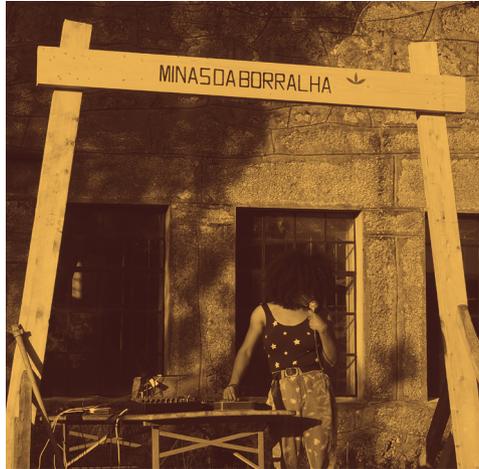
interweave and work together towards a more comprehensive project, with which locals can more easily identify. Drop any hierarchic classifications concerning the various kinds of practices and make sure that they all have a similar representation.

18 Find balance. Try to find the right harmony between tradition and contemporarity, carefully attending to the local heritage, while shedding new light over it with a vanguard approach. But don't overdo it: contemporary practices don't necessarily have to be weird nor do they have to be merely directed to those already familiar with its semantics. Programming an unnecessarily bizarre or eccentric activity may result in the community closing in on itself and rejecting other inputs. Again, some disruption is usually desirable as long as the dosage is right.

19 Take advantage of the terrain. Apply your knowledge of the territory in order to integrate different space typologies into your project. Try to combine the more obvious spaces —safe, comfortable, representative...— with less evident ones —undervalued, feminised, masculinised, racialised...— in favor of a more inclusive approach.

20 Encourage participation. If the goal is to empower citizenship within the community, there should be room for more participatory activities —like meetings, debates or workshops— besides others less participatory ones —such as concerts or exhibitions. Remember that also the latter can be quite participatory if the community is adequately involved in the processes.

21 Reach out. Don't be afraid of asking the residents for help. Most of the time they will be more than happy to have your back. Consider also involving the population during pre-production processes and other early tasks.



22 **Be flexible.** Try to impose the less possible content or format onto the programmed activities with the community. Although a workshop can be a great way of getting together and sharing knowledge, a less formal gathering may be more suitable as it may lead to more authentic and unexpected results.

23 **Less is more.** Don't overdo it when programming activities. Allow enough time and space so that these are easily accessible to everyone, and don't forget to leave some room for leisure moments within your team and with the community.

24 **Be here and now.** Favor the processes over the results and think in terms of continuity rather than ephemerality. Embrace the accidental and the unexpected, and don't be afraid to fail over and over until you get it right. Festivals may be an interesting way to shed new light over a depopulated area but be advised that more sustainable and continuous activities will cater for longer-lasting relations with the community and deeper results concerning territorial development.

25 **Document.** Register everything you do as much as possible. Keeping a written and/or audiovisual journal can prove to be an extremely useful tool for further reflection and communication, and will allow for the recovery of past moments and references, ensuring that you don't forget anything or anyone.

26 **Communicate.** Make use of social networks, local agents, press and crowdsourcing methods in order to lend visibility to the project and to the community. Make sure that everyone involved will feel included and well-represented, while generating awareness regarding the importance of both the project and the community itself.

[C] Teamwork

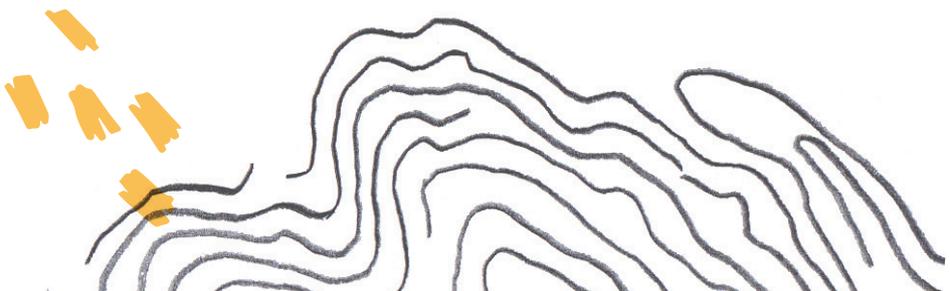
A thoughtful selection of team members and invited artists is absolutely fundamental to the success of the project. Choose your production and creative team wisely and take good care of them during the whole process.

27 All together now. Assemble a diverse and flexible work group which you believe will be able to work well together and to respond to the various creative and logistic situations that they will face during your project. They should be good listeners and communicators, and at least part of them should already be familiar with the territory and its inhabitants. Also consider the role that each one of these people may play regarding each group within the community: different groups—such as children, senior women or teenagers— may imply distinctive approaches and work models.

28 Drop the divas. Select those thinkers, technicians, creators and facilitators who are used to working with communities and with people in general. Flexibility, humbleness, empathy, humour and good communication skills are some of the crucial attributes to look for in your team, besides their specific artistic or technical competences.

29 Like a ninja. Again, if you are planning more than one field trip to the territory, it's better to start off with a smaller scouting party before you bring in the cavalry. Start small and then gradually scale up your team.

30 Water the plants. Be as thoughtful and considerate to your team as you are to the community: make sure that the living and working spaces are always well taken care of, and make enough room for meals, rest, reflection and recreation times. Remember that the internal dynamics of the group will directly influence all external dynamics and determine the first impressions that your group will transmit to the broader community.







31 **Conspire.** Internal communication is at least as important as external communication, so be sure to encourage team meetings, debates, brainstorming and collective reflection moments, while working in the most transparent fashion possible. Try to create and distribute a welcome pack for each team member with all the relevant information, make use of signposting whenever necessary and always keep your team well informed along the process.

32 **Be Switzerland.** Just like with the community, it's perfectly normal that minor conflicts should arise within your team. Again, try to foresee which issues are more probable to come up and prepare strategies to deal with them in the most democratic and conciliatory ways possible.

[D] About reciprocity

It's very important that all processes developed within your project are considered not from an extraction point of view but from a logic of interchange. Reflect carefully upon which community resources you are using up and which assets you are contributing with yourself. Also meditate on what will happen after you are gone and on what you will leave behind.

33 **Give back.** One of the most obvious —but not less important—ways of doing so is spending at least part of your financial resources locally: acquire as much as the supplies you can within the community, hire residents for certain tasks and jobs, buy local and traditional products. Also try to help out the population with their own tasks whenever you think you are needed and welcome to, and bring them gifts such as traditional goods from your region or your own artistic creations.

34 **Keep it real.** Be very cautious concerning the eventual instrumentalisation or exoticification of the community you are working with. Community-based and participatory projects seem to be an emerging trend, and many of the so called community-driven projects are in fact using communities to greenwash the public image of their organisations, to ensure easier access to public funding or as a way to cover up other political or financial interests.



35 Give credit. Include the community, local agents, policy makers and individual participants into your marketing and communications efforts, and don't forget to mention them and to attribute the proper credits when communicating to the press, social networks and other media, giving them as much visibility as possible.

36 Stay in touch. As much as possible, try to keep those communication juices flowing with the resident population even after the project is over. After all, that's what social media is for, right?

37 Empower. Generate some kind of product, tool, knowledge base or resource that you can leave behind after you're gone, which may be used or replicated by the community. Work tools, methodologies and audio-visual objects—such as a documentary about the project and the territory— can be good examples.

38 Come back. If you did it right, be assured that the residents themselves will take care of reminding you that you should return to the scene of the crime as soon as possible.

**Minas da
Borralha**







III. Our context

It's accurate to say that, in 2019, Spain witnessed a huge increase concerning interest around topics such as rurality and depopulation. These issues that have been slowly cooking for at least 40 years have finally reached the first line of political debate, along other discussion fields such as sustainability, food policies, the Common Agricultural Policy or the right to basic services for all.

Portugal is currently also the scenario for specific rural development policies being conducted by local action groups and policy makers, nonprofits and national institutions such as the General Direction of Agriculture and Rural Development, Turismo de Portugal and by the several Culture Direction regional departments.

The geographic proximity and similar conditions shared by both nations allow for the consideration of a common departure point of view: the revalorisation of a rural area through the development of a community-based cultural project which may bring back the right to culture within an isolated, depopulated and economically-depressed community.

In a time when meetings, debates, exhibitions, festivals and other projects in, from and about rurality are becoming ubiquitous, we chose to develop a slowly cooked cultural approach. Most of the events previously referred to aim to bring focus back to rurality and possibly attract tourism into these areas. The case of festivals is especially meaningful since these are frequently designed and coordinated by large urban companies that very often will impose their own settings, formats and contents to rural communities, which will again find themselves victims of colonisation —this time by cultural industries.

Our approach —we must insist— rests far away from the search for economical revenue and numerical success. Our methods and goals are rather focused on establishing a dialogue with a rural community based on equality, transparency and reciprocity, and on bringing back the right to culture from the democratic logic of radical access to culture for all.

This doesn't mean that the artist figure must be taken out of the picture. Nevertheless, instead of being perceived as some kind of high-powered mutant gifted with extraordinary and supernatural skills, the artist is understood as a researcher-mediator: a specialist in transforming collective ideas into sensorial results, dedicated to activating processes of knowledge sharing and participation amongst others.

Departing from this point of view we'd like to underline once more that this idea of restoring the right to culture within rural areas does not imply an effort to activate creativity based on repetitive sessions of handicrafts or folklore. What it does imply is coming up with new forms of making —for, with and from the rural—without deprecating those traditional activities which have generally been considered as subaltern practices, while also not inflating them onto a pedestal. We are aligned with a kind of art that aspires to produce new senses and auto-narratives, while attempting to find its place within these post-autonomous times —far from the artistic nineteenth century paradigm—, and declaring respect and listening as its essential backbone.

Again, our approach departs from a small scale, from what is foreign to general interest, what is out of place, what doesn't appear in the photo. We focus on a concept of sustainability—not at a financial but rather at a human level—in which the community may sustain its own cultural production. We don't work for mass tourism. The raw materials we work with are mindful affective relations, read from the lense of gender, race and social equality, and articulated —at the human, cultural and political levels— by kindness, empathy, tenderness and flexibility.



Our references include Spanish organisations such as Fundación Cereales Antonino y Cinia, Campo Adentro (Inland), Fundación Entretantos, Asociación Ábrego, Rural-C and Espacio Matrioska amongst others —such as some of the projects proposed by Zemos 98, whose approach is always an example to be taken into account. Some interesting cases of Portuguese references include the Vezeira de Fafião association and the Binaural - Nodar community-based sound art project in rurality. Ethno-education, collective reorganisation, neighbourly conviviality, agri-food policies, pastoralism, collective imaginary and auto-narrative are some of the key concepts we've been able to pick up from the above mentioned organisations.





In the small peasant worlds there isn't a natural exterior outside the social sphere: everything surrounding the peasant community concerns them and determines their living conditions. [...] Until four days ago, agricultural activities were not only the common denominator of the social fabric, but they also represented the bridge between the domestic environment of human groups and their ecological environment.

Badal, M. (2018), Outdoor Lives: Nostalgia and Prejudices about the Peasant World, Logroño, Oviedo Pepitas Ed. And Cambalache.



IV. Case study: Re_Emergir

It was Borralha's singular charm that made us feel magnetically attracted towards this peculiar village in the first place: a bizarre combination of natural beauty and industrial ruins which illustrates the decadence of a long bygone industrial era and of the golden age of mining. An echo from the early 20th century — where the hardships of labour can still be perceived— and a good representation of the workers' struggle, which in this profession assumes an almost legendary status.

The mineral extracted in Borralha was wolfram, also called tungsten, mostly used in the construction of weaponry for World War II, and which reached extreme market prices. As can be expected, this instigated a lot of miners and other locals to engage in the illegal practice of wolfram smuggling, the so called "fárria". We can only imagine the stories yet untold about this.

It's difficult nowadays to imagine a place like Borralha working at full throttle, even if you think that it was once one of the main economical cores of northern Portugal —just like a tiny big city— where residents could find everything they needed: living conditions much better than the average for that time, food, fashion, education or culture. Since the late 80s, when the mine was permanently shut down, the village was abandoned by the mining company administration, inaugurating a time of economical suspension and depression, which in turn led to mass emigration and depopulation.

We felt truly comfortable and at peace with the geographically isolated character of the village, but could nevertheless witness how this doesn't cater for an easy access to whoever may wish to visit, in the same way that it disrupts the access of the local population to nearby shops, jobs, cultural centres or schools. The social life of Borralha is currently supported by two cultural

and recreational associations, a cafe and a trailer bar. A division of the Barroso Eco-museum, the Interpretative Center of the Borralha Mines has, since 2015, handled both the material and symbolic heritage concerning the mine and its people, while also promoting cultural and sports activities in the area.

The name of our project —Re_Emergir— refers to Borralha's mining identity, suggesting the idea of coming back up to surface from deep within its long, dark tunnels. Our main goal was to establish connections with and between the population, in order to help develop a collective narrative about their history and translate it into artistic projects that tell the story of their present and contribute to propel the village towards a desirable future.

We worked within different discursive and practical dimensions, departing from a fundamental human and emotional level, and addressing cultural, artistic and heritage aspects, while also beginning to reflect on territorial development issues. We consequently divided the project in two distinctive phases: the absolute goal of the first was to get to know and introduce ourselves to the community; and the second consisted in a series of arts residencies, workshops and meetings.

Our first incursion was mostly about establishing an open dialogue with the population, getting to know the more active groups and each person individually, and understanding the history and heritage of the place. Comprised of four people, the initial scouting party developed some research on the area, supported by a series of video-interviews conducted with the locals, mostly focused on each one's history, identity memory, conception of culture and visions of future.

During this first stay we took the time to join some of the daily activities which took place, such as playing cards and table football, savouring local gastronomy or following the community through a hiking trail. We also invited local inhabitants over —to the former elementary school that we called home— for meals, drinks, conversation and laughter. Furthermore, we visited the village of Fafião and Os Blancos, in Galicia, where we shared

MINAS
ADA
BORRAHA



our project vision with other individuals and collectives more seasoned in these matters, establishing affective networks with nearby territories and adding to the cross-border character of the project. Despite repeated warnings by regional policy makers that this was a closed and suspicious community who would probably refuse participating in our project, we found nothing but warm, neighbourly and welcoming human beings, with whom we gradually became good friends and who took great care of us all the way.

For our second field trip we gathered a group of nine people: three producers-facilitators, a chef and five artists from multiple fields, who joined different workgroups depending on the roles each one would play within the community. Our return was welcomed with enthusiasm by the community, and during the next days the resident artists shared knowledge, experiences and good times with the population, in a multidisciplinary, intergenerational and horizontal fashion. Anan (Spain) and Celestial Brizuela (Argentina) set up workshops and meetings with women, seniors and children, which resulted in a real-time analog retro-projected animation show; V de Sotavento (Portugal) prepared a VJ performance remixing footage from the village; Trans Van Santos (USA) and O Gringo Sou Eu (Brazil) joined Zé Silva — a local teenager, concertina player and our main native facilitator— to create the band “Zé & os Ovnis” (Zé and the UFOs).

For the grand finale, we celebrated all together in an event we called “Fárr[i]a”, a small-scale but high-quality event with live music and audiovisuals, distributed through two different and representative areas of the village, with a guided tour in between both conducted by some of the locals. This was a party to dance, share recent memories and references, and to say goodbye to our new friends. Besides the resident artists we invited the Franco-Galician artist Mounqup and Lendário Homem do Trigo, eclectic musician rooted in the region, with whom we completed the cultural program of the evening. A substantial part of the population danced and enjoyed themselves at both the “Fundição” and the “Pensão” stages, and was joined by friends and visitors from Aveiro, Braga, Valladolid...

The relentless help and availability of the implicated population — Marta and Zé Nuno from the Eco-museum, the cafe and the trailer-bar owners, Victor, Severino, Mila with her delicious cookies, and Sameiro with her exquisite savoury pastry, amongst others— was of paramount importance for the success of the event.

After finishing these lines, we still have one last mission: publishing the documentary that we've been developing with director Vanessa Fernandes, where we are combining the interviews we made, some of the things we learned with the inhabitants of Borralha, our experiences on the field and some beautiful footage of the village —its natural, cultural and industrial legacy. With this audiovisual object we are hoping to give something back to the community, and to generate content that may help shed new light over their territory and about how one may produce culture on this and other peripheral geographies. It's also a great excuse to go back there and get together with the community, since we'll obviously have to organise the première of the documentary in situ.







V. Who are we?

Words & Project Coordination

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Ecoopera [ES]

Ecoopera is an asociación that works within the rural-urban axis towards the establishment of cultural, economical and emotional bridges between both, through the promotion of cultural management, circular economy and rural development projects, under a logic of rural culture revalorisation, social participation and ecology.

www.ecoopera.es



VIC // Aveiro Arts House [PT]

Located at the former house of the multifaceted artist Vasco Branco (1019-2014), the Aveiro Arts House has a great tradition concerning arts, culture and political resistance, currently combining an arts residency, a guesthouse and a cultural centre into a lively and creative ecosystem in the very heart of Aveiro. With an expertise in contemporary arts residencies applied to site-specific, community and heritage projects, VIC also produces and programs cultural contents for a number of external events.

www.aveiroartshouse.com

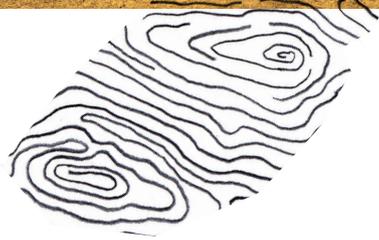


My invisible narrative. The women of my house. Just like a shady spot, that area of the slopes where the sun barely reaches. Those gradients which, due to their orography, are devoted to the shadow. In the shady spot strong species also grow. [...] The shadow. The lack of light. The fact that we cannot see them or, rather, that we do not know how to see them, doesn't mean that they are not there.

Sánchez, M. (2019) Land of Women, Barcelona, Seix Barral.







VI. Acknowledgments

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