The Right to Beauty as an Element of Social Justice

Interview with **Simona Bordone** and
Pasquale Campanella, Fondazione Wurmkos

Orietta Brombin



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Europe

INTRODUCTION

↥ Cover photo
Wurmkos, *Andare con le radici*, 2023, PAV Turin. Photo: Filippo Ballarin

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In 2023, PAV – Parco Arte Vivente, experimental centre for contemporary art – presented the solo exhibition of the Italian artist collective Fondazione Wurmkos entitled *Andare con le radici* (Going with the roots). Founded in 1987 by Pasquale Campanella, Wurmkos is best conceived as an open space or laboratory to connect art and people suffering from mental disease. *Andare con le radici* consisted of visual works and installations as well as several workshops that reflected on the methods of Wurmkos and the practice of mutual aid. In this interview by curator Orietta Brombin from PAV, Simona Bordone and Pasquale Campanella of Wurmkos discuss the history and development of the group, their approach to societal issues and neurodiversity, and ways to engage participants.



↥ Würmkos, *Andare con le radici*, 2023, PAV Turin. Photo: Filippo Ballarin

OB **Wurmkos is a pioneer of artistic practices created within the scope of (what we would currently call) neurodiversity in Italy. Taking into consideration the value of neurodiversity is also one of the pedagogical assumptions of PAV's mission. What were the fundamental steps in the creation of the group and your first experiments?**

Wurmkos was set up as a laboratory in 1987 together with the users of the Cooperativa Lotta Contro l'Emarginazione di Sesto San Giovanni (the Cooperative Fighting Marginalisation in Sesto San Giovanni – a suburb of Milan). From the very outset, it was intended to be a fluid and open space capable of involving different subjects without any overall goal of salvation. Inspired by the work of the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia[1], Wurmkos debated the issues of diversity and the stigmatisation of those affected by mental disease. Wurmkos' *procedural objects* originated in the mid-1990s. Our interest was not in the artwork as a formal object, but rather in the dynamics that experiential and relational processes brought into play for its realisation. Since the end of the 1990s, our research has focused on the "care of place of care", as in, for example, *Abitare* (2000-2004), Comunità Parpagliona, Sesto San Giovanni (Milan); *Plurale* (2006-2009), Comunità di Pieve San Giacomo (Cremona); *Belli dentro, curare i luoghi con cura* (2015-2016), Casa AMA - Salute Mentale di Trento; *Coabitare l'isola* (2019-2022), Centro specialistico per l'età evolutiva, Malegno (Brescia). The interest in health care facilities was generated by the assumption that they should be welcoming places that are more domestic and less impersonal. Care for our living environment poses general questions that include the idea of beauty as an element of social justice. Today, the workshop is not only where theories, ideas and projects can grow, it is also a work that continues to develop. Here, everyday life, encounters with other people, objects, designs, collages, photos and performances arise spontaneously, without any need for an audience, to create visions and spatial changes.

OB **The Wurmkos collective has been very active in PAV with exhibitions as well as numerous workshops and installations. It defines itself as an open space, a non-stop laboratory of shared experiences that, expressly outside the framework of "art therapy", brings together artistic practice and creators with complex needs to make works based on a lengthy procedural and participative practice. Why do you think that art therapy is not a representative practice?**

It was our deliberate choice that Wurmkos should be a visual arts laboratory without supervision by health care professionals (doctors, therapists, nurses, et cetera). Its aim is to engage with the world of contemporary art, its spaces, its forms, and its debates. Acceptance of this approach has taken considerable time and a lot of persuasion on our part. After the 1998 exhibition, *Figure dell'anima. Arte irregolare* in Europa (Figures of the Soul, Outsider Art in Europe), curated by Bianca Tosatti, we decided to avoid associations with the idea of the art of "others", or whatever you want to call it.

OB **What is your take on the current state of the battle for the rights of people with mental-physical fragilities?**

Up until the 1970s, people with mental-physical fragilities were a source of shame for their relatives. Today, this no longer is the case. However, there is still a tendency to build closed environments characteristic of total institutionalisation – the communities that house so many people, for example – and a temptation to bring back the separation in schools. In Italy, the ongoing reduction of resources to treat people is at the root of these tendencies and is not without political motivation.

OB **How do you manage to both stimulate and valorise the creative side of each participant in the workshops, and how do the exhibition projects come about?**

Those who come to the workshops and decide to remain already have a predisposition for expression. By starting from the needs of each individual, each person in the group can discover the right moment, the material and physical position that makes them feel at ease. No pressure is placed on

1 Franco Basaglia (1924–1980) is considered to be the most influential Italian psychiatrist of the 20th century. He proposed the dismantling of psychiatric hospitals, and was the figurehead and founder of Democratic Psychiatry.

the participants in the workshop to act, and we implement a policy of “nothing-established”, where anything is possible. For us the project is not an anticipation of something to come. We have always said that “the projects just came about”. Over time what seemingly has no purpose takes on meaning, that’s how ideas come into being.

OB **Piero Gilardi (1942–2023), the founder of the PAV, an ante-litteram relational artist, theorist, and political activist, left us a great poetic vision. From the early 1970s on, he promoted the theories of Basaglia in Turin with the founding of an atelier dedicated to collective creativity, open to neurodivergence. His radical, lateral, and transcultural vision of the world is present in PAV’s participatory practices of experimental, artistic and anthropological research. Is Piero Gilardi’s history also one your reference points?**

Gilardi has been a reference point for our studies, above all the period from 1969 to 1979, when he’d stopped exhibiting and expressed his disappointment about how quickly the art world had been institutionalised. He decided to withdraw from it, and renounced his status as an artist in order to become active in social movements, and bring the issue of culture into the political debate. Wurmkos has always acted as a bridge between art and civil society with projects that have been open to the territory understood as a togetherness of physical space and community. Another affinity with Gilardi is linked to mental illness. When he worked with the Associazione Lotta contro le Malattie Mentali (Association for the Fight Against Mental Diseases) and Centro Aurora (a medical centre in Turin), he established the basis for the development of a collective creativity and discourse in relation to the diversities that we possess.

OB **Following Gilardi’s ideas and practices, PAV was founded on the principles of horizontality. It acknowledges nature’s biodiversity as a model of cohabitation and as an interdependency of the various species that coexist in a shared ecosystem. In this ecosystem the differentiation of the living is the creative and generative engine. Can you cite any projects that are based on research into the intermixing of humans and non-humans?**

There are two ongoing projects in which we investigate the natural world. *Wurmkos Animale*, which started in 2005, calls into question the juxtaposition of humans and non-humans, of domesticated and “uncivilised” thought. According to the current paradigm, the balance is weighed in favour of the human at the top of the pyramid. Changing this perspective and embracing animality provides the opportunity to return to a discussion about our instinctive, visceral, but also primary, warm, and relational qualities. We aren’t separate from the others, but, if anything, we can welcome the diversity that is in us, and among us. *Andare con le radici*, revisited these concepts with an exhibition at the Turin PAV in 2023, revolving around plants. When we returned to the laboratory after COVID-19, we no longer saw the space as a room but rather as living ground beneath our feet. We saw it as a living being, a forest, an interdependent organism, and this viewpoint generated a number of reflections, including the idea of “mutual support” as theorised by the anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921). The idea is that this is the primary drive at the centre of all biological and social life. In society, it is mutual solidarity that can help to reformulate effective political language and lead the individual to consider the rights of each person as being equal to their own – a nineteenth century idea that, in our opinion, should be reappraised today.



↤ Wurmkos, *Coabitare l'isola*, 2021, Brescia. Photo: Antonio Maniscalco
↦ *Wurmkos Animale*, laboratory, 2007. Photo: Filippo Ballarin
↧ Wurmkos, *Andare con le radici*, 2023, PAV Turin. Photo: Filippo Ballarin











↥ Wurmkos, *Andare con le radici*, 2023, PAV Turin. Photo: Filippo Ballarin
↤ Invitation for presentation Wurmkos Magazine, 1989, Casa della Cultura, Milan
↦ Wurmkos, *Andare con le radici*, 2023, PAV Turin. Photo: Filippo Ballarin



Wurmkos, *Belli dentro, curare i luoghi con cura*, 2016, Trento. Photo: Pierluigi Cattani Faggion

CONTEXT

This text is one of the pilot studies of *Re-Imagine Europe: New Perspectives for Action*. In these contributions we explore and reflect on artistic practices and experimental approaches in the cultural field that can engage and activate audiences and communities to address ecological, social, and political challenges. The pilot studies provide an overview of practices of cultural organisations that can serve as models, recipes, or tools for transformation for current and future generations of cultural workers and artists.

Re-Imagine Europe: New Perspectives for Action (2023–2027) is a four-year transnational co-creation and circulation project of fourteen interdisciplinary art organisations across Europe. The project aims to equip and empower young Europeans through artistic practices to better withstand societal challenges triggered by rapid climate change.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Orietta Brombin is an expert in art education who has been working at PAV Parco Arte Vivente since its foundation in 2008. In the Experimental Centre for Contemporary Art in Turin founded by Piero Gilardi, she is in charge of the Educational and Training Activities. At PAV she curates the annual programme of workshops led by Italian and international artists, the programmes for students and young artists, and she also coordinates the public programme. The author of many essays and articles, since 2008 she has curated numerous exhibitions and has participated in important network projects with contemporary art foundations and museums, associations, research centres and training agencies in Italy and abroad. Since 2020 she has been teaching Museology of the Contemporary at the Accademia Albertina in Turin.

Wurmkos is a laboratory of visual arts founded by Pasquale Campanella in 1987 at Sesto San Giovanni, Milan(IT). Wurmkos is a “Basaglia type” experience (the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia promoted the shutting down of psychiatric hospitals in Italy) that links art and psychological distress without any attempt at salvation. Participants in the laboratory, with mental-physical distress or not, include artists, critics and the people participating in multiple projects. Wurmkos’ group and solo exhibitions have been presented at La Biennale di Venezia; 10th Gwangju Biennale (KR); Kunstraum lakeside, Klagenfurt (AT); La Triennale di Milano; PAV, Turin; Pac - Padiglione d'arte contemporanea, Milan; Megaron the Concert Hall, Athens (GR); Museo del 900, Milan; Istituto Italiano di Cultura, Barcelona (SP); COD, Tirana (AL). It became an NGO in 2011, aimed at preserving the cultural and material patrimony of the group and sharing it with the collectivity.

COLOPHON

↳ www.re-imagine-europe.eu

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