Being Otherwise

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Re Imagine Europe

New Perspectives for Action

INTRODUCTION

For more than fifteen years, a group of adult patients and educators from the Mental Health Department of Turin’s Local Health Authority has been participating in the workshops of PAV – Parco Arte Vivente, the experimental centre for contemporary art in Turin. In this text, curator Orietta Brombin traces the history of an experience that has become increasingly relevant, and reflects on the motivations and creative methods that have enabled the participants to grow together through the exploration and experimentation with various contemporary artistic languages.



Valuing neurodiversity is one of the pedagogical foundations of PAV's mission. Central to the organisation's approach is the recognition of nature's biodiversity as a model for coexistence and interdependence among diverse agents within a shared ecosystem, where the differentiation of living beings is embraced as a creative and generative force. Lateral thinking is the artistic mindset at the core of Oltre Modo's workshops dedicated to collective creativity; it blends reasoning with intuition – an ability to 'see, sense, and interpret' phenomena in an unconditioned way.

The name of the group, which means 'Another Way', was chosen by the members (adults supported by the Mental Health Department and Centres of the local Health Authority who have participated regularly in PAV's workshops since 2011) and denotes that they represent and express themselves beyond conventional norms.

Over time, the Oltre Modo group – which includes PAV's staff as an integral part – has collectively explored significant and existential contemporary themes through workshops: the meaning of inhabiting both personal and shared spaces; the ability to express one's individual voice within a collective context; and the concepts of depth (where it is dark, as in *Inframondo*, a 2013 workshop led by Laura Viale), and emergence (towards the light, as in *This is the place where I feel at home*, a photographic archaeology of PAV's memory by the artist duo Botto&Bruno in 2013). The expressive challenges encountered during Oltre Modo's annual, process-based activities were often inspired by exhibitions at PAV, and included themes such as turning inward, reaching outward, and acting through physical movement, gesture, and voice. The theme of precariousness was also explored – an unstable condition experienced both by people and endangered plant species – while focusing on the talents and personal aspirations of each participant.

Oltre Modo has experimented with sewing, graphic design, screen printing, writing texts and recipes, all with the aim of finding ways to represent oneself and one's own capabilities. While the working method has become a solid foundation, it is constantly being re-negotiated, and shaped by the suggestions and stimuli offered by PAV's temporary exhibitions. The process involves explorations, photography, drawing, and writing by different individuals: signals emerging from deep and secret places are brought into the light through artistic practice.

For the exhibition *Cambio de Fuerza* (2024), a solo show by Adrián Balseca (Quito, Ecuador, 1989), the group's skills were directed towards creating maps – both imaginative maps and maps based on careful study and personal research – related to the flora and fauna of the Galápagos Islands. On these islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the local sculptor Segundo Teodoro Ruíz, documented by Balseca, creates large sculptures out of cedar wood (*cedrela odorata*). A parallel effort took place in Turin where the group tried to decode the appearance, needs, and environmental challenges of those distant islands.

With the introduction of Article 71 in its constitution in 2008, Ecuador became the first country in the world to recognise nature as a subject with legal rights. It affirms that *Pacha Mama*, or Mother Earth, 'has the right to full respect for her existence, the maintenance and regeneration of her life cycles, structure, functions, and evolutionary processes.' This legal achievement was strongly supported by indigenous communities through political and existential reflections that shifted attention from an anthropocentric vision towards a way of living well together, in diversity and in full harmony with nature.

What might the landscapes, animals, and plants of the Ecuadorian Amazon look like to someone who has never been there? It is a nature distant from them, yet intrinsically part of the greater whole of an extraordinary shared planet, one to be observed in both its lights and shadows. Through this lens, the Oltre Modo group came to know, even from afar, blue-footed boobies, iguanas, and sea lions, forests of rubber trees (*hevea brasiliensis*), giant passion flowers, *kalanchoe*, and flame trees.











Over the years, moving from one exhibition to another, from one habitat to the next, the Oltre Modo group at PAV has created murals for the City of Turin; it has written and printed publications (including reflections from participants, facilitators, psychiatrists, philosophers, and experts); it has produced videos and photographic documentation; and it has designed, built, curated, and presented five workshops with exhibitions in galleries and public spaces. Today, two large installations created by the group are permanently displayed in public institutions: *We of today, yes, we've understood*, at the main headquarters of Turin's Mental Health Department, and *I climbed the tree to see the world*, currently on view at the Valletta Health Facility.

Oltre Modo has taken part in *Officine della Salute*, two socio-cultural programmes, promoted by the City of Turin's Local Health Authority and Mental Health Department, aimed at encouraging projects integrating people living with mental health conditions. For these events, they presented sculptures, posters, and a complex choral performance. Fluidly, just as in the continuous exchange of knowledge, these significant achievements were made possible through collaboration with experts: educators, botanists, musicians, and artists.

Vilma Xocco,[1] when reflecting on the experimental character of the programme and PAV, recognises a defining methodology in this practice: 'This description captures exactly what I, as the director of the Mental Health Department, believe should guide our mission as professionals to truly help patients, or rather, people living with illness: recognising them first and foremost as people.' She continues her analysis by highlighting the parallels between care and art, noting how an open-air, interactive museum like PAV, with its encounter of experiences and ecologies, includes those concepts:

> [...] that refer to movement, something we know is not only beneficial for physical health, but absolutely vital for mental health, for those who suffer from psychiatric conditions [...], for psychological well-being. I don't mean just physical movement, but [...] the capacity for change and ongoing dialogue, the potential for discussion, and even, why not?, for conflict. The inability to engage in dialogue and to make choices leads to serious psychological impoverishment, which becomes synonymous with chronicity in the context of mental illness. [...] The need for change, dialogue, acceptance of difference, and, if necessary, friction with others, always with the opportunity to continue making choices, are at the very heart of mental activity. This concept becomes tangible through the practice of shared creation, as seen in the activities at PAV. Whether working on an artwork or a mural, on painted or papered walls, each person brings their own ideas, embraces the contributions of others, working together toward a final result that feels both recognisable and satisfying for everyone involved.

Starting from temporary exhibitions, the group's progressive design work constantly generates unpredictable processes, which are the fruit of each participant's diverse disciplinary insights. With the environmental installation *Environmental Triage* by the Critical Art Ensemble, featured in the group exhibition *The God-Trick* (2018) visited by the group, the central focus was water, a key player in many current ecological emergencies. Oltre Modo approached this theme through an ethical-aesthetic investigation involving multiple perspectives, developed from natural elements, both vital and symbolic: diatoms, unicellular algae that emerged in the Cretaceous period around 145 million years ago and that play a crucial ecological role as a food source for marine animals, plants, and terrestrial ecosystems. Captivated by their fascinating shapes and colours, participants first drew the diatoms, then painted them, and finally transformed their forms into three-dimensional clay sculptures. These objects, true sculptures, were created under the guidance of expert ceramicists from the Ecomuseum of Clay – *MunLab* in Cambiano.

Participants describe the group's design practice as follows: 'We developed a synthesis that represented our inspirations and served as the conclusion of a

1 Psychiatrist, Director of the Department of Mental Health, Local Health Authority of the City of Turin. All quotes are from *PAVZine #10, Oltre Modo – Fluttuante come il tempo*, March 2019.

journey taken together. The final work is the product of many individuals who contributed and suggested the ideas for the piece [...].'[2]

With Alan Sonfist, a key figure among the pioneers of Land Art and environmental art, the Oltre Modo group engaged in a close dialogue and collaborative relationship that began even before the American artist's arrival in Turin. *Seeds of Time: Growth Between the Cracks*, the public event held in advance of *Seeds of Time* (2025), Sonfist's solo exhibition curated by Marco Scotini, required significant preparatory work on both organisational and communication levels. Sonfist invited citizens to contribute to a 'soil collection', gathering samples of urban earth found in the streets of Turin, between cracks in the asphalt, in crevices along pavements, at the base of buildings, and in those interstitial spaces where nature likes to hide. The process was deliberately detailed and delicate. Participants were asked to collect soil without disturbing any plants or roots already growing there; to label the sample with its location; to take a photograph at the exact spot of collection; to email the image to the artist in New York; and to deliver the sample itself to PAV. These were the complex steps of the gathering process undertaken by local citizens.

The Oltre Modo group also contributed to the installation of micro-landscapes, from which hidden seeds are currently already beginning to sprout, with each member having collected soil from areas near their homes or close to the community mental health centres they visit regularly. The collected samples, each housed in a small box, will remain on display for the duration of the exhibition, forming a collective work in which the plants that emerge stand as silent witnesses to the richness hidden within the earth.

As with the previous examples, Oltre Modo's contribution is part of an ongoing process of individual and collective growth, where art and its diverse forms of expression become a means to creatively transform reality. Reflecting on the creation of one of the many murals co-designed and painted together, Flavia from Oltre Modo describes the experience as follows: 'Many people, one single project: the wall. Like bees buzzing excitedly around a hive to make honey, so people come together to create the mural. Slowly, it fills with shapes, figures that bring it to life. And finally, a project becomes reality. And this is the reality of Parco Arte Vivente: from dream to realisation.'[3]



2 Tommaso and Franco, in *Altre Parole*, PAVZine #7, October 2014

3 Flavia, ibidem

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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BIOGRAPHY

Orietta Brombin is an expert in art education who has been working at PAV Parco Arte Vivente since its foundation in 2008. At this experimental centre for contemporary art in Turin, established by Piero Gilardi, she leads the Educational and Training Activities. She curates the annual programme of workshops led by Italian and international artists, the programmes for students and young artists, and also coordinates the public programme. Brombin is the author of many essays and articles, has curated numerous exhibitions, and participated in major collaborative projects with contemporary art foundations and museums, associations, research centres, and training institutions in Italy and internationally. Since 2020, she has also taught ‘Museology of the Contemporary’ at the Albertina Academy of Fine Arts in Turin.

Oltre Modo is an informally constituted, horizontally organised group composed of adult participants supported by the Mental Health Centres of the Local Health Authority of Turin, the educators who accompany them, and the staff of PAV who lead them through ongoing artistic and workshop-based programmes. Founded as an informal collective in 2011, Oltre Modo has since taken part annually in experimental workshop projects based on the languages of contemporary art under the curatorship of PAV Parco Arte Vivente. Over the years, the group has produced exhibitions, publications, and contributions to local events with a focus on artistic, relational, and social engagement.

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