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PARTICIPATORY ACTIONS, PARTICIPATORY ART, AND RURAL LIFE IN THE POST-INDUSTRIAL CITY OF ASPROPYRGOS

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PORTFOLIO

PARTICIPATORY ACTIONS, PARTICIPATORY ART, AND RURAL LIFE IN THE POST-INDUSTRIAL CITY OF ASPROPYRGOS

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She organizes the AMOLI International Programme on Participatory art and rural life, multiculturalism and resilience in the post-industrial environments, conducting educational activities, international research workshops, community celebrations and creating an international network. Her work has been presented internationally. She has taught "Performance" at an academic level (eighteen years). She has worked as a representative of the European League Institutes of the Arts in Greece, organizing meetings on Research and Innovative teaching methods.

PARTICIPATORY ACTIONS, PARTICIPATORY ART, AND RURAL LIFE IN THE POST-INDUSTRIAL CITY OF ASPROPYRGOS

Abstract

This portfolio is a presentation of the research and artistic practice used by the artist and performed through participatory art works in collaboration with the rural Arvanitic community of the post-industrial city of Aspropyrgos.

Aspropyrgos, a Greek city located 18 km west of Athens, and historically a rural town, in the middle of the 20th century went through a harsh industrial development and is now experiencing its post-industrial phase. In the last decades, the intense migration flow has shaped the multicultural character of the city, and at the same time, a shrinking of the rural Arvanitic community has been noticed, its language getting endangered.

As an example of research and artistic practice, the international interdisciplinary programme "Amoli - Art and Culture: a collective project in the rural, post-industrial, multicultural community of Aspropyrgos" is presented („amoli" is the Aspropyrgos farmers' term for the furrow that irrigates the agricultural crops).

The "Amoli" project highlights the power of participatory art as it creates interdisciplinary visual works presented in rural spaces, transforming them into spaces of contemporary art. This process brings to the fore questions concerning the international community, such as the value of arable land and food, experiential artistic practices, the connection of modern man with nature, the sustainability of the farming community and the resilience of the cultural heritage of rural communities in post-industrial cities.

The portfolio presents three projects carried out in three different time periods (2016, 2019 and 2020) as examples of research and artistic practice showing the course of the "Amoli" programme. The three projects consist of narratives, the participation of the public in agricultural work, participatory meals, walking routes, experiential practices, video projections, installations and performances, creating a proper communication environment for the participants, as well as a sense of collectivity.

"Amoli" is an ongoing programme. One of its main concerns is to build up the community's trust to interdisciplinary processes, thus aiming at its active participation, as well as at the acquisition of participatory knowledge of those involved.

Finally, it attempts to connect the locality with the international dynamics of the communities' development.

Keywords

participatory art
performances
post-industrial
cultural heritage
rural life
community
connection
multiculturalism

DESCRIPTION OF ACTIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME “AMOLI”

The programme started in 2016 and is still evolving. First of all, I should mention that I was born in Aspropyrgos to parents who were farmers and breeders and my mother has Arvanitic¹ roots. I myself was raised in the rural society of the city, but at a relatively young age I left Aspropyrgos to study and live abroad.

The “Amoli” project was a response to an inner call I felt to rediscover the rural landscape of my hometown and highlight it, since a large part of it had already become industrial and post-industrial. My purpose was to rebuild the ties with the rural landscape through an artistic, participatory, experiential and interdisciplinary process. Moreover, I intend to highlight the intangible cultural heritage of the rural, Arvanitic community and to underline the importance of its survival as it is connected to the rural landscape.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE CITY

Aspropyrgos is a complex city with a catalytic presence in the country's economy through industrial and post-industrial development, which maintains its agricultural activity and has a strong multiculturalism as well. To me the agricultural activity of the city served as an inspiration, it was the place of the ‘agricultural’ goddess Demeter who had left her priesthood and together with the farmers of the plain started to cultivate the seeds. Known as the granary of Attica, the plain of Aspropyrgos has never stopped being cultivated since ancient times until today. The harsh industrial development that the city experienced in the 1950s, its transformation from agricultural into industrial and the transition from the economic crisis of the last decades to its post-industrial phase are reflected in the damaged landscape of the area. However, today the local farmers through the necessary certifications have checked the suitability of the soil and thus they can defend the cultivation of their land. Finally, the intense immigration activity, in different periods of time, has turned Aspropyrgos into a multicultural city consisting of twelve nationalities. The course of Aspropyrgos functions as a micrograph of the course of Europe, a continent that experienced at different speeds the stages of agriculture, industrial development and the post-industrial phase, while today it is suffering from the economic crisis and the migration flow.

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME “AMOLI”

The international programme “Amoli”, both through its research process and through its artistic, participatory actions, displays a series of elements that go beyond regionalism and concern the whole of Europe. The rural landscape and its relationship with rural, industrial and post-industrial Europe as a past but also as a present, dynamic space is common ground for all of us and the questions that emerge through research and artistic practice are critical:

- What is the relationship of the European citizen today with food?
- How is the farmer's right to cultivate the land in an agricultural-industrial-post-industrial place ensured?
- How can the community come closer through growing food, shared meals and participatory art activities?
- What is the relationship of modern man with his body, and how does he rediscover the environment with the vehicle of art?
- What happens to the future of spoken languages and local dialects (such as the Arvanitic language that prevailed in the city until 1940), since today a piece of memory and intangible cultural heritage is being lost with them?

¹ Arvanites have come from Northern Epirus (south Albania today) and gradually settled since the 15th century in the wider area of Attica. They were engaged in animal breeding and agriculture. They maintain close endogamic relationships and develop a distinct culture based on their language – dialect (Arvanitic), manners and customs (songs, dances and clothing). See more: Economou, A. (2007) Nature, Technology and Society in the Mountain Communities of Kithairon, Odysseus.

As an attempt to start a dialogue with local authorities, higher institutions and communities regarding the above questions, a three – day international workshop was held at the Cultural Centre of Aspropyrgos, in 2019 entitled: Art & Agriculture, Industry, Multiculturalism.²

The research questions continue to this day as sources of inspiration, providing food for thought, creative dialogue and artistic experimentation. The main place of creation is the landscape and communities of Aspropyrgos (here I am focusing on the rural, Arvanite community) where participative experiential events, walking routes, visual exhibitions, narratives and open educational programmes, discussions and international workshops take place. Aspropyrgos becomes an occasion to approach, through creative practices, a local element that gets universal, thus highlighting thoughts and concerns related to international trends in a world that is constantly evolving and influencing each other.

The portfolio presents the development of the “Amoli” programme, focusing on three projects:

2016: POST-INDUSTRIAL RURAL PATHS OF ASPROPYRGOS;

2019: RURAL IMPRINTS OF ASPROPYRGOS I – THE ARVANITIC CULTURE;

2020: RURAL IMPRINTS OF ASPROPYRGOS II – THE ARVANITIC CULTURE.

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECTS OF THE INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME “AMOLI”

THE SYNTHESIS METHODOLOGY OF THE WORKS

The methodology of the composition of the works was through a specific practice that I have developed. This includes solitary walks in the landscape, where, in contemplation, I organically synthesize the action of the project. It is not a mental, but an experiential process, as I allow the body through breath and senses to create a relationship with the landscape and also create a relationship with the people it meets in it. It is an organic process in which the body experientially absorbs information and translates it into participatory action.

THE PARTICIPATION OF THE FEMALE FARMERS OF THE ARVANITIC COMMUNITY OF ASPROPYRGOS IN THE COMPOSITION OF THE WORKS

The meetings with the Arvanitic women farmers in order to participate in the project took place in the fields; there we discussed our experiences, our everyday life and our anxieties. I gave an expanded skeleton of possible action but the action was created in the rural landscape organically, thus the farmer women sang about the beauty of nature, love, friendship and death, combined with their experience in the fields of that particular landscape. This, in conjunction with my own inner call to re-read the landscape and people’s relationships, created the framework to emerge and select the organic elements that constituted the action of the works.

2016

PROJECT TITLE: POST-INDUSTRIAL RURAL PATHS OF ASPROPYRGOS

TYPE: EXPERIENTIAL, PARTICIPATORY ACTION / PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE

LOCATION: ASPROPYRGOS FARMS

Description of the project

A group of twenty spectators (participants) took part in a walking route that took place in the rural area of Agia Marina in Aspropyrgos. The artist waited for the participants at the chapel of Agia Marina (patron of the rural area of Aspropyrgos) and led them to the fields of the area. During the route, the artist used an improvisational monologue, inspired by the landscape and its constant transformation, having as aim to familiarize the group with the rural landscape and feel its power and beauty Aspropyrgos (Figure 1).

2. Syn+ergasia art platform, International Workshop Art & Agriculture, Industry, multiculturalism. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jloEFUivOTI>

They then ended up in a field where they met Arvanitic women farmers, who worked singing Arvanitic songs dedicated to nature, life and death. There the group participated in agricultural work by collecting vegetables from the estate, together with the women farmers (Figures 2, 3, and 4). The group then partook in a silent meditative meal consisting of field-fresh vegetables and local produce.

During the meal the artist introduces the participants to the alchemical power of food, the energy and power of the earth and the union of people during the meal.

The project concludes with the screening of a documentary about 100 years of rural life in Aspropyrgos, with testimonies of old and new farmers of the region bringing evidence, memory concerning the Arvanitic culture and anxiety for the future of rural life in the region. The documentary is shown in a warehouse, near the courtyard of the church of Agia Marina where the meal took place.

In conclusion

In 2016, the “Post-industrial, rural paths” project was the start of the “Amoli” programme, which continues to this day.

– The project highlighted the rural landscape and agricultural cultivation of the post-industrial city of Aspropyrgos, as well as the dangers it faces since it gradually shrinks through the expansion of the city’s commercial zone.

– The artist redefines the function of the traditional rural warehouse, turning it into a contemporary art space.

– The relationship of the women farmers with the spectators (participants): the group of women farmers in the action welcomed the participants by singing, giving a sense of hospitality to their place. In that action, there was no particular verbal communication about the problems of the place, but a warm welcome and a substantial acquaintance with the community and its culture.

– The feeling of the participants shared with us at the end of the evening, that they did not know that Aspropyrgos had agricultural land and cultivation; they only had the image of an industrial city. They also admired the women’s songs, although they did not know what they meant, while at the meditative meal they felt the power of food and gathering.



Figure 1. The walking route in the fields, 2016.
Photo © Voula Androni (Archive Emilia Bouriti).



Figure 2. The Arvanitic women farmers, 2016. Photo © Voula Androni (Archive Emilia Bouriti).



Figure 3. (left) and **Figure 4.** (right) Participatory agricultural work, 2016. Photo © Voula Androni (Archive Emilia Bouriti).

2019

PROJECT TITLE: RURAL IMPRINTS OF ASPROPYRGOS I – THE ARVANITIC CULTURE

TYPE: EXPERIENTIAL, PARTICIPATORY ACTION / PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE

LOCATION: ASPROPYRGOS FARM

Description of the project

The project was carried out in the rural area of Agia Marina in Aspropyrgos. There, as has been said, there is a small chapel dedicated to Agia Marina. On the day of the action, the chapel was open, and the participants could visit it. A group of Arvanitic women farmers welcomed the participants, spoke to them about the history of the city and invited them on a walking tour (Figure 5).

Then, singing Arvanitic songs that glorified the beauty of nature and human relationships, the participants were led to a farm where they watched a performance by the artist (Figure 6), who dragged sacks full of seeds on a specific construction. The symbolism of the performance was twofold as the artist emphasized through her action the 'burdens' that a man must carry as he walks through life, as well as the toil of agricultural work. Then the participants participated with the women farmers and the artist in a task of sorting out various seeds (Figure 7). Alongside the work, the entire group of participants shared personal moments of their lives and referred to the connection they have with the rural places they were born in or are connected to.

Afterwards, the women farmers cooked outdoors and distributed the food to the participants (Figure 8). The meal was accompanied by narrations of old metaphysical stories about Aspropyrgos that the women farmers had heard as children (Figure 9). The project concluded with the participants visiting an art exhibition held in a nearby agricultural warehouse including photographs of the women farmers as children, teenagers and brides (Figure 10).

In conclusion

- The project presented to the participants the rural landscape of the post-industrial city, unknown to many.
- It created a safe condition where the community and participants came into closer communication with each other as they shared personal information about their lives and their relationship with their place, thus creating bridges of true communication and the sense of community.
- Finally, artistically I felt that the conditions were more appropriate to present in this work, a dialogue between individual performance and participatory process.



Figure 5. The walking route, 2019.
Photo © Voula Androni (Archive Emilia Bouriti).



Figure 6. The performance of the artist, 2019. Photo © Voula Androni (Archive Emilia Bouriti).



Figure 7. (up left) – The participatory work, 2019.
Figure 8. (up right) – Arvanitic women cooking, 2019.
Figure 9. (down) – The narrations of old metaphysical stories, 2019.
Photo © Voula Androni (Archive Emilia Bouriti).



Figure 10.
The Arvanitic woman farmer,
Fani Papada, 1963. Photo
© Voula Androni
(Archive Emilia Bouriti).

2020**PROJECT TITLE: AGRICULTURAL IMPRINTS OF ASPROPYRGOS II – THE ARVANITIC CULTURE**

TYPE: EXPERIENTIAL, PARTICIPATORY ACTION / PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE

LOCATION: ASPROPYRGOS FARM

Description of the project

The project started from the city with a walking route (Figure 11), and ended at a farm in Aspropyrgos, next to the chapel of Agia Marina, where a participatory action and an outdoor video projection of the participatory project “Agricultural Imprints of Aspropyrgos, 2019” would be held which was about what the community had carried out the previous year.

On that day it was the feast of Agia Marina and the chapel was celebrating, it was full of believers and a small festival was taking place. One of the aims of the project was to bring the humble festival into dialogue with participatory and visual art. At the beginning of the participatory project and while the service in the chapel was over, the participants of the project lit candles on the soil of the neighboring farm, making a wish to Agia Marina. The believers who had come to the chapel also took part in the action.

Then a group of Arvanitic women farmers, who were sitting on chairs along the farm, sang Arvanitic farm songs while in parallel the artist lit a series of lamps on the ground, signaling in this way that the action had a ritualistic character, such as respect for the power of the earth and in the metaphysical anguish of man for divine protection (Figure 12).

Then, at the request of the women farmers, they sang the church hymn in Agia Marina. The oldest woman farmer spoke about the miracles and the history of the chapel, as well as the important role that the chapel had played in the lives of the farmers. Then she mentioned the coronavirus pandemic, highlighting the issue of individual responsibility and man’s relationship with the divine as a determinant of health and well-being (Figure 13).

The evening ended with the outdoor video projection of the project “Agricultural Imprints of Aspropyrgos, 2019” (Figures 14 and 15).

In conclusion

- The project provided important elements in the anthropological reading of the community, in relation to its rural, Arvanitic culture and religious belief.
- A new element was that the walking route included, in addition to the rural environment, a part of the urban and commercial (mostly logistics) environment.
- A bridge of communication was created between a religious event such as the small church festival with a visual participatory project.
- The meeting and joint action between the believers and the participants of the project broadened the physiognomy of the audience’s identity and created the sense of communication between the participants.
- The Arvanitic women farmers showed great courage as they presented themselves to a large part of their fellow villagers who had come to attend the church service and then came to the participatory project. With their attitude, the Arvanitic women farmers showed their love and support for the “Amoli” programme.
- My artistic experience expanded as I organized a large and complex participatory project that embraced not only the participants of the project, but also the believers from the festival of Agia Marina.



Figure 11. The walking route, 2020. Photo © Orestis Ilias (Archive Emilia Bouriti).



Figure 12. (up left) – The participatory performance, 2020.

Figure 13. (up right) – Arvanitic women farmers speaking about their culture, 2020.

Figure 14. (down left) – The projection of the video in the open air, 2020.

Figure 15. (down right) – The participatory event in the field, 2020.

Photos © Voula Androni (Archive Emilia Bouriti).

In conclusion, the results of the three projects and the benefit of the community were:

- They mobilized the rural Arvanitic community to actively participate in participatory action by promoting and defending their culture and their intangible cultural heritage acquiring, as I observed, a sense of pride for their place.
- They introduced the community to contemporary art through the elements of participation, the participatory meditation meal, the walking route, the video projections, the installations in the rural area of their city.
- The community had a positive contact with the interdisciplinary team formed from farmers, artists (visual artists, cameramen, photographers etc.), educators and the general public and actively participated in it.

In closing, I point out that participatory projects in the way they work in the international programme “Amoli” evolve over time. My portfolio report started in 2016 and ends in 2020. Today, in 2023, the “Amoli” project has taken on even greater dimensions, delving into the relationship of participatory art with the rural, Arvanitic community, its sustainability and resilience, as well as the participatory knowledge that emerges and develops all of us who participate in the “Amoli” programme.

For more information about the actions of the international programme “Amoli” please visit: <https://synergasia.wixsite.com/synergasia>.