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СИМПОЗИУМ „ИЗКУСТВО-ПРИРОДА“ – ГАБРОВЦИ, 2022²

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WATER AND FIRE:

THE 2022 GABROVTSI ART–NATURE SYMPOSIUM

*All things flow, nothing abides.
You cannot step into the same river twice,
for the waters are continually flowing on.
Nothing is permanent except change.
Heraclitus*

Abstract: This paper presents a critical review of the works created during the ART–NATURE Symposium, which was held in the village of Gabrovtsi near Veliko Tarnovo in July 2022, and organized by the Duppini Art Group. Land art artists from Iran, Turkey, the USA, Greece, Romania, Italy, Korea, Spain, and Bulgaria came together for a ten-day event including artistic work, exchange of ideas, and collaboration. It culminated in a series of outdoor exhibitions where the public could enjoy the completion of their projects. Expressed in works of water and fire, the river of the Symposium sprung from a swirl of agony, rushed through the various cascades and ripples of life, and closed with the transition from physical death to spiritual rebirth through nature and art. We start with death full of blackness and finish with death full of light.

Keywords: Duppini Art Group; land art; artists; ancient Greece; conflagration theory; environmental art; site-specific art; sculpture; architecture; video installation.

The river always lives in the present. And everything in the present is constantly shifting, changing, and becoming other than itself. Heraclitus claimed that nature is change. Like a river, nature flows ever onwards. Even the nature of the flow changes. The river is not just about water - it sustains whole ecosystems and its own cycles are connected to the atmospheric conditions of the whole planet. The river is unpredictable. It is all about flux, about fluidity, about movement and change. That current runs throughout the world like veins through which life flows. That river is what connects all the works in Duppini Land Art Symposium 2022.

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² Visual documentation of all artworks mentioned in the text can be viewed at the website of Duppini Art Group (<https://duppiniart.group/art-nature/2022-2/>).

In **Anahita the Goddess of Water**, part of an artist's series, began in 2021 in Babolsar, **Iranian artist Farzaneh Najafi** creates clay figures of Anahita, the ancient Iranian goddess of water. Using clay from Iran, the artist emphasizes Anahita's cultural identity. At the same time, she embeds her statuettes in the environment of Gabrovtsi using local soil and the river as additional media for her installations.

Anahita is the divinity of "the Waters" (Aban) in Ancient Iran and hence is associated with fertility, healing and wisdom. She is a manifestation of the Indo-Iranian idea of the Heavenly River which provides the waters to the rivers and streams flowing in the earth. She is hailed both as a divinity and as the mythical river which she personifies.

For inspiration Farzaneh turned to Neolithic figurines made between 3500 and 6000 years ago in the region of current Iran, the Near East and Eastern Europe. Her semi-flat figures have clear female proportions, upright posture and arms spread like wings so that they exude lightness despite their voluptuous shape. Albeit similar in silhouette and dimensions, each statuette has individual proportions, some with ampler, others with slimmer hips, shapes and size of breasts varied as well. All figures are adorned with exquisite decoration carved onto their bodies. Interestingly, some of them have human heads, while others resemble birds, or cats.

With the assistance of Mehrnaz Rashno, Farzaneh created as many as 40 of these clay statuettes. She distributed some of them in small groups (of one, three, five) at various spots along the river Enyovitsa. They were arranged on rocks near the water, so that they would be reached by the stream. By exposing her figurines to a gradual destruction by the current, the artist returns Anahita to her element. In this double symbolic gesture, the goddess regains her true place at the same time as the rivers and waters of the world, receive back their divinity. In a similar gesture as the Italian duo Gaia and Niccolo, waters of the earth are reclaimed from their submission, devaluation and devastation by the modern technoscientific rationalization. Re-enchantment returns to the disenchanting world. Nature regains its soul and its power back.

In her indoor AV installation, Farzaneh Najafi covered the floor in one of the rooms of the Art Centre with local soil, arranged her little goddesses on top and projected a video loop of Enyovitsa river onto their surface. The movement of the stream gave liveness and depth to the sculptures.

Finally, she made series of photos with a living Anahita (performed by the beautiful Gaia Favari).

Beside Anahita project Farzaneh performed series of works in which she tries to align her body with the rocks along the river (the Line Series), and narrated the events from the symposium in a series of photographs cut in the shape of a dove (Conversation with Nature/Peace for Nature).

Expressed in works of water and fire, the river of this symposium has sprung from a swirl of death agony, rushed through the various cascades and ripples of life and closed with rebirth. From physical death to spiritual rebirth through nature and art.

Tugçe's Aytürk "Serekatü'l Mevt" (*Death Agony. Intoxication of Death*, Installation Moment Series) is the first one I encountered upon my arrival in Gabrovtsi and it stroke me to the core of my being. The work is undeniably dark. It is set on the floor of a dimmed room with walls, whose yellowish paint is peeling off. The work is made of black metal debris, a *swarf*. Swarf is a waste, a scrap, a discarded matter left around in a dissipated entropy, after the designed structure has taken shape. Black is also the colour left on wood, stone or metal after their destruction by a fire.

The artist has arranged these black metal chips in the rough shape of a woman lying on her back on a thin green blanket spread on the floor. The posture is of a body in pain. The pain seems to be focused around the area of her belly, implying labour pains during childbirth or menstrual pangs. However, the joyless atmosphere suggests bleaker scenarios. Surrounding the scene is a black circle of the same metallic debris. With that finish, the setting reminds one of magical rituals. In this context, the female body could be of a possessed one or of a subject of sacrifice.

The subtitle of the work "Intoxication of death" also points the thought in this direction. An intoxication due to pain, but also of mystical extasy in the face of death. A transmutation of matter into spirit. A transmutation of the soul. "If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life – and only then will I be free to become myself" wrote Heidegger.

The guest artist from **USA Kim Holleman**, on the other side, is intoxicated with life. In her artist practice she builds utopian architectures by growing green ecosystems in unlikely places – inside buildings and portable wagons in the midst of the dense urban environment of New York City (US). Through her artificially grown natural landscapes she tells stories of possible futures, of ideal environments, where urban complexities can co-exist in harmony with nature. Some of these stories have a darker twist. In one sculpture she builds a tsunami of trash threatening to engulf the planet, moving like an inevitable natural disaster, an enormous wave of destruction awakened by the greediness of modern human civilization based on overconsumption.

In her last artwork made at the Duppini Art Symposium 2022 the dynamics is very different. **The sculpture “Wish You Were Here“** tells a personal story of hope, struggle and courage, of her decision to leave behind a life in one of the densest centres of global multicultural urbanity, NYC in the US, to sell all her property and without ever turning back to head towards the Unknown by building her life step by step in a tiny village in a small East-European country, of which she had never even heard before. Her sculpture in Gabrovtsi is a stairway open-ended towards the sky. Each step is an event and symbolizes an effort to advance and a hope for the future. Sometimes the pace stumbles over the next step until it finds the right footing. The structure is suspended between the weightlessness of the sky and the solidity of the earth. It is a passage, built of local timber and adorned with wild flowers picked from the fields around. And as a passage it is transient. The cut flowers have a very short bloom and the wood structure is suspended to the elements – rains, winds, thunderstorms, summer heats and winter colds.

Different in a way, but meditative and gently ephemeral in its essence is also the work by the **Geek artist Maria Gouvelli**. What she did in Gabrovtsi is not so much a final product, rather than a poetic exploration of artistic boundaries. With a subtle rearrangement of river stones, Gouvelli creates a path between the opposite river banks in her main project “Integration“. While her blue lines in “Edges“ grab the attention and direct it to the meeting point between the sky, the river and the earth. Using white, sky blue and baby pink chalk she emphasises the edges, the in-between which simultaneously connect and separate. Her work “Integration in Micro“, continues this line of blending art and nature in a very feminine, very intimate way.

The focus of **Romanian artist Peter Pal’s** nature art is light in all its manifestation: diffraction, diffusion, refraction, optical illusions. For this purpose, he uses various optical mechanisms such as large-scale transparent plexiglass spheres and convex/concave lens, metal wavelike plates, mirror tubes, mirror semi-pyramids, all embedded in the natural landscape.

His project in Gabrovtsi, **“The Column“**, is a prism made of plexiglass filled with water and installed on a big pedestal built directly into the river from stones collected from the river banks. It is meant to be a symbolic column which “holds“ the heavy rock above. The place Peter has chosen to install his sculpture is one of the most magical along the river. Not only the final sculpture but the whole process of its creation which happened directly into the river is part of his work. While building the stone base he had to feel the bottom of the river, find each stone and position it in a way that the whole structure grows stable. During the construction process he used only his hands as tools. He used no cement to glue the stones together and secure the structure. Halfway through his creation process he had to deconstruct and rebuild the base again because it didn’t seem stable enough. This is when he noticed that the installation creates a perfect environment for water snakes, who enjoyed hiding, and even mating, between the warm stones. This observation prompted him to add the subtitle: “snake house“.

The prism is full of light. Its colours shift – from grey to blue to black to gold – depending on the time of the day. It is most expressive around noon when the sun beams get diffracted into the full spectrum of the rainbow.

Returning to the backyard of the Art Centre, we see the rotting core of a huge trunk (one meter in diameter two meters high) bursting with little creatures thriving on its dying flesh. For their work “La rinascita dopo il pianto“ (Rebirth after Crying) the **Italian duo Gaia Favari and Niccolo Nencioni** introduce a destructively purifying fire into this decaying matter contaminated with buzzing microscopic life. The charred beech tree stands out magnificently in its deep-green surroundings. The flames have burned out its core and have drawn obsidian patterns over its coarse bark. As a result of the fire, the disintegrat-

ing body of the tree has been transformed into a living work of art with a new spirit. However, this spirit seems to be weeping. Translucent drops have oozed all over its charred skin reflecting the sun like tiny beads of light. Could those be amber secreted by the tree? Not really. The tears are made from alabaster stone brought to Gabrovtsi from the far away town of Volterra, Italy. Alabaster is a soft mineral, which yields even to the gentle touch of water – a fact, demonstrated by the artists in a previous experiment, where they left a piece of unrefined alabaster in a stream for a few weeks and realised that the ripples of the current are capable of carving the stone into their own image. This is the reason that traditionally this stone is considered unsuitable for outdoor sculptures. However, this is exactly what the Italian duo chose to do – expose their work outdoors and leave it to the impact of the elements. As a result, both the wooden trunk and its tears will slowly disintegrate under the rain. We have this “idea of the stability of stone. And when we find that the stone itself is actually fluid and liquid, that really undermines our sense of what is here to stay and what isn’t.” (Andy Goldsworthy “Rivers and Tides”).

But why is the tree weeping? The art of alabaster carving is emblematic of the cultural identity of the town of Volterra in Tuscany since the time of the Etruscans, 2500 years back. Just a century ago its streets have been saturated with white clouds accompanying the cutting, breaking and carving of the alabaster stone. However, this craft nowadays is dying under the advancing pressure of industrial mass production. Technology of each epoch defines humanity’s relationship with Nature: with minerals, plants, animals and microorganisms. While with manual craftsmanship humans enter into a harmonic relationship with nature, the industrial approach breaks the harmony and tries to take full control over natural processes. It is art, Heidegger writes, where the domination of modern technology can be broken and balance with nature recovered. This is exactly what Gaia and Niccolo’s artistic gesture does.

I love **Niccolò Nencioni’s “Tentativo di fusione con la natura”** (Attempt at Fusion with Nature). His tree-man is almost like a new species brought to life from ancient legends – half-man, half-tree. His head and hands are extended with long elegant branches, while his human legs are fusing with the grass and ground, becoming roots. “By working with the tree you understand the earth it has grown through“, once said Andy Goldsworthy. (“Leaning into the World“).

At first glance “Glass Tears“ of the Bulgarian artist and Duppini Art Group member **Lydia Karke-lanova** is another work about weeping trees. However, the vibe of her piece is very different from the idea of Gaia and Niccolo’s “Rebirth After the Cry“. Here the tone is more intimate and the focus is time itself, its constant flow and the essence of human life as “being-in-time“ (Heidegger).

The piece is exquisite. Each one of these translucent glass beads is made with utmost care and attached to a string, like frozen moments suspended in time. The light airy construction is hanging weightlessly from the big walnut tree generously spreading its shade above the most communal area of the Art Centre – the place where the big dining table is situated and where we talk, we work, we eat and we share. In this quiet gesture rings the crystal voice of wine glasses, laughter, connection and love. These sensations reverberate equally between people, trees, cats, swallows, and all other creatures cohabiting the area. The fullness of the moment resonates deep into the soul. It poignantly reminds us also of the evanescence of this beauty. Each and every fleeting moment of being together passes irreversibly never to come back. This realisation prompts us to stop in silence and breath in the sensation of being fully alive, right now, right here. Past, present and future, merging in one single bittersweet moment.

Other art pieces emphasising human temporality are **Diana Yovcheva’s “White Shadows“** and **Naiden Kolev’s “Here and Now“**. Albeit full-fledged artists on their own right, this year both were providing their selfless assistance for the successful organisation of the symposium. “White Shadows“ directly points our attention to the present moment, while “Here and Now“ speaks about the unity of past and future bridged by the present moment as the only time when the past and future truly exist. While the present moment is always pregnant with past memories and future expectations, it is deeply submerged into the turbulent river of the becoming of the world, into which we are all thrown.

At his late-night arrival from South Korea, on his way from Veliko Tarnovo to Gabrovtsi village, **Kang Hee-joon** couldn’t take his eyes off the full face of the moon rising above the hills and shining brightly onto the night sky. The irresistible proximity and brilliance of her golden disk completely mesmerised him. This is when he decided to create his “**Moon jar**“ so that he could capture this short-lasting

beauty for a longer time. His “jar“ constructed of willowy tree branches intertwined into a hollow sphere is like a spider net, which is designed to hold not flies but the moon itself. The dreams to catch the moon are as ancient as humankind. It can be found in many traditional mythologies around the world. In the Korean folk tale “Song of Sun and Moon“ the Moon goddess and the Sun god are associated with water and fire in the earth realm.

Bulgarian artist and Duppini Art Group member **Orfey Mindov** works with abstract geometrical forms and their dynamics. “**Horizontal rhythm**“ is a massive symmetrical composition and as such it conveys a sense of stability and repose. The clear edges of its elements juxtapose with the organic contours of the surrounding greenery. The horizontal position and solidity of the sculpture invites us not only to contemplate its proportionate structure, but also to sit comfortably on top of it and explore its dynamism through the movements of our whole body. Depending on the position of the gaze, the shape of the sculpture changes. Seen against the background of the Church, its form takes almost organic dimensions reminding giant boots marching through the village. The nature of such sculpture is not fixed and finished. Processes continue, when it is exposed to the elements: chemical reactions, fermentations, colour changes, decay, drying up. Everything is in a state of change.

Contrary to Mindov’s sculpture, “Air Kiss“ by the Bulgarian artist **Rumen Rachkov-Darvesnia**, also a Duppini Art Group member is vertically raised and rather softly, almost organically shaped. It stands prominently against the sky near the river bridge of Gabrovtsi. It is a sculpture made of a single piece of beech wood, 3-4 meters high, in which the artist chiseled (за превода: извайвам) few round openings. This structure guides the attention to the space in-between, that emptiness which breaths air and points our gaze towards the sky. Dyrvesnia started this piece the previous summer and then let it wait outside. During one year the half-finished sculpture got literally kissed by the air, since changes in temperature and humidity gave a specific character to its texture. The uppermost void received a fracture and from a fully closed circle, symbolizing perfection (but also death), became an incomplete circle, which allows transformation, movement and development. Or as the poet and musician Dimitry Voev once said: „There’s a circle that never gets to a close. This is the circle of infinite improbabilities.“ (From the film “Voev“). (“Има един кръг, който никога не се затваря. Това е кръгът на безкрайните невероятности“. (От филма „Воев“)

Cristian Seuşan from Romania and another Duppini Art Group member, is among the most productive artists at Gabrovtsi ART-NATURE Symposium 2022. Apart from the small sculptural object and the one-year durational paintings, Cristian Seuşan made two big scale works during the symposium: the fieldwork “QR Catharsis“ and the issue specific installation “The awareness of the history today“.

Both works speak about catharsis. The eponymous one encodes the word “catharsis“ into a huge QR code burned into the grass of a meadow near the village of Gabrovtsi. It can be read by a smartphone’s QR reader, but only if you manage to take it from above. Hence, both literally and symbolically, to let catharsis happen, you have to rise up. Catharsis is to allow renewal through destruction. Burning the grass revives the soil. Lighting a fire is itself a cathartic ceremony for all participants involved.

Seuşan’s second work, “The awareness of the history today“, is a complex and powerful piece. It is a heartfelt response to the current historical events. Russian devastating aggression in Ukraine is symbolized by the fanatic madness of Rasputin, whose head the artist made out of wood and hanged upside down. Interestingly, the source of cathartic purification for Russia and the world comes from a vortex of stones bellow the sculpture, inspired by the aesthetics of Zen Buddhist gardens.

“Идвам от гората, нося светлина!“ Bulgarian artist and musician **Vayana Makaveeva**’s magical voice fills the open air in the backyard of Duppini Art Center on the Open Doors Day (16.07). Comfortably barefoot on the green grass, dressed in fanciful metallic green top and long green skirt she gently swings along her chords. Her audience merrily joins the rhythm. Vayana performs under the artistic pseudonym KOPRIVA, which is the plant known as stinging nettle. The texts of her songs are whimsical, yet highly poetic, dreamily narrating stories about interconnectedness, becoming-plant, and becoming-animal³.

³ „Дърво си, в клоните ти се люлея. Както беше и преди да се родим.“ (Идвам от гората“), \И ето пак превръщам се, превръщам се във синя пеперуда“ („Синята“), „И тя танцува, зеленичка, парливка, гледа любопитно младичка копривка“ („Коприва“).

Multitalented, KOPRIVA composes the music, writes the lyrics and draws the visuals accompanying her performances. In Gabrovtsi, Vayana Makaveeva – KOPRIVA created her first installation art and land art pieces. “The Fall of the Ego“ is a five-channel audio-visual installation in the interior specific spaces. The videos show animated blue-haired girls in various positions very much reminding the artist herself. On two of the walls the girls are free-falling into a lush of greenery. The third wall confronts us with a hairy blue foot, which, as the artist shared with me, was inspired by the physical pain in her own foot, accompanying her during the whole symposium. The gigantic foot is almost stepping onto the head of another blue-haired girl peeping above the floor. On the opposite wall’s ceiling yet another girl’s head is talking incessantly, albeit muted.

All these iterations of the same “Ego“ suggest its fragmentation into many anxious “selves“, who lack integrity and peace of mind “through the cities of concrete“ (“The Fall of the Ego“ accompanying song). The lucidity and richness of the animations are in sharp contrast with the half-destroyed floor and the chipped paint on the walls. This contrast only reinforces the message of the Ego falling apart. Yet, the tone of this audio-visual piece is not desperate. Catharsis, transformation, and growth await us when we return to the source of all life – nature. “My freedom lies at the roots of a green tree“ echoes the artist’s voice in the installation space.

“God’s hanger“ is KOPRIVA’s other work at the symposium and her first landart installation. Although it is constructed by her, it looks almost like the hanger is an extended branch of a tree. You can hang your hat or your coat there and feel at home in the midst of the forest. Funnily, the hanger even has its own sun-activated “lamp“. A piece of the Volterra alabaster found itself onto the hanger to lighten each time a sun beam touches it.

And finally, KOPRIVA’s musical performance accompanied Jordi NN’s ritual act as well, which was the culmination gig of the Open Doors Day for this year Gabrovtsi ART-NATURE Symposium. Dressed in white robe like a forest nymph (за превода: самодива), she performed her musical piece “Forest“ (“Гора“) creating an unforgettable atmosphere in perfect line with the bonfire ritual. The piece begins with bells and chans (за превода: хлопатар и чанове), then gradually builds on with meditative vocals echoing the cosmic mysticism of the traditional Bulgarian voices. KOPRIVA found natural collaborators in the face of the frogs who joined the human performers with their twilight choir.

Meanwhile in the forest near the Art Center, a boat hanging from a tree is a strange sight to be observed. When pushed, it gently swings to and fro in the air. That is the “**Hanging boat**“ by **Rumen Dimitrov – POPA**, another landart artist from the Duppini Art Group. Attached to the tree by its pole, it looks as though in its longing for the nearby river the tree has grown the boat from its own branches. We almost could hear the verse of Rabindranath Tagore “I must launch out my boat. The languid hours pass by on the shore---Alas for me!“ (Rabindranath Tagore “The Boat“).

Popa’s “Boat in the Forest“ is positioned opposite of KOPRIVA’s “God’s Hanger“. To reach them you pass through Cristian Seuşan’s issue-specific installation, and you go further under a Gate of intertwined tree branches. This is the other piece Rumen Dimitrov did during the symposium. It plays the symbolic role of a portal from the world, where everyday life happens, to the world of the Forest where Art is exhibited in symbiosis with Nature. In this case, the forest is the magical universe of transition and passage into spiritual and existential renewal.

Jordi NN is a Spanish artist who makes large-scale land art sculptures caring symbolic meaning drawn from ancient traditions. Many of his works involve bonfires referring to pagan festivals of the sun.

Jordi’s installation in Gabrovtsi was a semi-sphere made of timber sticks. Its dimensions matched the hollow under the arch of river Enyovitsa’s bridge. Installed in the water it was reflected by its surface into a full sphere. At sunset its silhouette glowed softly against the surrounding darkness. A magical sight to behold, the whole atmosphere silencing the soul into dreamlike meditation.

The title “**In-Between**“ is an invitation to see the work as an intersection between two worlds: the physical (the wooden sculpture) and the virtual (its reflection). Between wood and water is the site of flux. The in-between is the space where the mixture of opposites can happen. That slice of reality where creation and destruction meet, where opposites negotiate their participation in the creation of order, systems and structures. This negotiation never ends. This is where real change can happen, when creation

can happen, but also where the individual things, structures and unities are transient and die. Creation passes into destruction.

On the Open Door Day – the last day of the art symposium, Jordi NN performed the ritual of burning his sculpture. The musical ambience was created by the magical KOPRIVA. The event was spectacular.

Shortly after nightfall the wooden semi-sphere was set ablaze and illuminated the surrounding river, stones and forest to create a mystical atmosphere. Thus, the fire was the ultimate transmutation force – destructing everything but letting the ground for a new creation. “In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting... Only this clearing, grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are“ (Heidegger). The fire creates this clearing. “How should the new day arrive, if the night is withheld from it“ (Heidegger).

We started with death full of blackness and finished with death full of light. There is this “conflagration theory“ in Ancient Greek philosophy, that the world is regularly destroyed and recreated to be again destroyed in a recurring cycle that goes on over and over. The starting point of this cycle is a state of things in which there is only fire. Of course, this primordial fire is not just a particular burning fire as we know it, but it is also a creative principle of the world. Fire exists both as having a destructive power of burning things, i.e., turning them into itself, and as creative fire, called ‘artful fire’ (*pur technikon*), which on the contrary shapes all things into what they are. The world is created when the primordial fire is progressively attenuated and transformed into the other elements of water, air and earth. Yet this differentiation is only transitory and at some point, fire starts again to prevail over the other elements, feeding on them to turn them into fire until the point where everything has become fire again and a new cycle can begin. The image of the whole world turning into fire is not a catastrophe, because the conflagration purifies the world as we know it and its destruction allows it to be recreated anew [1].

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