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Exactly 10 years ago I was in my room in Ravenna, without air conditioning, packing my backpack. The plan for that night was to catch up with Gabriella, who would be arriving at Ferrara train station from Naples at around 10:00 pm. Eva would have jumped on the train in Venice at midnight; unfortunately Giulia was not joining us this time. We were still dazed and excited about our latest project, "Vaccinium", which we had presented at Manifesta 7 in Rovereto a couple of months earlier, and we could not stop thinking about what we would do next.

Belgrade was waiting for us.

I remember hearing almost legendary stories about "Real Presence" from our fellow students at IUAV, our university in Venice. I could not wait to get there, although I did not know what exactly to expect. Belgrade seemed so far away; seventeen hours by train through Italy, Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia to reach a city where I could not even understand the alphabet. Yet it was not difficult to feel at home, I think it was love at first sight.

Thinking retrospectively about the value of that experience, I believe it was an important example of radical pedagogy through an approach of total inclusivity and openness. In a city where the course of a ferocious war was still so visible, I felt like culture, and in our case art, was the only common ground we had between each other.

The way the workshops and exhibitions were conceived was totally free: we did not have any constraints, and this helped us to develop our methodology as a collective, essentially through cross-pollination and mutual exchange.

Today, after several residencies around the world, I believe that "Real Presence" was a truly honest space for experimentation devoted to emerging artists. In contrast to what happens in most residency programs,

participants were not necessarily required to produce a work at the end of the experience, but more or less everybody showed a work or organised a performance or event.

We all wanted to be just present in that moment.

In 2016, Aspra.mente turned 10 years old, so we decided to celebrate at an event we were invited to take part in. I remember that during the artist's talk a journalist told us: "You were not aware of what you were doing back in 2006, you were ahead of your time, and you did not know it. You can see it now, this kind of socially engaged art project has become a trend". We thought this was quite offensive: of course we were aware of what we were doing. "No artist was born ahead of her or his time, it is impossible!" said Hannah Gadsby about Van Gogh in her comedy show "Nanette".

The journalist's comments came to my mind a year later when I was preparing a class for my students in San Francisco. I was reading some texts by Tania Bruguera and Jeanne van Heeswijk, who both arrived at the conclusion that through their work artists are able to rehearse the future and train for the not-yet. Both concepts reveal the potentiality of art to become a sort of third dimension, where our agency can be tested in order to find a balance between individual and collective needs.

Artists need to ask themselves: how do we immerse ourselves in a context we are not familiar with?

I think that is precisely what we have been trying to do since the very beginning of our career: just be honest with the reality around us, and be present.

Aspra.mente (Alessandra Saviotti, Eva Cenghiaro, Giulia Gabrielli and Gabriella Guida) is a group which focuses on the common definition of "work in progress", seeking the contribution of operators in fields other than art for interdisciplinary projects free from time constraints. An open-ended phase of exploratory research in a given field will thus only consolidate into a definite form when the time for public viewing comes. Their projects are generally con-

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text-driven, with local constituencies playing an important part in determining the guidelines: by involving the public as a stakeholder in the creative process, art becomes an agent and a tool for social initiatives and cohesion in the most disparate settings. The prevalent running theme is the consumption of food, regarded as intimately land-specific and a potential generator of agri-cultural projects.



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1 Aspra.mente - Real Presence: Aspra.mente, "Untitled", installation, Heritage House

2 Aspra.mente - Real Presence: working on the installation

i Jeannette Petrik, Education is always about the future: an interview with Tania Bruguera, Temporary Art Review, July 20, 2017, <http://temporaryartreview.com/education-is-always-about-the-future-an-interview-with-tania-bruguera/>, Accessed July 30, 2018.

ii Jeanne van Heeswijk, Preparing for the Not-Yet, in "Slow Reader: a resource for design thinking and practice", Carolyn F. Strauss and Ana Paula Pais (eds.), Valiz, Amsterdam, 2018.