



PLANTPORTATION

a story of one mobility
growing into international
cooperation

Olena Kasperovych is an art-manager, curator of the International Art Residency Programme at the **Yermilov Centre**, the first centre of contemporary art in Kharkiv.

As part of the Culture Bridges mobility programme, Olena visited Slovenia in April 2019 to present the concept of her joint project with the BridA art collective. In September of the same year, Slovenian artists came to Kharkiv and the Plantportation project opened in the courtyard at the Yermilov Centre within parallel programme of the II Biennale of Young Art. Olena talks about the rapid development of the project, its successful launch in Ukraine and its publicity in Slovenia as well as the invitation to curate the visual part of the most important Slovenian contemporary art festival Pixxelpoint.

Art collective BridA

I began my acquaintanceship with Tom Kerševan, Sendi Mango and Jurij Pavlica from the **BridA** art collective and emerging generation of Slovenian artists, in April 2017 during a study tour of Slovenia, initiated by the Culture & Creativity, an EU-Eastern Partnership Programme. We travelled through several cities and during the last night in the small town of Šempas, which is near the Italian border, I got to know the trio from BridA and visited their creative workshop.

We kept in touch over a year, always looking for opportunities to invite artists to Ukraine. We saw then that a more realistic approach would be a mobility for me to Slovenia. At that point, I already had the idea of a plant migration project and I suggested the concept to the group. They liked it and we agreed that I present it to the professional community and the public in Šempas. Another object of the trip was to conduct research as a curator and have personal interactions with area colleagues in order to finalize the concept and start work on the project in collaboration with BridA.



Mobility in Slovenia

This mobility lasted three weeks (20 days) and was integrated into the BridA Arts Group R.o.R. residency programme in Šempas. On 14 April, we held a 'Tea Party' meeting - Presentation of our common project with BridA at their studio for the local art community, including artists, curators, journalists, and cultural managers. I got a lot of useful and specific questions and feedback from arts professionals. I shared my plans and conducted my "Plant Adoption" (both adoption and adaptation) action. I had brought some plants from Ukraine to Slovenia which my friends and artists in Kharkiv had given me, notably Natalia Ivanova, director of the Yermilov Centre. Each plant came with its own history from its Ukrainian donor (where it grew, why important, etc.), which was written on a notecard together with scientific data about its origin and type. Guests at the event had the opportunity to choose a plant and take it home with them. Quite often people were drawn to the plant they chose because of its history or because of the commonness of the species grown in nearly every garden—strawberries, chamomile, currants, etc. We recorded the contact information of those who took plants and got them to sign a pledge to care for the plant and then we took a photo of them with their plant, adding some real informal formality to the exchange. I provided everyone with my address so they could report on the faith of their "adoptee".



On 19 April, we had another presentation continuing the action at the [Carinarnica](#) Cultural Centre in Nova Gorica. There, we invited everyone to bring their children. Carinarnica, translated from Slovenian, means "customs". Fitting, with its building located directly on the border of Slovenia and Italy. You come in the door from one country and leave through another door into another country. The border now is merely a formality, of course, but the checkpoint booth is still there, and this was converted into a cultural centre which often hosts presentations and workshops. This point was quite significant for the project, referring as it does to the complex history of the city and the daily movement of residents across the border. This region was the subject of a territorial dispute between Italy and Yugoslavia after World War II. With the establishment of new borders between the countries in 1947, the old town passed into Italian possession (now it's called Gorizia), and Nova Gorica was built on the Yugoslav side.



Slovenia is a small country territorially when compared with Ukraine. However, the concentration of cultural institutions, hubs, galleries and museums is noticeably higher. I was impressed by the creative hubs: how they were created, how they function, how people from different sectors unite, and stimulate the development of interdisciplinary collaborations. Slovenians also perceive that their thought processes don't differ that much from that of Ukrainian. Local residents noted that as recently as 10-15 years ago they could not have imagined this kind of development opportunity for cultural projects as it now exists. They described how they did it and what obstacles they encountered on the way. After hearing these stories, you see that rapid development is possible and that you can do it, too.

In Ljubljana, I liked **Poligon**, a private creative centre and the first and largest coworking-space in Slovenia. It is housed in a former tobacco factory, which ceased operations in the early 2000's and occupies more than a thousand square metres. It was created to empower self-employed professionals working in the field of creative economics, social entrepreneurship and culture. Poligon offers internship programmes, which regularly attract foreign students. There is also a bar, library, gallery space, and room for presentations, lectures and other cultural events at the space.

The Independent Academy of Arts, located in a historic building in the town of Vipava on the bank of the Vipava River, and not far from Nova Gorica, also has a dynamic media department under the guidance of Professor Peter Purg. Today, the Academy offers BA and Master programmes in photography, animation, video and new media. Students are constantly travelling, implementing projects that host successful sector players, who hold workshops and condensed original courses.



For me, a huge step in my professional development was cooperating with the BridA group. They are one of the most sought-after Slovenian artistic unions worldwide, the home of the creators of several internationally recognized projects. The trio explores modern society, employing art, science and modern technology. They interrogate a subject as artists, attempting to understand what role technology might play in the work. Looking at how much of an action is a creative function and to what degree it can be automated, also examining the question of if a work is a collective effort, how we can talk about author contribution.

My focus shifted during the project and I began to be interested in art associated with technology and experimentation. When I was in Ljubljana I met with Irena Pivka, curator of the [Steklenik](#) sound, bioacoustics and art gallery. This is a kind of conservatory along the lines of a botanical garden where artists organise exhibits of plants, space and acoustics—there are a lot of sound works done there. This left a strong emotional impression and I wanted to grasp how it worked, that is, how technology is not just a tool to help express an idea, but how it can be combined organically in an art project. Sadly, there isn't much of this going on in Ukraine and this inspired me to create an interdisciplinary project combining the arts and sciences here and at home, and bring artists working at Steklenik to Ukraine.

BridA in Kharkiv and PLANTPORTATION project

It was during my mobility with BridA that the idea on plant migration realised visually arose. The Honourable Council of Slovenia helped with the funding and artists started on the work. Busy with that, we also thought about where it would be best to exhibit the project and settled on Kharkiv. Then Sendi Mango got a Culture Bridges grant and their entire arts team travelled to Kharkiv.

We worked independently and planned to hold a presentation in the autumn, but we had a conflict with the timeframe of the II Biennale of Young Art, so we offered the curators the suggestion of incorporating this project into a parallel programme. Conceptually everything fit and in September we opened an interactive multimedia installation in the courtyard at the Yermilov Centre.

We'd never been to Ukraine before. I mean, we knew of the country, where it was located, but the only information we had about the difficult situation there was what we heard on the news. And making a trip yourself to a place is certainly a much different thing. All the young people on the streets of Kharkiv really surprised us. We also found that our common Slavic background helped us understand Ukrainian pretty well; in fact, it's very similar to the Šempas dialect of Slovenian. We were probably just lucky, but instantly started making contacts with curators, artists, managers and locals. We held a presentation and met with students to discuss the future of art and their vision.



Sendi Mango

BridA, grantee of the sixth call of the Culture Bridges programme



Our project is a reconsideration of the natural history of Europe, in particular, the migration of plants. We're asking questions about local and foreign, adaptation, movement and migration. We also focus on how space is perceived in terms of real and virtual coexistence: it is not difficult for humans to move, but for plants it's only possible under certain metamorphic conditions. The project raises the possibility of attracting plants into our virtual life, even if their roots are attached to the earth, artists are thinking about the potential for the televised, visual presence of plants and the manner of caring for them remotely.

The Biennale curators organised a private viewing of all the expositions on the day before the official opening, after the artists had completed their installations. It was very cool to have this chance to get a comprehensive overview of the diversity of the Ukrainian art scene and get an insider's view of how a contemporary art exhibition was developed. Most of the work made comparative analyses of past, present and future. For example, one artist explored the stereotypical ideal towns built during the Soviet period and what they look like now. That kind of journey opens new horizon for creativity; they give you a chance to see how artists in another country tackle a common topic but from a completely different perspective, one informed by their personal cultural, social and political environment. This approach gets incorporated in your own work after that, albeit in fragmentary fashion.



Sendi Mango

BridA, grantee of the sixth call of the Culture Bridges programme



The *Plantportation* project is ongoing and continues to develop the concept of plant migration that I had presented in Slovenia, resulting in the creation of an "inter-space" where people can temporarily assign to themselves a plant's identity. The installation consists of a wall projection alongside local plants in a way that creates a mirroring sensation, though it is in fact a photo of the place you are standing. The images change, reacting to the movement of the viewer and plants in Šempas appear on the screen, creating the potential for real identification with the plant. The project got good reviews from the professional community and the audience.

We worked with plants and the methods of transporting them, noticing that at the Biennale some artists had done an exploration of gardens in the regions where the war is now active. The displaced residents of those cities were not able to take their gardens and they are worried about them. In this aspect, our project garners interest in its potential for transferring plants from one place to another.



Jurij Pavlica

BridA

After a bit, some representatives from Nova Gorica, co-organizers of the Pixxelpoint festival, contacted me. We met at our 'tea party' and then we talked with the afterwards. They had read about our project at the Biennale which had been covered by Slovenian media. They offered me the chance to provide the visual concept for their festival. They liked what I did and invited me to be the foreign curator for the 21st Pixxelpoint festival set for November 2020. Now I have to put my concept to work in some project exhibits and put together a list of artists. I'll go to Slovenia again this spring for a working meeting. Festival rules dictate a certain level of participation from Slovenian artists and I plan to meet these people face to face. BridA will also have a project at the festival.

During Olena's mobility in Slovenia we introduced her to the director of the Culture House (Kulturni Dom) in Nova Gorica, Pavla Jarc. Following our trip to Kharkiv, we wrote about the Plantportation project on all the social networks, attaching photos from the Biennale. The mass media showed interest and started covering the event in the press, on the radio and online. We also told Pavla about our experiences and shared our collaborations with her, hoping the Culture House might be able to assist us somehow. A few months later they called us in for a meeting and we suggested Olena as curator of the visual portion of Pixxelpoint. This is the most important contemporary arts festival in Slovenia and in parts of Italy. When we're working on international projects, we often talk about building links and bridges between countries, and, in our opinion, this contact is a very solid bridge already. I'm confident that Olena will represent a very interesting body of Ukrainian artists and this will result in intercultural dialogue with local artists. This is our first large-scale eastern European collaboration and it's a huge success.



Sendi Mango

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Photo credits: BridA, Olena Kasperovych, Yermilov centre