

**THE MUSIC VIDEO  
PERFORMANCE  
*ENCOUNTER*  
*ACROSS BORDERS*  
AS A CREATIVE  
COMMUNITY-BUILDING  
EXPERIENCE  
FOR SOCIAL COHESION  
AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE  
THE EUROPEAN  
PROJECT *COMMUNITY***

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## ESSAY 119/07

ART-BASED APPROACHES

MUSIC

VIDEO

'COMMUNITY'

SOCIAL COHESION OF YOUTH

One of the most widespread problems among young people, leading to serious forms of social unrest, is the lack of a sense of social inclusion and belonging. For this reason, the Project *CommUnity. Build Communities - Create Peace!* (2019-2021) involved eleven partners from seven European Countries –Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, and Croatia– in order to build up and develop a cross-generational intercultural dialogue through the creation of communities of people who share a passion for the arts and music.

A group of seven persons, chosen among students, graduates and junior researchers of the University of Florence, was created for the development of a musical and theatrical video performance

on the issue of an of intercultural dialogue among peoples.

The intercultural music band worked under the supervision of the University of Florence research team, through the implementation of art-based methodological approaches, and the 'design thinking' process.

This paper focuses on the importance of creativity and art-based approaches in building communities, while it underlines the relevance of the artistic and cultural contexts within which their members can share visions and experience. Through the video images the evocative power of Florence landscape is clearly emphasized: when the performers meet different people in the midst of monuments, squares, ancient buildings and real or metaphorical bridges across the Arno River.

## THE EUROPEAN PROJECT *COMMUNITY* FOR THE SOCIAL COHESION OF YOUTH

The program (2019-2021) involved eleven partners from seven European Countries (Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, and Croatia) that –through the 'Harmony CommUnity' campaign– worked to improve cross-generational intercultural dialogue and create communities of persons who love and practice arts and music. The overall goal focused on improving social cohesion/inclusion by using music and storytelling in such a way that people could choose to take up conflict-free expressions of their identity and beliefs. This was promoted by enhancing the harmonious coexistence among young generations, despite their differences of cultures and religious faiths, in order to foster a sense of belonging and reduce the sense of marginalization for individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Art and music allow young people to be brought closer together by enthusing them about an activity that requires them to adopt the same language beyond individual differences. As a matter of fact, one of the most prevalent problems among teens that lead to serious forms of social discomfort is, precisely, the lack of a sense of social inclusion and belonging (Biagioli, 2015).

The idea behind the research work is based on the conviction that the isolation of individuals from society, their feeling of being subject to discrimination, or the habit to consider others as potential threats or even enemies can lead to radicalization and extremism (Huion et al., 2021). Therefore, the Project placed at the center of the acted practices the need to define safe spaces to enable participation, interaction, sharing, expression of thoughts, and dialogues among stakeholders in a free and spontaneous way through 'artistic languages'. The pedagogical perspective that oriented the research work stemmed from the idea that music can foster the control of emotions and solicit positive social bonding, by means of a shared cultural tradition or

through the encounter of different cultures that allow a fusion of artistic knowledge aiming at the creation of shared meanings (Moscato, 2012). Indeed, as Cambi (2008, p. 49) argues, “music is aesthetic culture. It is historical culture. It is internalized culture. It is cultural fruition”.

The University of Florence research team<sup>1</sup> designed and implemented a musical performance with the involvement of seven people chosen among students, graduates and junior researchers<sup>2</sup> who collaborated, for the first time, on this specific project, creating an intercultural music band that, through its performance, was able to experience the benefits of artistic methodologies in fostering a sense of belonging and the free expression of personal identity and values. The intercultural approach was retrieved not only in the Italian and Spanish origins of the band participants but was mainly represented by the multicultural references that inspired the original music compositions, the lyrics and the literary contributions selected by the band performers with the research team support. The co-design of the performance also prompted the protagonists to reflect on the importance of an intercultural dialogue among peoples, of a peaceful coexistence and the building of creative communities that communicate through musical expressiveness. The University research team supported the young artists in the development of their performance, coordinated all project meetings and musical rehearsals<sup>3</sup>, supervised the video making.

#### ART-BASED RESEARCH & DESIGN THINKING: A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The implementation of artistic and creative approaches in educational and social research has intensified since the 1990s in a transdisciplinary context because of the technological and media progress (Guerrini & Proli, 2022). Therefore, today it is possible to trace music, visual art, film, theater, dance,

performing arts, and digital arts, in various areas of research, particularly in the educational and social ones (Chilton & Leavy, 2014, cited in Guerrini & Proli, 2022). In these contexts, in fact, the arts can express the rich feeling-based relational entanglements that animate communities, can highlight the complexity of lived experiences, and induce researchers and stakeholders to see and think differently. In this perspective, the artistic approaches have the power to evoke, inspire, kindle emotions, awaken visions and imaginations, as well as facilitate researchers in bringing out untold stories (Cole & Knowles, 2001, cited in Guerrini & Proli, 2022).

The methodology applied within the *CommUnity* Project was qualitative, with feedbacks being gathered from all those involved through interviews and reports related to the artistic activities. The research activities were developed according to a laboratory approach through a series of online meetings, carried out during the period 2020-2021. In addition, the ABR (Art-Based Research) methodology and the 'design thinking' –as pathway for solving critical and wicked problems in professional and educational contexts



**Fig. 1** Outline of the creative process<sup>4</sup>. Graphic elaboration by the author.

(Buchanan, 1992)– were implemented to promote and give value to the participants' experiences (Huion et al., 2021).

As reported in Figure 1, the main stages through which the creative process was articulated. Following the initial meetings centered on the performance design, the research team proceeded to define the roles that the participants themselves chose to play, according to their artistic experiences and skills. Moreover, the performance theme, "encounter among peoples", inspired the music and lyrics composed by the young artists involved.

The first approach to the musical creation was made by studying the traditional songs and compositions of the partner Countries and by tracing an ideal cultural itinerary from the southern coasts washed by the Mediterranean Sea, to the North and East of Europe. The principal outcomes were seven digital music tracks inspired by traditional music from Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and an original gospel song for choral singing placed at the end of the performance. The young artists then composed original lyrics to transform the musical tracks into songs. The music and songs, together, prompted the idea of drawing on the literature of the Countries mentioned above, to select literary extracts that could interweave narratives with songs and dance. In this way, a complex and richly evocative tale was produced to evoke the theme of encounters and dialogues among peoples. The workshop model was maintained at all stages of the creative work, in such a way that all the performers remained active and fostered a continuous confrontation that enriched the final product.

#### THE EVOCATIVE POWER OF URBAN PLACES AS SPACE OF ENCOUNTER WITH OTHERS

After composing the musical structure of the performance, all the band components and the research team began to study the venues of the performance itself through site visits

**Fig. 2** S. Cini and F. Pinzani sing No more tears, "Wanna delete the fears, I have no more tears" (songwriters: S. Cini, F. Pinzani). On the ancient bank of the Arno.

**Fig. 3** F. Pinzani and a performer sing *Ephemeral life*, "We are like flowers, we move slowly at times, but we adapt and then we blossom" (songwriter: F. Pinzani). Ospedale degli Innocenti, Piazza SS. Annunziata.

**Fig. 4** F. Pinzani and a performer sing *Caminan a mi lado*, "Hijos de una misma tierra abrigados por el mismo sol con la esperanza en las estrellas con sueños ahogados en dolor" (songwriters: P. Feijoo Reis, F. Pinzani). Piazza Leopoldo, northern suburbs of Florence.

in Florence that became an opportunity to "encounter" the city, its public spaces, and monuments. The protagonists imagined that their singing, storytelling, and dancing could stitch together the spaces chosen as a background for the video recording into a set of emotions and sensations that could easily reach the audience. At this stage, the research activity was based on the interpretation of the city's places, capturing the "vertigo of urban voids, the resonance of ancient stones, the flowing of the Arno River, and further, the life that animates the suburbs dense with humanity. (Figures 2-3-4-5)

These built spaces live and speak through their forms, surrounded by silence, which only in rare moments, during the day or at night, allows the possibility of grasping the meaning of the scene deprived of words and sounds. Meaning thus lies in the forms themselves and in the relationship among them (Focillon, 1943/1987). Thus, the sound of the instruments, the voice and gesture of the performers converse with places, with works of art and peripheral architecture, weaving new relationships, creating new stories even if transient.







**Fig. 5** F. Pinzani sings *Seeds of Beauty*, "I am looking for love and unity, I look for beauty in diversity, I look for food for my curiosity to enhance my life" (songwriter: F. Pinzani). University of Florence, Campus of Social Sciences, northern suburbs.

**Fig. 6** F. Pipparelli is acting out a passage from *The Giufà Project*, "If you look at it from the Bosphorus, or from the Pillars of Hercules, the Mediterranean Sea looks like a lake. A big one, yet a lake. You see coastlines everywhere. Your sight can never really get lost on a flat horizon. At least not there. You need to go to the high sea if you really want to be at sea". <<https://thegiufaproject.com/it/team-2/>>. San Miniato al Monte.





**Fig. 7** The Violinist plays a melody inspired to Belgian traditional music, Piazza della Signoria.

As masterfully expressed by Paul Valéry (1923) through the dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus in *Eupalinos ou l'architecte - L'Âme et la Danse - Dialogue de l'Arbre*, music and architecture make us think of anything but them, and the urban space in the performance becomes the place of the relationship between music and architecture, beyond words and in the absence of words. In this perspective, art can be understood as a system of formal relations rather than a symbolic representation of reality (Kubler, 1976/2002; Focillon, 1943/1987; Langer, 1950/2017). Therefore, from the top of Piazzale Michelangelo, in front of the church of S. Miniato al Monte, the narrator is the only one who makes words resonate to guide the audience beyond the images towards other places, evoking perilous journeys of men in search of freedom (Figure 6).

The images rendered by the video capture the incessant flow of tourists through the narrow streets of the historic center of Florence, and music becomes an opportunity to converse with spaces and people passing by.



**Fig. 8** The Dancer, Carolina Braus, improvises a choreography inspired by the flamenco tradition on the song *Caminan a mi lado* (songwriters: P. Feijoo Reis & F. Pinzani). Loggia of Filippo Brunelleschi, Piazza SS. Annunziata.

The absence of words gives way to the flow of music played by a violinist standing alone in front of the majesty of the Palazzo Vecchio immersed in the emptiness of Piazza della Signoria (Figure 7). Not far away, the dance of another performer enlivens the silence of Brunelleschi's Loggia in Piazza SS. Annunziata (Figure 8).

All participants showed extreme involvement in their performances and, regardless of the skills they possessed, worked with great dedication and awareness of the importance of their roles.

The final product is a 45-minute video<sup>5</sup> entitled *Encounter across borders. Narratives and Music for Intercultural Dialogues between Peoples*<sup>6</sup>, where music and songs alternate with narration and dance, in an emotional flow enriched by the suggestions evoked by the squares, streets, gardens, river and bridges of Florence. The research team documented all the encounters and conducted a text analysis of some significant passages of dialogues written by the young authors during the first phase of the creative process.

## FINDINGS & CONCLUSION

Thus, the main results achieved were the production of a video performance; the emergence and the enhancement of the participants' skills; the cohesion and cooperation within the intercultural music band; the performance design as an opportunity to share intentions and values. Unexpected results were achieved: the emergence of artistic skills possessed and not fully expressed and the development of new artistic interests that will be a stimulus for new projects and self-training paths, as stated by some of the participants.

The belief in the importance of art approaches for social cohesion and the development of a sense of belonging and community building was surely strengthened. The work on *Encounter Across Borders* project facilitated the creation of a group of youngsters who felt they were a community through a shared passion for music and arts. The ultimate artistic goal of creating a performance transferred to a video was the glue that motivated the group to work independently with greater commitment and dedication than expected. The participants themselves declared that working together meant a great improvement of technical and artistic skills.

It is important, therefore, to multiply art-based research experiences in education by facing the challenge of being able to incorporate such methodological approaches into rigorous scientific processes regarding collection and analysis of data together with their wide spreading.

## NOTES

**1** The research team of the Education and Psychology Department was directed by Prof. Raffaella Biagioli and included Dr. Valentina Guerrini and Maria Grazia Proli.

**2** The intercultural band performers have university backgrounds in various disciplines: education sciences, engineering, architecture, political

science, and nursing. Their specific artistic backgrounds are singing, playing percussion, guitar and violin, songwriting, electronic and digital music composition, acting and dancing.

**3** In some periods, meetings and rehearsals took place online, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This condition led the project towards different perspective because the digital environment used for sharing the artistic experience, represented more than an obstacle, but –at the same time– it was a new input to improve creativity.

**4** This scheme represents only the main steps of the creative process, the nature of which was reflexive and recursive.

**5** The video was shot by professional operators (April-May 2021).

**6** <<https://sites.google.com/forlilpsi.unifi.it/public-engagement/home-page-festival>> (09.2022).

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