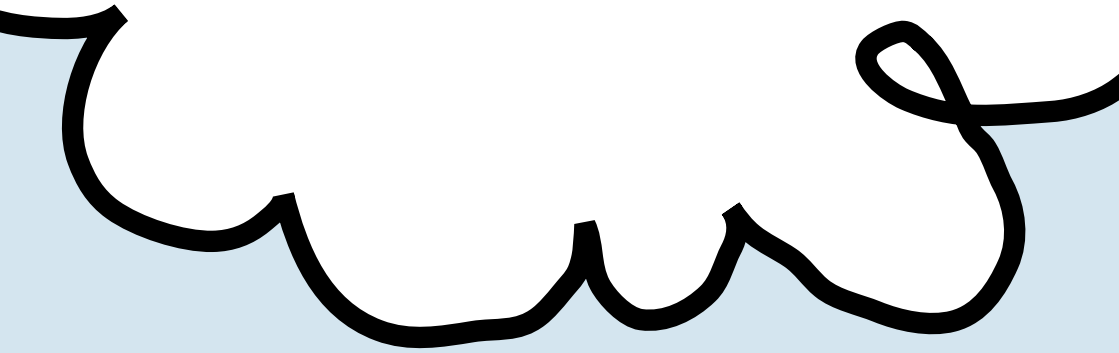




IMAGINING CITIES

FIRST EDITION
2026

A HANDBOOK of practices,
research and interventions in
the urban environment from the
experience of “Nine Elephants”



HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

“Imagining Cities” is conceived as an open format for sharing artistic and research-based practices. It brings together different ways of being present in the city, pointing us toward concepts and disciplines that help us reflect on our work as curators, artists, or experts, while understanding the city above all as a process.

We called this publication a “handbook”, though in our minds we quietly place an “almost” in front of the word. Our intention is not to impose fixed procedures, but to encourage everyone to develop their own approach to the places and stories that matter to them.

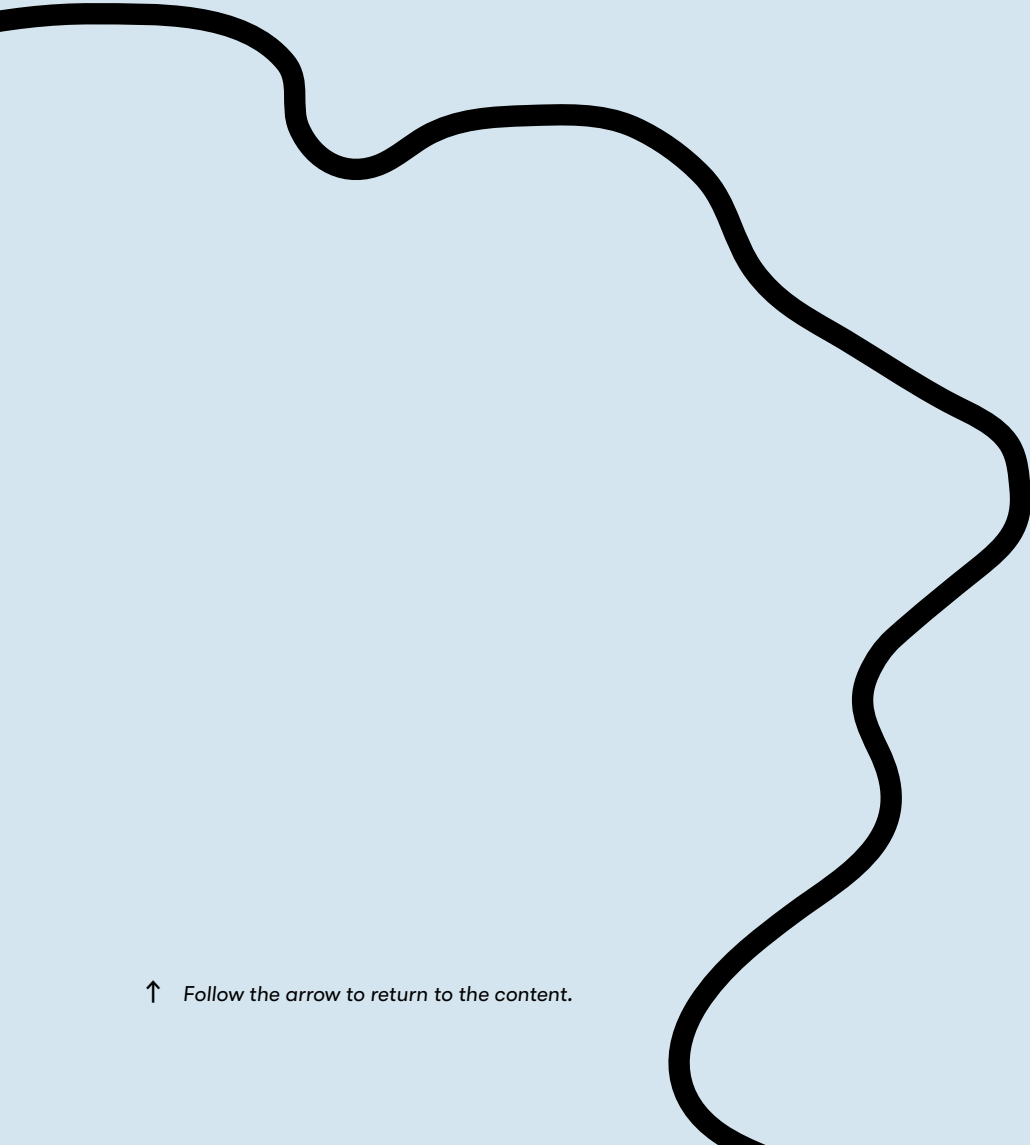
Many of the projects presented here took place only once, which also makes this publication a kind of archive. Alongside each project, we have included analytical texts and reflections shared by the creators themselves. Beyond documentation, we also propose a speculative way of thinking: under what conditions could these ideas come to life again? How might we enter their methodology?

We consider the methods presented here as practical and adaptable, which is why we included the section “If You Want to, Try It”. We do not expect all of these ideas to be physically realised — even engaging with them through imagination can be a valuable experience that changes the way we look at our own street.

If you would like to learn more, you can find additional materials on the online platforms of the [“Nine Elephants” Festival](#) and the [Centre for Social Vision](#), as well as in the digital publication [“Journal for Social Vision”](#).

CONTENT

↑ *Follow the arrow to return to the content.*



**INTRODUCTION: IS A CITY WITHOUT
IMAGINATION POSSIBLE?**

A

SPACES ON THE EDGE

- 01** NEITHER A CITY, NOR A GARDEN
- 02** INTER-BLOCK WANDERINGS
- 03** BEYOND “ISTORIYA
SLAVYANOBALGARSKA”
- 04** SOMEONE ONCE HERE

C

URBAN PARTICIPATION

- 01** THE GREEN PLACE WITHOUT A NAME
- 02** WEAVING DRUZHBA
- 03** QUEER AS FOLK
- 04** JUICEGROOVE
- 05** UFO ELEPHANT

E

EXERCISES

- 01** INSTRUCTION BRIEFING
- 02** IMAGINARY SCRIPT FOR A PLACE
- 03** WHAT WOULD THE ELEPHANT ASK US?

**NINE ELEPHANTS –
BEHIND THE SCENES**

B

URBAN STORYTELLING

- 01** LIFE AND THE FLEA MARKET
- 02** MUSEUM NO. 20
- 03** THE ORCHARDS OF MLADOST
- 04** THE RED LIST OF SOFIA
THREATENED SPACE
- 05** THE SHINY SEXY: HETEROTOPIAS
IN STUDENT TOWN
- 06** A HOUSE FOR AN ELEPHANT,
A PLANE, A GARDEN
- 07** RECIPES FOR THE FUTURE

D

IMAGINING NEIGHBORHOODS

- 01** WHEN THERE ARE NO WORDS LEFT
- 02** STORIES FROM THE BOTTOM
- 03** VIEWS FROM NOWHERE
- 04** WE ARE THE STREET WE FORGOT
- 05** FIRST LOVE, THEN EVERYTHING ELSE
- 06** ROOM AT THE END OF THE WORLD

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COLOPHON

INTRODUCTION

IS A CITY WITHOUT IMAGINATION POSSIBLE?

Where do encounters take place in a city? In the pauses between routes, in accidental detours, in places not designed for any specific purpose. Very often, not where the city has been carefully planned in advance. The modern city is in fact designed to produce anonymity — as in Baron Haussmann’s model of Paris, which Richard Sennett discusses in his studies on the relationship between democracy and the city (*The Conscience of the Eye*, 1990), arguing that excessive planning and homogenization limit social communication and weaken the conditions for democratic processes.

In Sofia, we can trace this tension, further layered by socialist urban planning. After the Second World War, representative central zones were built over former neighbourhoods with dense street networks, where public life was often framed by ideology — not through encounters, but through manifestations and parades. The large-scale housing estates constructed after the 1960s absorbed the major waves of migration to Sofia, yet left the spaces between apartment blocks as some of the few places where spontaneous encounters and actions could emerge despite, rather than because of, planning. Publicness is not a given; it arises precisely through informal and temporary practices. This is why Ivaylo Dichev notes that the city must create its own conditions and rules for encounters between strangers (*Citizens Beyond Places?*, 2003).

After the changes of the 1990s, the city seemed to sprawl uncontrollably — a small shop appeared in every garage, while privatization led to new apartment buildings and gas stations emerging in parks and small green areas. This inevitably altered the trajectories of movement through the city, decentralizing urban life. More recent construction, meanwhile, has begun to “smooth out” the city, making room for homogeneous business centers around Paradise Mall, “Manastirski Livadi” neighbourhood, and the new luxury zones in the city center. In this way, Sofia becomes part of the global phenomenon of urban “smoothing” — a process described by René Boer (*Smooth City*, 2023), in which cities are transformed into sterile, over-designed spaces deprived of conflict and surprise, and subordinated to the logic of consumption.

In Sofia, different regimes of urban production overlap. The city becomes simultaneously fragmented, institutionalized, and privatized, where parallel social realities coexist without ever fully replacing one another. *Sofia Architectural Guide* (Stoyanova et al., 2013) describes this type of city as “spontaneous” — composed of layers, incompatible logics, and divergent practices of inhabitation.

We sense this most clearly in the way we move through the city — jumping over potholes, searching for paths across boulevards, or walking around unexpectedly appearing buildings. This “urban parkour” is also reflected in the façades of apartment blocks, with their mismatched window frames and enclosed balconies. Here, one can recognize the “hyper-individualization” of the post-socialist transition — a reaction against the former compulsory collectivism, which today often turns into an obstacle to collective solutions and shared responsibility toward the environment.

And yet — or perhaps precisely because of this — Sofia remains a city of contradictions and tensions, but also of unexpected situations in which spontaneous forms of activism frequently emerge. Paradoxically, the weak levels of homogenization, and even poor construction itself, allow entropy to seep back in — flowers grow between paving stones, while bats settle into cracks in thermal insulation. Sofia remains a city of countless stories — of people, streets, and plants: shared, lived, imagined, or left unspoken.

This is how the following question emerged for us: as our trajectories intersect every day — willingly or unwillingly — where do we actually meet? And what is it that we share amid all this difference? It is precisely here that we recognized a field for our activities, placing art on the negotiating table of the world we inhabit.

When we started in 2021 with the Center for Social Vision, and later with the *Nine Elephants* festival (2024) — within which all the artistic projects and exercises included in this publication have been produced and realized — our aim was to establish a paradigm of conversation. We were looking for projects that enter into dialogue with the city — a dialogue that can take different forms, be fueled by different elements, and seek points

of intersection where they seem to be absent. Gradually, we opened the festival towards micro-interventions and “soft transformation,” turned our attention to the periphery, and began searching for unheard stories. The goal was to build immaterial connections between processes, people, and infrastructures.

We also came to see that encounter is key, but in itself not sufficient. For it to happen, it requires imagination — the ability to allow the other, to coexist in difference, and to create a space that does not yet exist. From these explorations emerged “Imagining Cities” — a publication inspired by the activities of the Center for Social Vision and Nine Elephants in the period 2022–2025. From the projects we conducted, we decided to outline four main directions for this manual — not as fixed categories, but as ways of working and thinking in the urban environment, which intertwine, flow into one another, and often coexist simultaneously.

The first direction is **spaces on the edge** — It includes projects that develop in liminal, neglected, or difficult-to-define spaces. These are inter-block areas, vacant lots, residual zones between functions and regimes of use. Here, interventions do not so much transform as they reveal already existing tensions and potentials, making visible those places that usually remain outside of attention.

The second is **urban storytelling**. Here, the projects work with memory, stories, and imagination as ways of understanding the city. They gather fragments — personal memories, archives, mythologies — and rearrange them into new narratives.

The third direction is **urban participation**. These are practices that involve people not merely as an audience, but as co-authors. Through encounters, collective actions, and temporary communities, situations are created in which the city is experienced collectively. For us, what matters is not so much the outcome, but the process itself — of gathering, negotiating, and acting together.

The fourth direction is **imagining neighbourhoods**. It focuses on everyday spaces and their hidden potential. The projects here activate imagination as a tool for rewriting the familiar — not through radical change, but through a shift in perspective. The neighbourhood becomes a field of possibilities, where even the most ordinary places can contain other worlds.

To these directions we also add several exercises — open formats offering invitations to action that can be adapted, extended, or transformed depending on the specific context.

Why art? Because it is precisely what creates the conditions for encounters that would otherwise not take place. Encounters between people, but also between different perspectives, stories, and possible worlds. In this sense, art does not simply reflect the city — it opens it up, making space for imagination where it is otherwise absent.

This publication, and our practice more broadly, is about more imagination — not as utopia or nostalgia, but as a concrete capacity to think



and experience the city together. Because only through imagination — and shared imagination at that — does encounter become possible, and the city becomes not merely infrastructure, but a space of continuous negotiation.



Viktoria Draganova
Sofia, 2026



INTRODUCTION

NINE ELEPHANTS - BEHIND THE SCENES

We asked ChatGPT to outline the steps for making an artistic intervention in the urban environment. This is what we received — and we commented on it.



If an artist wants to make an intervention, what is the process, who should they contact, and what permissions are required? In this case, we are also referring to participation in the “Nine Elephants” festival.

Of course. Below is a **draft example for the handbook (clear and useful for artists)**.

You can use it as a **structure in the handbook** and later replace or expand the details.

1. Pick a place¹

First, you need to find out **who owns the place**.

Possible scenarios:

- **municipal**² space (street, square, park)
- state-owned property
- **private**³ building or facade

If it is **private owned property**, you need **written consent**⁴ from the owner.

2. Define the type of intervention

Different types of interventions require different permissions.

Most common types⁵ include:

- mural
- temporary **installation**⁶
- sculptural object
- performance or event
- light or sound intervention

3. Apply for the festival

The festival is the **first entry point**, not the administration.



¹ Sometimes the place is the driving force, other times it is the idea...

² There are highly unusual municipal spaces — for example, in Ashira Morris’s project we used a tram, which is municipal property. We negotiated its rental, and later, through a vote of the City Council, the tram was granted to us free of charge. For a short moment, “Nine Elephants” entered directly into the political agenda...

³ For Veronika Desova’s performance, we were looking for an empty floor in an office building — naturally for a symbolic rent and with the goodwill of the owners.

⁴ Trust is key for us.

⁵ We most often work with temporary interventions — walks, workshops, momentary installations...

⁶ At one point, a program for temporary installations in neighbourhoods was almost launched — for example, “Open” within the “Outdoors” program. It would be great to revive this process and finally see it realized.

different permissions.



Most common types⁵ include:

- mural
- temporary installation⁶
- sculptural object
- performance or event
- light or sound intervention

3. Apply for the festival

The festival is the first entry point, not the administration.

- Typically, you will need to submit:
- idea / concept¹
- visualization² or references
- suggested location³ (or type of space) a short bio of you / your team

The festival:

- makes a selection
- evaluates⁴ whether the project is realistic
- takes on the role of facilitator with the institutions

4. Project approval and development (with the festival)

If the project is selected:

- you work together with the festival team⁵
- you further develop the concept according to the real conditions
- the following are clarified:
 - exact location
 - scale
 - materials
 - timeline

Here adaptations happen in relation to:

- urban environment
- technical constraints
- administrative requirements

5. Communication with the district administration

Almost always, the first institution to contact is the district where the site is located.

The district may:

- confirm whether the location is suitable
- direct you to the necessary procedures
- provide an initial assessment



¹ Start from something specific and find the larger theme. If the project builds on your practice while also involving different people, underrepresented communities, other voices, observations of all kinds of interactions within the environment, and the knowledge of experts — that is what we are looking for.

² It is not that important, because we know that this is a process.

³ Very important — and it should be clear why exactly there.

⁴ Sometimes we are slow to respond because we are trying to fit complex projects into the most accessible program possible, while also helping to facilitate funding or connect projects with partner organizations. But do not hesitate to reach out to us again.

⁵ This is actually the most exciting part — when a project begins to find its way through the city, moving from idea to reality. The earlier and more conversations you have with people living in the neighbourhood you are exploring, the better.



- scale
- materials
- timeline

- Here adaptations happen in relation to:
- urban environment
 - technical constraints
 - administrative requirements

5. Communication with the district administration

Almost always, the first institution to **contact** is the district where the site is located.

The district may:

- confirm whether the location is suitable
- direct you to the necessary procedures
- provide an initial assessment

6. Check whether additional permits are required.

Depending on the project, the following may be required:

- permit for a temporary **structure**²
- permit for the **use**³ of public space
- permit for a cultural event
- approval from cultural heritage authorities (if the site is in a protected historical area)

7. Implement the project

After obtaining the necessary approvals:

- you carry out the intervention
- you respect the agreed timeline
- for temporary interventions, deinstallation is **required**⁴

+ Ask anything



¹ The districts we have worked with have generally been very positively disposed. If you need to make the first contact yourself, look for the people responsible for cultural projects, inform them, invite them, and keep them updated.

² For this, you will need an architectural drawing that must be approved – the district municipality will be able to guide you more specifically regarding the types of procedures required.

³ If your project takes place on a street, in a park, or in a square, you should contact the Security Directorate, download the form from here, and also inform the district administration. There are deadlines! A few days before the event, you receive official permission.

⁴ Very important – especially for installations in urban environments, they are often “dismantled” by people who, for some reason, are annoyed by them, or simply do it at random. Monitor the condition of your project and remove it before it creates unnecessary waste or even a hazardous situation. Yes, in other places art may remain for longer, but here this is rare. Good luck!

PROJECTS

SPACES ON THE &DGE



CAN WALKING BE A
WAY TO UNDERSTAND
THE CITY?

A

WHAT GROWS
WHERE NO ONE
PLANS?

WHAT FORMS OF LIFE
SURROUND US THAT
WE ARE NOT EVEN
AWARE OF?

IS THERE POETRY IN
INFRASTRUCTURE?

WHAT BUILDS THE
CITY WITHOUT
BELONGING TO IT?



NEITHER A CITY, NOR A GARDEN

AUTHORS ANDREA POPYORDANOVA AND FRANCESCA CASTAGNETTI

LOCATION

Vartopo Park, Sofia

WHEN

2023

FORMAT

artistic research, walk and publication

TOOLS

guided observation, dialogue and knowledge sharing, co-creation through cyanotype, sensory exploration, storytelling and naming of plants

RELATED FIELDS

ethnobotany, urbanism, socially engaged art

KEYWORDS

urban periphery, transitional territories, collective knowledge, empirical research practice, shared memory, nature–culture interactions, eco-ethnography, urban wilderness, liminal spaces

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

→ [interview](#)
→ [info for print publication](#) —
“[a useless guide to vartopo and its weeds](#)”

“Vartopo” is a vast meadow with a view of Vitosha Mountain, located between the districts of Darvenitsa, Mladost, and Student Town. This area is also a typical post-socialist case of an unfinished transition. Although the terrain is designated as a green public zone in the Master Plan, it remains inaccessible as a park due to overlapping private ownership and the impossibility of expropriation. Meanwhile, construction sites around it are advancing, making it increasingly difficult to find an entrance to the meadow.

Thus, the space exists in a prolonged “in-between” state — neither fully public nor private. Where the buildings end, a wild territory begins — a habitat of fruit trees, weeds and grasses, but also of stray dogs, illegal structures, two rivers, a monastery, and much more. Unlike the ordered urban park with carefully selected ornamental species and pathways, “Vartopo” is what it chooses to be in each season. This meadow on the edge of the city is a kind of fragment of the Sofia plain as it once was, before becoming densely built up.

In 2023, artist Andrea Popyordanova and ethnobotanist Francesca Castagnetti organized an exploratory walk through Vartopo Park, where participants were invited to discover the urban landscape through plants and their stories. The walk led into one of the most beautiful wild gardens in Sofia, where participants became acquainted with some of its weeds and grasses, and explored what plants can reveal — about ourselves, the soil, and the spirit of the place.



METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

A walk lasting approximately two hours, during which participants share knowledge and practices that help them immerse themselves in the place with all their senses, includes preparing tea from locally collected and dried herbs, naming selected plants, and collectively producing cyanotypes.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

Find a place in your city that sits between different categories and is perhaps under threat of development or changes in ownership. Get to know it across different seasons. Learn about its historical trajectories — what it was used for, who it belonged to, and what its present and possible future are. This workshop is inspired by ethnobotanical techniques — a discipline and way of working that situates itself between scientific botanical methods and the equal recognition of traditional knowledge about plants. Look for scientific facts, but also speak with older people about legends, uses, and stories.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

During a walk, try to observe the plants you encounter and note as many observations as possible about the environment surrounding them. In traditional plant naming, the name often contains information indicating where the plant was found when it was named, what colour or season it blooms in, or whether it grows in wet or dry areas. Try to come up with your own names, then look up the commonly used “folk” names and compare them. An example of a plant with a particularly interesting range of names is one of the herbs we found in Vartopo: meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), also known as elm-leaved spirea, marsh root, or meadow queen.



Francesca Castagnetti is an ethnobotanist affiliated with the Centre for Bi-cultural Diversity in Kent, working in the fields of herbalism, ethnobotany, and culture. Through ethnographic approaches and community-based work, she explores the relationships between plants, knowledge of the land, storytelling, and ritual practices.

Andrea Popyordanova is an artist whose practice develops between illustration, the book form, and graphic design, with an interest in the relationships between people and the spaces they inhabit. In 2021 she created “First Line”, an imaginary guide to Sunny Beach, and since 2022 has been developing projects such as “Orchards” and “Urban Harvest”, exploring informal green spaces in Sofia. In 2025–2026 she is participating in an international residency between France, Spain, and Bulgaria, focused on territories with contaminated soils, in partnership with Gradoscope.



INTER-BLOCK WANDERINGS

AUTHORS SAPROMAT AND KONSTANTIN GEORGIEV

LOCATION

“Kylulutsite” neighbourhood, Sofia

WHEN

2024

FORMAT

audio walk with site-specific installations

TOOLS

artistic research, participation, temporary art installation

RELATED FIELDS

theatre, dramaturgy, urbanism, cultural heritage

KEYWORDS

urban fantasy, imaginary institutions, observation of details, infrastructure, inter-block spaces, archival research, narrative, immersive experience, urban storytelling, liminal spaces, rethinking of space, periphery

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

→ [audio walk](#)

“Inter-block Wanderings” is an audio walk that takes us through the streets of the “Kyulutsite” neighbourhood in a fantastical way. It immerses us in the stories of buildings and the invisible infrastructural logics of the area. Working with archival documents and field research, the artists construct a narrative that moves beyond specific events and historical periods. At its centre is the imaginary “Centre for Urban Research,” and participants in the walk become its collaborators.

At the beginning of the walk, all participants are given tools with which to indicate elements important to imagination and to the city. These elements are most often details that would otherwise go unnoticed. The blue colour applied by participants using chalk and water-soluble paint serves as a code, allowing everyone to recognise what others have discovered or marked as significant. The same colour is used for the viewing frames, through which one can focus on a specific detail and isolate it from its surroundings. The poster of the walk itself has a large hole in its centre — a sign that every urban detail can become a site of inquiry for the imaginary “Centre for Urban Research.”

The collaboration between the Sapromat Collective and anthropologist Konstantin Georgiev situates their work at the intersection of artistic practice and urban anthropology, emphasizing listening, attention, and participation as methods for understanding the city. Found objects and functional stories from the inter-block wanderings open windows into the past and future of the neighbourhood and its multiple possible identities. Cities are simultaneously places of habitation and industrial-transport nodes, and these functions often coexist side by side, while the experience of their boundaries differs for each of us.

Through the format of an audio walk, the project activates these in-between spaces as territories of imagination and exploration, rather than as objects of nostalgia or reconstruction. The imaginary “Centre for Urban Research” operates as a critical tool — it both parodies the institutional production of knowledge and democratizes it. Participants become co-researchers whose observations are treated as valid urban data. In this way, the dominant technocratic model of planning is questioned, as it often marginalizes everyday experience. The focus on invisible infrastructural logics — flows, boundaries, functional overlaps — reveals how centralized modern planning continues to structure the contemporary city within its new ideological and economic dimensions.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project uses a pre-recorded audio guide that participants can listen to on their own devices. The recording leads them through the streets, telling them when to turn and where to stop, while weaving together historical references, social theory, and creative writing exercises. As part of the collective walk, participants also received tools to “augment” the reality around them by outlining or embellishing various objects and found elements in the surrounding spaces with a distinctive blue paint. The surreal elements of the audio narrative were further emphasized through temporary installations and interventions in the urban environment.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The question remains whether we can — or even should — attempt to archive temporary interventions in urban space in the same way we have preserved and archived the audio guide itself. On the one hand, this would make it possible to retain the original experience, whose richness is partly shaped by the interaction between the recording and the artistic interventions in the environment. On the other hand, such complete archiving would contradict the project’s original intention, which relies on a certain element of frivolity, experimentation, and improvisation.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

The audio walk can be experienced individually. The starting point is the small park at 13A Panayot Volov Street. Once there, start the audio guide available at this [link](#). We recommend using headphones with good noise isolation.



Sapromat Collective is an artistic collective founded by Michaela Dobrova and Boris Dalchev. Creators of the immersive performance “Invisible Cities” in the Botanical Garden (collaboration with “Conclave”, nominated for a national Icarus Award in the category “Scenography”); the visual environment around Olga Tokarchuk’s visit during the “Literary Encounters” at Topocentrala in 2022 and the performance “The Other Dream” together with Kosmotehnika in 2023.

Konstantin Georgiev is a PhD anthropologist from Rice University (Houston, Texas) with a project exploring the imagination and environment of the city and nature through the history of a former scientific institute in eastern Siberia. Outside of his academic work, Konstantin has worked in film and television as well as a film archive. He has worked alongside visual artists on various projects, the most recent example being his work on Martin Atanasov’s photobook Nature Index. Together with Alexander Popov, Konstantin co-founded Kosmotehnika, a collective exploring the intersections between science fiction, social science and the humanities.



BEYOND „ISTORIYA SLAVYANOBALGARSKA”

AUTHORS MARIA ILIEVA AND MARTIN TOMOV

LOCATION

along “Istoriya Slavyanobalgarska”
Bld., Sofia

WHEN

2024

FORMAT

a visual research project and essay

TOOLS

video, essay, fieldwork, audio recording,
mapping, artistic research

RELATED FIELDS

visual anthropology, ecology, urbanism,
philosophy of the Anthropocene,
cultural studies

KEYWORDS

infrastructural poetics, the
Anthropocene, more-than-human
perspectives, periphery, liminal spaces,
urban ecology, post-totalitarian
heritage, multispecies perspective,
border spaces, post-socialist
infrastructure, urban wilderness

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

→ [video](#)

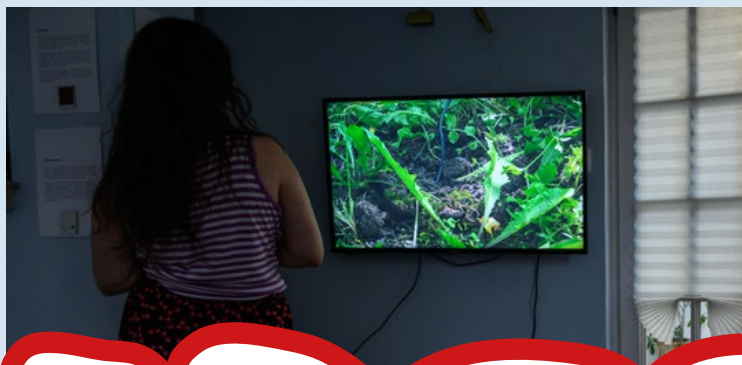
→ [essay](#)

“Beyond Istoriya Slavyanobalgarska” is a visual research project that traces the image of the city through its peripheries and border spaces. The project focuses on how urban territories generate their own narratives and meanings without the need for additional intervention — how space itself becomes a carrier of poetics, memory, and transformation.

The artists work along Istoriya Slavyanobalgarska Blvd. (named after an 18th-century foundational text, translated as Slav-Bulgarian History — ed. note) as a liminal line between center and periphery, constructing a journey through four infrastructural topoi: the outskirts of Nadezhda Park, the abandoned building of the vocational railway school “Nikola Korchev,” the Sofia thermal power plant, and the Central Sofia Cemetery. These sites are approached not as functional objects, but as living structures inhabited by more-than-human agents — moss, water, soil, plants, animals, as well as the material infrastructure itself. The video installation traces the interaction between infrastructural remnants and natural transformations, revealing how these spaces shape the sensory and cultural experience of the city. The artists work with visual and audio documents to present space as a constellation of layered sensory meanings. Alongside video material, highly sensitive microphones capture hidden sounds within the soil, as well as wide-range recordings that register the differences in the sonic environments of each site. The artists position themselves not as controlling subjects, but as observers and documentarians of the coexistence between human and non-human actors. The installation is accompanied by a form of investigation into the historical and corrupt practices that have led to the decay of the selected sites.

In this way, the project proposes a multispecies perspective that extends beyond an anthropocentric view of the city. Through visual and sonic methods, the authors document non-human rhythms and processes that continue even after human presence has receded. The post-socialist city is understood as an autonomous organism in which decay, corruption, post-totalitarian heritage, and ecological transformation intertwine with resilience, adaptation, and emerging forms of life.

“Beyond Istoriya Slavyanobalgarska” approaches resilience, adaptation, and new forms of life not as abstract concepts, but as processes unfolding within concrete urban structures, where human and non-human worlds intersect with questions of memory, power, and decay. Rather than relying on grand gestures or universal solutions, the project operates through micro-actions, observation, and presence, using art not as a tool for rapid transformation, but as a way to deepen the conversation, open perspectives, and build more attentive and sustainable relations to the city as a living process.



**METHODOLOGY
IN PRACTICE**

Fieldwork in urban border spaces, combined with visual ethnography, audiovisual documentation, and theoretical research.

The method merges artistic observation with anthropological and ecological approaches, treating infrastructure as a carrier of poetics and political meaning.

**NOTES FOR FUTURE
ITERATIONS**

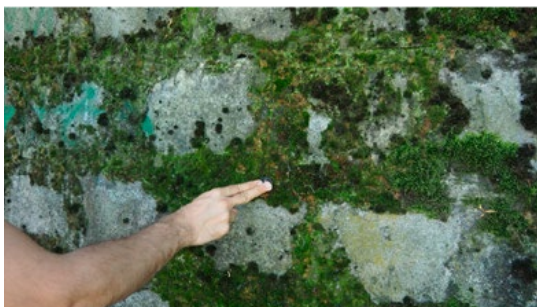
The project can be further developed in other cities or peripheral zones, with the method adapted to local infrastructural topoi and ecological contexts. It may also

be expanded through the inclusion of archival materials, oral histories, or longer-term field observation.

**IF YOU WISH
TO TRY**

Choose a liminal site in your city. Stay there long enough to observe not only people, but also non-human processes. Document what

usually goes unnoticed — sounds, traces, decay, growth. Try to “hear” the infrastructure. Look into the histories of these places and their transformations; consult available online information on investments, ownership changes, and responsibilities. Search for connections to broader ecological processes.



Maria Ilieva is a multidisciplinary artist working with drawing and text, whose practice explores memory, language, and the experience of migration. Drawing on personal experience across different cultural contexts, she rethinks social and internal boundaries.

Martin Tomov is an anthropologist and part of the Greenpeace Bulgaria team, with an interest in art and socially engaged practices. He works on issues such as the climate crisis, environmental justice, and social inequalities, including in urban and international contexts.



SOMEONE ONCE HERE

AUTHORS MARIA MAKEDONSKA AND NICOLA ZAMBELLI

LOCATION

Buhovo, the Central Administration of “Rare Metals,” with subsequent presentations in Pavolche and Vidin

WHEN

2025

FORMAT

poetic walk, film

TOOLS

oral history, community exchange, audio recording, poetic writing, video documentation

RELATED FIELDS

film, literature, visual anthropology, cultural memory, documentary cinema, urbanism

KEYWORDS

memory, absence, periphery, belonging, post-industrial cities, community, urban wilderness, liminal spaces, post-socialist infrastructure

“Someone Once Here” is a poetic investigation of absence, memory, and belonging. The project searches for meaning where buildings have disappeared and official narratives fall silent — within peripheral urban spaces marked by industrial decline and social transformation.

It continues the long-term collaboration between Maria Makedonska and Nicola Zambelli, initiated within “Babah Residency” (2023) and further developed through “Ruins of Memory” (2024). For “Someone Once Here,” the artists turn their attention to the town of Buhovo, a former mining town near Sofia marked by industrial collapse. During state socialism, Buhovo was integrated into the national economy through uranium extraction, which shaped housing, labour, and social infrastructure. Following the closure of the mines, the town experienced depopulation, institutional withdrawal, and symbolic marginalisation.

Rather than approaching decline through statistics, the project works through memory and storytelling. Disappeared or non-functioning buildings continue to exist in the narratives of local residents. Through fieldwork, oral testimonies, poetic writing, and shared walks, the artists develop a film that treats memory as a spatial practice, creating a collective poetic archive of loss, resistance, and imagination.

The project’s methodology is grounded in attentive slowing-down and sensitivity to the time and space of the city. Instead of documenting or analysing from the outside, it creates a space of co-experience and imagination, where memories and silence become active participants in the narrative. In this way, the approach emphasises the impact of local stories and how they can reshape understandings of place and its cultural memory.

**METHODOLOGY
IN PRACTICE**

In the town of Buhovo, local residents share their memories, losses, and sense of belonging connected to abandoned buildings, with conversations documented through video and photography. After each interview, a poetic text is created as a way for personal stories to transform into collective memory. Finally, the words and images are translated into a poetic performance and returned to the space through a screening of the visual material, allowing the site to “speak” through the voices of its inhabitants.

**NOTES FOR FUTURE
ITERATIONS**

The project can be adapted to other peripheral neighbourhoods or small towns with decaying infrastructure and a lost industrial identity. It can also develop into a travelling archive of texts and images, an interactive map of voices and memories, or a series of writing and visual-thinking workshops with local communities.

**IF YOU WISH
TO TRY**

Find your own site — a neighbourhood, industrial zone, or abandoned building where the past still speaks through derelict structures and people’s memories. Stay long enough to hear the stories of those who have lived or worked there. Invite them not only to share their accounts, but to write together with you. Return their words back into the space by organizing a public event on site — a reading, screening, or audio walk.




Maria Makedonska is a writer, screenwriter, and documentarist whose practice combines literature, field research, and poetic storytelling. She works with disappearing places, oral history, and cultural memory, creating hybrid forms between documentary and fiction. In 2023, she took part in “Babah Residency,” where she began her collaboration with Nicola Zambelli. In 2024, the two developed the project “Ruins of Memory,” and in the same year Maria participated in the “Nine Elephants” festival with the project “Bit and Bitak.”

Nicola Zambelli is a director and visual researcher working at the intersection of philosophy, documentary cinema, and fieldwork with vulnerable communities. He holds a degree in Hermeneutic Philosophy from Bologna and studied documentary filmmaking at IED Milan. His practice focuses on narrative identity and social transformation through storytelling. He has worked in Palestinian villages, prisons, and post-socialist contexts, and in 2023 he participated in “Babah Residency” in Bulgaria.

PROJECTS

URBAN STORYTELLING

HOW DOES THE
CITY TELL STORIES
WHEN WE LISTEN
TO IT?





CAN TRAMS
TELL STORIES?

B

HOW DO WE
MEASURE THE
VALUE OF A
PLACE?

WHEN DOES
CONTRADICTION
MAKE A PLACE
DESIRABLE?

IS THERE A RECIPE
FOR COLLECTIVE
IMAGINATION?



LIFE AND THE FL&A MARKET

AUTHOR MARIA MAKEDONSKA

LOCATION

flea market in Malashevtsi, “Popa” (Patriarch Evtimiy Square), Mladost District, Swimming Pool

WHEN

2024

FORMAT

artistic research, urban intervention with a temporary stall

TOOLS

listening, conversation, oral history, participatory exchange, artistic research, voice archiving, intervention in public space

CONNECTED FIELDS

urbanism, cultural anthropology, literary practices, socially engaged art, cultural heritage

KEYWORDS

informal urban economies, encounter, urban periphery, everyday life, urban narratives, informal urban economies

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

→ audio materials

“Life and the Flea Market” by Maria Makedonska explores the Malashevtsi flea market as a key space of post-socialist urban informality, where economic survival, social exchange, and memory intertwine outside institutional frameworks. Flea markets across Eastern Europe emerged and expanded in the 1990s as an adaptive response to the collapse of state socialism, unemployment, and the withdrawal of the welfare state. In Sofia, the Malashevtsi market continues to function as a vast informal economic and social hub, existing alongside official commerce and globalised consumption.

For the project, the artist recorded stories from people selling at the flea market. Based on the understanding that writing is not only a process of arranging words but also a practice of listening, conversation, and attention, Maria Makedonska builds a project grounded in spontaneous encounters and informal relationships between strangers. “Writing is listening to insignificant conversations that are in fact meaningful,” she says — a statement that underpins “Life and the Flea Market.” Initially, her questions to vendors focus on trade itself and the decisions they make; over time, the focus shifts to their personal lives.

She brings these stories into the city through a mobile stall that appears in different locations across Sofia during the Nine Elephants Festival. Objects from the stall can be “purchased” through listening to the collected stories. The recorded conversations become the currency of the stall — the voices of people determine the “price” of objects.

The act of “payment” through listening places voice, presence, and time at the centre as alternative forms of value, challenging neoliberal notions of productivity and exchange. This revaluation reflects post-socialist conditions in which informal practices compensate for structural inequalities and economic precarity.

The flea market unfolds as a living urban ecosystem — a space of economic necessity, social presence, and memory. The project does not seek to romanticise the market but to reveal its complexity, disorder, and human density, where individual voices often remain unheard.

Situated within debates on everyday urbanism and informal economies, the project shows that the post-socialist city is shaped not only by policies and transnational capital, but also by micro-practices of survival, sociability, and meaning-making that continue to exist in the in-between spaces of the city.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project uses fieldwork, interviews, and object-based storytelling. At the flea market, we collect oral histories from vendors about their lives and the objects they sell, with the conversations recorded as an audio archive. After each conversation, we purchase one object. In a subsequent stage, the objects are presented through a pop-up stall in the centre of Sofia, where they can be acquired not with money, but in exchange for listening to the seller's story.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The project can be adapted to other flea markets, neighbourhood markets, or cities. It can be expanded through visual documentation, the participation of the vendors themselves, an audio archive, or a digital map of objects and stories. The process can also be reversed — artists may sell their own works at the flea market.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Find a space of exchange. Collect stories connected to people and objects. Record conversations with people from different generations. Bring these stories into a new public context where the focus is on attention and listening rather than purchase. Create a route or action in which these voices are heard in the very place they speak about.



Maria Makedonska is a writer, screenwriter, and documentarist whose practice combines literature, field research, and poetic storytelling. She works with disappearing places, oral history, and cultural memory, creating hybrid forms between the documentary and the fictional. Together with Andrea Popyordanova, Sofia Popyordanova, and Mila Yaneva Tabakova, she created the exhibition “Unfixed Properties” at AVRT-KL, based on texts about post-socialist rental properties in Sofia. At “Babah Residency,” she participated in the interactive installation “I Hear You,” which connects strangers through an emotional conversation.



MUS&UM N°20

AUTHOR ASHIRA MORRIS

LOCATION

Tram loop opposite Iskar Station, Sofia

WHEN

2025

FORMAT

pop-up museum, sound and documentary installation in a tram

TOOLS

interviews, audio recordings, fieldwork, curatorial selection, archival materials, photography

RELATED FIELDS

urban history, visual anthropology, cultural studies, urbanism, oral history, documentary practice

KEYWORDS

urban memory, transport infrastructure, everyday life, non-monumental history, post-socialist infrastructure, reimagining space

“Museum No. 20” is a pop-up museum dedicated to the everyday life of the trams from depot “Iskar” and the people who operate, maintain, and use them. The project is hosted inside a tram carriage parked near the depot, transforming an ordinary vehicle into a space of memory, narration, and encounter for a single evening.

The yellow trams on line No. 20 began operating in Sofia in 1989 — a symbolic threshold year between socialism and post-socialism — and remain part of the city’s landscape and daily life. The project captures their existence at the moment they are about to be replaced by more modern vehicles, using the museum format, traditionally reserved for the past, to document the present. The forthcoming replacement situates the project within broader European infrastructural regimes, where “progress” often erases embodied habits and attachments.

During the event, visitors can explore exhibits and listen to recorded interviews with drivers, technicians, and passengers. In this way, “Museum No. 20” assembles a collection of memories experienced in motion and proposes an alternative form of urban history built from voices, gestures, and routine practices that usually remain invisible. The project creates memory in real time: history is not extracted from the archive but produced through use. It thus offers an alternative model of heritage based on everyday practice rather than monumental representation.

The project also functions as a participatory urban practice that activates everyday participants in city life — drivers, technicians, and passengers — not only as subjects of narration but as co-authors of its content. It highlights public transport as one of the few remaining shared urban experiences in a context shaped by privatization and individual mobility.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project combines fieldwork, interviews, audio documentation, and curatorial selection, using the mobile space of the tram as a museum environment. The method emphasizes oral history, everyday practices, and non-monumental forms of memory.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The project can be adapted to other lines, depots, or modes of transport, and expanded through video, archival photography, and a digital platform for collecting memories from passengers and employees.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Find an everyday object or piece of infrastructure that is about to disappear or be transformed. Collect the stories of the people who use, maintain, or inhabit it, and create a space where these voices can be heard.





Ashira Morris is an independent reporter and associate professor at the College of Journalism and Communications at the University of Florida, working between Tallahassee and Sofia. Her practice explores local urban environments and has been published in outlets such as Foreign Policy, Artforum, and 99 Percent Invisible, focusing on topics such as Sofia's inter-block spaces and informal urban environments.



THE ORCHARDS OF MLADOST

AUTHOR ANDREA POPYORDANOVA

LOCATION

Mladost district, Sofia

WHEN

2022

FORMAT

walk, mapping, visual and textual research

TOOLS

fieldwork, audio/visual recordings, map, interviews, illustration, artistic research

RELATED FIELDS

urbanism, urban ecology, visual anthropology, social history, cultural studies

KEYWORDS

urban vegetation, inter-block spaces, social histories, micro-actions, mapping, resilience, neighbourhood ecology, local participation, urban wildness, urban narratives

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

→ [map](#) (pdf)

“The Orchards of Mladost” explores the unexpected presence of fruit trees within the residential complexes of Sofia’s Mladost district — a large post-socialist housing estate. These trees exist largely outside official urban planning, yet form a resilient ecological and social infrastructure, revealing the improvisational and adaptive character of post-socialist urban life.

Andrea Popyordanova investigates the origins of these trees, their relationship with residents, and the ways in which their presence generates hidden stories and social interactions within the urban environment. The project emphasizes everyday care and informal maintenance of urban vegetation, documenting these practices and highlighting a form of civic engagement that contrasts with top-down planning models. While institutional planning traditionally focuses on functional zoning and formal green spaces, residents create a living, self-organizing urban ecology that connects social relations, memory, and seasonal rhythms.

The project is presented through a walk in the neighbourhood, accompanied by narratives about the trees, their caretaking communities, and their roles. A dedicated map of the trees visualizes this information in an accessible way, allowing visitors to experience the district through multiple perspectives.

The walk as a method, together with the evolving map, emphasizes temporality, accumulation, and layered perception. Rather than imposing a single interpretation, the map offers a framework for multiple readings, reflecting urban experience as fragmented, hybrid, and continuously negotiated between state planning, neoliberal investment pressures, and everyday practices. “The Orchards of Mladost” explores how unplanned urban vegetation shapes space and the lives of those who inhabit it. The trees function not only as ecological elements but also as social markers — linking past and present, people and place. Informal green spaces contribute to social and spatial justice, providing sites of encounter, care, and local knowledge in neighbourhoods often overlooked by municipal strategies. Fruit trees thus operate as subtle markers of continuity, connecting the legacy of socialist planning with the adaptive practices of contemporary residents. Andrea’s methods demonstrate how micro-actions and long-term presence reveal invisible dimensions of urban life, expanding understandings of belonging, resilience, and connectedness.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

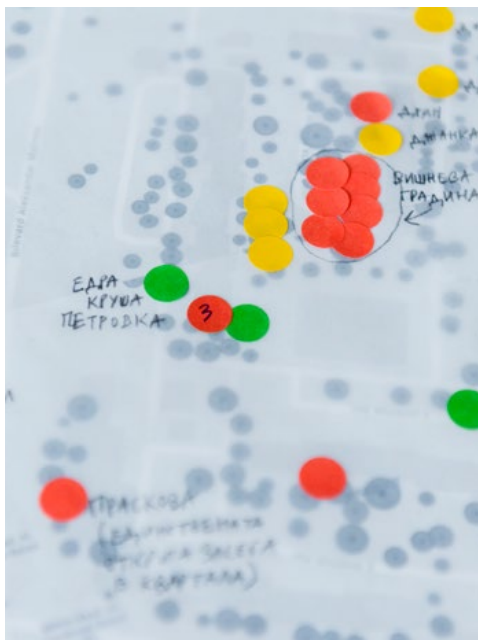
The project combines fieldwork, walks along routes, interviews with residents, audio and visual documentation, mapping, and artistic research. The method emphasizes the observation of unexpected or forgotten elements of the urban environment — trees, inter-block spaces, and interactions between people and plants.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The project can also be applied in other neighbourhoods or cities, with attention to local specificities of urban vegetation, history, and social interactions. It may include archival materials, oral histories, photography, and video to deepen both the map and the narrative.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Walk through your neighbourhood and look for unfamiliar trees or green spaces. Observe their condition, the surrounding infrastructure, and the people around them. Document everything — through sketches, recordings, text, or maps — trying to “hear” and narrate the stories of both plants and people together. You can also choose a single tree in your neighbourhood, observe it over several days, and record how it changes, what happens around it, and what people say about it. Try to connect it with other trees or places in the neighbourhood through a map or visual diary.



Andrea Popgyordanova is an artist whose practice develops between illustration, the book form, and graphic design, with an interest in the relationships between people and the spaces they inhabit. In 2021 she created “First Line”, an imaginary guide to Sunny Beach, and since 2022 has been developing projects such as “Orchards” and “Urban Harvest”, exploring informal green spaces in Sofia. In 2025–2026 she is participating in an international residency between France, Spain, and Bulgaria, focused on territories with contaminated soils, in partnership with Gradoscope.



THE RED LIST OF SOFIA THREATENED SPACE

AUTHOR VIKTOR DAMOV

LOCATION

presentation at “Svetofar” bookstore, Sofia

WHEN

2024

FORMAT

documentary research, fieldwork, academic essay

TOOLS

interviews, observation, photography, field mapping, critical analysis, artistic and visual documentation

RELATED FIELDS

urbanism, architecture, urban sociology, cultural studies, social anthropology

KEYWORDS

social-urban value, egalitarianism, urban community, gentrification, cultural infrastructure, participation, urban empowerment, urban narratives, informal urban economies, social justice

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

→ [video](#) (6 episodes)

→ [essay](#)

→ [interview](#)

“The Red List of Sofia Threatened Space” is a documentary research project by architect and researcher Viktor Damov that maps urban spaces in Sofia characterized by informality and social significance. The project presents places such as cafés, old cinemas, community centers, and cultural hubs that are used by diverse social groups, but which are threatened with disappearance under the pressures of neoliberal urbanism and gentrification.

The project focuses on the concept of “social-urban value” — spaces that provide egalitarian access, encourage interaction between different social groups, and enable a sense of belonging and empowerment for their users. Through the study of six key locations (Fabrika Avtonomiya, independent community center “Kopriva,” “Vlaykova” cinema, the Cultural Club of Veliko Tarnovo residents, café “Paris,” and the Cultural and Debate Center “The Red House”), Damov demonstrates how these spaces form an invisible social infrastructure that can serve as a model for a more just and inclusive urban future.

The project combines fieldwork, observation, and interviews with visual documentation and critical analysis of urban processes, focusing on gentrification, social segregation, and cultural assimilation in the center of Sofia.



METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project combines observation of urban spaces, field research, interviews with users of the places, photographic and visual documentation, as well as theoretical and critical analysis of processes of gentrification, social segregation, and cultural assimilation, along with possible responses to them. The overall approach emphasizes understanding egalitarianism, communal significance, and informal social interaction within the context of central Sofia.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The project can be expanded through the documentation and analysis of new urban territories and spaces (including those in other cities). For deeper research, interactive maps, video stories, digital archives, etc. may be added. On a theoretical level, the concept of “social-urban values” is continuously refined and expanded.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Go outside! Observe the city and its public spaces carefully, including the “hidden” ones. Explore an urban neighborhood and identify, on site, places that meet the following three criteria: (1) they must be egalitarian (economically accessible); (2) they must have a community (or communities) that consider the spaces valuable (a given community may own or simply use them); (3) the spaces must be open to the city, rather than exclusive to a specific group (i.e. they allow free communication and exchange). Use anthropological methods to understand their history, everyday life, activities, governance, funding, etc. Do not remain a passive observer — document through audio recordings, text, photographs, sketches, video, etc. Tell the story of these places and why communities consider them irreplaceable. Experience the selected spaces and empathize with the people who are part of them. Try to reflect on the intersections between different spaces — how they are similar and how they differ. Believe that these spaces contain both everyday trivialities and the possibility of a different urban future.



Viktor Damov is an architect and PhD candidate at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy (UACEG), with interests in architectural education and socially engaged practice. He is a co-founder of the collective Underschool_, with which he develops research, events, and educational formats.



THE SHINY SEXY: HET&ROTOPIAS IN STUDENT TOWN

AUTHORS MARIA GETOVA, ASYA PETKOVA, ANA-MARIA MOLNAR

LOCATION

Student Town, Sofia

WHEN

2025

FORMAT

walk and visual narrative

TOOLS

visual documentation, mapping, oral histories, photography, social research

RELATED FIELDS

urbanism, architecture, cultural studies, visual arts, poetry, photography

KEYWORDS

heterotopia, neighborhood, participation, local identity, social dynamics, urban narratives, neoliberal city

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

→ [map](#) (pdf)

The project takes us to Student Town, a paradigmatic urban space in which the ideals of socialist planning collide with the market logics of transition and everyday improvisation. Originally designed as a monofunctional district for temporary student residence, the area has today transformed into a heterogeneous environment inhabited by different generations, shaped through overlapping lifestyles and informal economies.

Within the project, Maria Getova, Asya Petkova, and Ana-Maria Molnar conduct multiple conversations and social research among residents of the district, mapping favorite and less preferred places, collecting impressions, observations, and personal stories about everyday life in the neighborhood. The project approaches Studentski Grad not only as an architectural or urban structure, but as a living space shaped by the people who inhabit it. It is precisely in the diversity of its residents and the complexity of social and spatial relations that the heterotopic nature of the district emerges — the coexistence of different generations, functions, and everyday practices creates a unique and multilayered image of the place. These overlaps are not an exception, but a structural feature of cities marked by regulatory gaps and rapid privatization.

A key question for the team is how a sense of belonging and identity is formed in such an environment. The walk between the “palaces” of the district (starting in front of the private kindergarten “Albertino,” whose architecture resembles a Disney castle, and ending near the Winter Palace) and the everyday routes of its inhabitants reveals both real and imaginary maps of social, cultural, and visual presence in the space. By including the sign “Shiny Sexy” from a local convenience store, the project captures post-socialist excess, ambition, and semiotic saturation. Neon advertisements, chalga posters, and nightlife infrastructure colonize the formerly regulated space, while laundromats, kindergartens, and small shops sustain routines of care and reproduction.

Thus, the project demonstrates how visual and textual narratives can turn urban heterotopias into a field of artistic and social research, using photography and mapping to reconstruct the diversity and dynamics of the neighborhood. It avoids nostalgia and moral panic, presenting Studentski Grad as a negotiation of urban community in which different times and groups coexist.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The research is conducted through fieldwork, interviews with residents, photography, and mapping. The results are presented as a walk through the neighborhood, in which visual and textual narratives intertwine into imaginary maps of space, combined with documented quotations from inhabitants. The method allows the capture of both social and visual heterotopias, turning the walk into a tool for collecting collective and individual narratives.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The project can be adapted to other neighborhoods and cities, with potential directions including expanding the number of interviews and respondent profiles, longer-term observation of selected urban routes, adding an audio layer to the walk, or strengthening the “imaginary” and game-like reading of urban space.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Go to a neighborhood that is unfamiliar and confusing to you. Start documenting all contradictory elements within it. Ask yourself about their functions and the invisible reasons for their existence. Seek out residents who can explain their own interpretations and perspectives. Most importantly, collect their stories. Understand everyday routes, ask about places they avoid or their favorite corners. Create a map representing the different layers and perceptions of the selected neighborhood.



Ana-Maria Molnar holds a BA in Press and Editorial Photography from Falmouth University, UK. She is also an alumna of the VII Photo Academy in Sarajevo, where she completed Levels 1 and 2 in documentary photography and visual storytelling.

Maria Getova holds a BA in Cultural Studies from Sofia University, where she also completed an MA in Arts and Contemporary Culture (20th–21st century). She participated in an Erasmus program at the University of Tübingen and in a workshop on participatory history-making organized by the House of European History.

Asya Petkova is an architect with an MA from Politecnico di Milano (2024) and a BA from the Technical University of Vienna (2022). Her work explores the relationship between space and narrative, with a focus on local identity, social integrity, and participatory design.



HOUSE FOR A& ELEPHANT, AIRPLANE, GARDEN

AUTHOR VOX POPULI DOCUMENTARY THEATRE STUDIO

LOCATION

Knyazheska Garden, Sofia

WHEN

2024

FORMAT

walk-performance, theatrical action in public space

TOOLS

interviews, oral history, fieldwork, verbatim theatre, dramaturgical composition, performative practices, mapping through narrative

RELATED FIELDS

documentary theatre, urban history, urbanism, socially engaged art, participation

KEYWORDS

park, public space, collective memory, urban narratives, post-socialist infrastructure

“House for an Elephant, Airplane, Garden” is a walk-performance and theatrical action that activates Knyazheska Garden as a stage for memory, storytelling, and imagination. The project originates from the “Container” space, maintained by VOX POPULI, and draws attention to the past and present of one of the most multilayered places in central Sofia — Knyazheska Garden as a space layered over time, whose meanings have been reinterpreted through different political regimes and social transformations.

Through documentary theatre and performative walking, the project presents the garden as a palimpsest of uses, memories, and imagined futures. Using oral testimonies and verbatim theatre techniques, it reconstructs different images of the garden throughout the 20th century — as an orchard, amusement park, zoo, monumental square, and site of youth culture. Stories of animals, students, music, wartime scarcity, conflict, and care intertwine to outline an imaginary map of the space, composed of personal experiences and collective memories, forming a living archive that resists linear historical narratives. The space emerges as simultaneously a place of leisure, discipline, scarcity, and community — complicating simplified notions of socialist public space.

The project turns the audience into active participants in reconstructing memory and rethinking public space. Rather than offering a fixed historical narrative, “House for an Elephant, Airplane, Garden” creates an open situation of listening, co-experience, and dialogue, in which personal stories function as material for collective thinking about the city, its past, and its possible futures.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project uses verbatim techniques based on interviews with real people, combined with fieldwork, historical research, and dramaturgical composition. The park functions as a stage, and movement through space becomes a structuring principle of the narrative.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The project can be adapted to other parks, gardens, or neighborhood spaces, and expanded through archival materials, visual traces, or digital formats for collecting memories.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Find a place with a multilayered history. Collect the stories of people who have inhabited, used, or observed it. Turn these voices into a walk, performance, or public situation for sharing, in which those voices are heard in the very place they refer to.



VOX POPULI Documentary Theatre Studio is an artistic collective founded in 2012 that develops socially engaged performance practices and works with verbatim techniques. The team creates and produces documentary performances, organizes debates and educational formats, focusing on contemporary social issues and dialogue with diverse audiences.





RECIPES FOR THE FUTURE

AUTHORS ELENA BALABANSKA, ELEONORA EDREVA, ISABELA MARKOVA

LOCATION

Primary and high schools, West park, Sofia

WHEN

2025

FORMAT

artistic research, participation, informal gathering

TOOLS

picnic, interviews and conversations, workshops, visual recording, collective writing, zine

REALTED FIELDS

urbanism, visual anthropology, educational practices, cultural studies, urban sociology

KEYWORDS

collective imagination, urban routes, shared future, young people, urban identity, participation, micro-actions, social inclusion, urban narratives, collective body

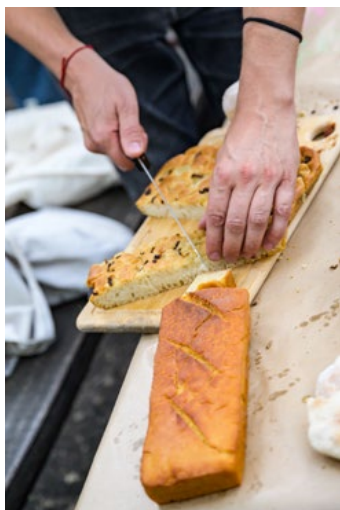
ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

→ [info for print publication](#)

“Recipes for the Future” engages young people from different educational and social backgrounds along tram line No. 10, using it as a symbolic and physical link between neighborhoods, people, and stories. Following the route of the tram line, the project maps Sofia as a socially stratified yet interconnected urban field, collecting individual voices, ideas, and imaginaries that are transformed into a shared future in the form of a “recipe” — a metaphor for urban collaboration and collective imagination.

The route passes through areas with different urban identities — from the corporate district around Paradise Mall, past schools of different profiles, university and cultural spaces, to more diverse and multilayered neighborhoods. The landscape around the shopping mall is shaped by transnational capital, corporate architecture, and the global IT economy. Each stop adds a new “ingredient” to the collective recipe, highlighting the diversity of social and cultural perspectives in the city. In this way, the project reveals how young people perceive and reshape the urban environment, and how power, attention, and future are distributed among different communities.

The outcome is materialized in a zine and a picnic event, where participants can receive a copy of the publication, learn more about the project, and taste the prepared recipes. Food and sharing are used as tools for social interaction, exchange of ideas, and collective experience, turning gastronomy into a method for exploring community stories and future visions.



METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project uses walking as the main tool for collecting stories, conversations, and observations. The route of tram No. 10 serves both as a structuring device and as a symbol of connections between neighborhoods and social groups. The process combines oral storytelling, supported by visual and graphic materials, and collective writing. The emphasis is on creating a collective narrative rather than a fixed product.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The project can be expanded to other tram routes or urban lines, adapting the method to local stories and specific neighborhood contexts. It can include more visual and audio documentation, as well as digital interactivity for broader access.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Walk along your own tram route or street, observing people and spaces. Listen, record, observe, and participate — both in conversations between people and in the quiet sounds and sights of the city. Collect stories, ideas, and impressions and record them in a short booklet or digital format. Think about how these “ingredients” can form a collective narrative of the city. Try to create a “recipe” for the future that brings together different perspectives.





Eleonora Edreva is an artist working at the intersection of art and ecology, with degrees from the University of Chicago and the University of New Mexico. Her practice combines visual media and socially engaged processes, and she is currently conducting research under the Fulbright program on natural dyeing traditions in Bulgaria.

Elena Balabanska is an architect and urbanist with degrees from the University of Manchester and the Royal Danish Academy. She works in participatory design and urban studies, focusing on community participation and the social aspects of the urban environment.

Isabela Markova is an artist and graphic designer based in Sofia, where she graduated from the National Academy of Art. She works in graphic design, visual identities, posters, and illustration. Recently, she has been exploring various media and techniques — from art installations and collaborations to print methods such as linocut, screen printing, and risography.

PROJECTS

URBAN PARTICIPATION



HOW DO WE
PARTICIPATE
IN THE LIFE OF
THE CITY?

WHEN DOES A
STREET BECOME
A COMMUNITY?

C

WHERE DOES
FREEDOM HAPPEN —
OUTSIDE THE RULES OR
IN BETWEEN THEM?

WHEN IS THE CITY A BODY?
AND WHEN DOES THE BODY
BECOME A CITY?



THE GREE& PLACE WITHOUT A NAME

AUTHORS REMINA ALEXIEVA AND RALITSA BELCHEVA

LOCATION

Podyane district / “Vasil Levski 1928”
community center, Suhata Reka
neighborhood / Podyane District
Municipality building, Sofia

WHEN

2024

FORMAT

visual research, exhibition, public
discussion

INSTRUMENTS

interviews, photography, fieldwork,
portraits, archival materials, expert
opinions

RELATED FIELDS

urban ecology, visual anthropology,
urbanism, social research, cultural
studies, civic participation,
participatory planning, urban
psychology

KEYWORDS

green spaces, informal urban
environment, oral history, neighborhood
memory, social imagination, urban
ecology, civic urbanism

“The Green Place Without a Name” is a research and exhibition project that examines informal green public spaces in the Podiyane district, particularly in the Suhata Reka neighborhood. In July 2024, Remina Alexieva and Ralitsa Belcheva conducted conversations with local residents who identified such places — most often left without official maintenance, yet actively used by people for rest, meetings, play, and personal rituals — spaces that fulfill an important social function despite remaining outside institutional attention.

The project investigates one of the most overlooked yet persistent phenomena in the post-socialist city: informal, unnamed green spaces that exist outside official planning and governance categories. Many of these green areas were originally designed as part of the socialist ideal of collective well-being and ecological balance. After the political transition, they often remained administratively “invisible” — without clear ownership, maintenance, or development strategies. The absence of a name becomes a symptom of their marginal position in contemporary urban governance.

The research functions as a starting point for civic dialogue and the expansion of collective imagination regarding neighborhood development. “The Green Place Without a Name” combines fieldwork, interviews with residents, documentary photography, and curatorial work with public discussions. The project places personal narratives and residents’ portraits at its center, revealing their affective relationship to space. Memory, desire, and everyday use are established as alternative forms of urban knowledge that challenge dominant investment-driven planning models. Imagination is framed as a civic resource — not only asking what the space is, but what it could become.

The exhibition, including six portraits and personal narratives of local residents, functions as a temporary forum for sharing and articulating collective aspirations. Rather than proposing spatial redesign, the project offers a discursive intervention that restores a sense of belonging and care. In this way, green space is reimagined not as a resource for exploitation, but as a shared social environment sustained through recognition, participation, and collective responsibility. Through meetings and discussions with residents, experts, and municipal representatives, the initiative promotes democratic and participatory approaches to urban care, emphasizing the importance of small, everyday elements that make a place habitable and desirable.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project uses fieldwork, interviews with residents, documentary photography, and public discussions. The method emphasizes personal stories, informal practices, and democratic participation as a foundation for rethinking urban green spaces.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The project can be developed in other neighborhoods and cities through the inclusion of new communities, longer-term field observation, and expansion into video, audio archives, and digital platforms for sharing stories.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Choose an “unnoticed” place and document what happens there over several weeks. Create a small exhibition or gathering in which you share people’s stories and invite others to imagine how the place could develop.



Ralitsa Belcheva is a photographer focused on documentary photography, interested in everyday life, human–environment interaction, cultural phenomena, and minorities.

Remina Alexieva is a researcher and civic activist working in ecology and climate issues, the social impacts of climate change, and democratic methods of civic participation.





WEAVING DRUZHBA

AUTHOR MARIA MINKOVA

LOCATION

flower structures by the lake in Druzhba district, Sofia

WHEN

2025

FORMAT

temporary installation, community participation

TOOLS

fieldwork, interaction with local residents

RELATED FIELDS

public art, participatory art, social memory, community practices

KEYWORDS

neighborhood identity, collective experience, civic urbanism, rethinking space

“Weaving Druzhba” is an installation in which the metal structures of the former flower shops by the lake in the Druzhba neighborhood are transformed into a surface for personal stories, memories, and relationships connected to the area. Together with friends, festival participants, and local residents, the artist weaves ribbons and threads of different materials and colors into the structures, forming a collective “fabric” of the neighborhood — the invisible yet tangible thread connecting people, places, and memories.

The installation is meant to be viewed, unraveled, recognized, and experienced together — it documents and visualizes the social memory of the neighborhood while simultaneously functioning as a place for encounter, conversation, and collective action. The project approaches the post-socialist neighborhood as a living relational fabric rather than a fixed administrative unit. By working with abandoned metal flower-bed structures near the lake in Druzhba, the project activates residual infrastructure from the socialist period that has remained functionally ambiguous in the present. Originally created as part of the aesthetics of collective life, these structures today testify to the withdrawal of institutional care. Rather than restoring them, the project transforms ordinary abandoned elements of public space into a platform for encounter and active community participation. It enables residents to engage directly in the artistic process and leave a personal imprint on public space. Through this act of collective creation, the installation not only visualizes neighborhood identity, but also encourages dialogue, strengthens social bonds, and demonstrates how art can function as a tool for inclusion and shared memory within the city. The act of weaving introduces a fragile, tactile, and collective intervention that contrasts with the rigid metal geometry of planned urban design.

The project includes abstract visual references to the lake, the bridge, the cafés, and the Roma neighborhood across from it, emphasizing the coexistence of different communities. This is not an official narrative, but an incomplete, intertwined, and open-ended process in which radical transformation is replaced by attention and care.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project works with the existing urban structure — adapting it rather than replacing it. Disused flower shop structures are transformed into weaving frames, while residents become co-authors. Through the manual interweaving of colored ribbons, an image of the neighborhood landscape gradually emerges. The installation functions as a membrane between inside and outside, filtering light and gathering people through a shared gesture.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

New “looms” could emerge on other abandoned urban elements, as a mobile version traveling through different neighborhoods, or as a light-based adaptation. Each realization can be archived as an unfolded panel — a map of a specific place and moment.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Begin with an existing structure, work with a simple module, and invite the community to participate. The process is as important as the result. Weaving becomes both an image and a social act.





Maria Minkova is a visual artist based in Sofia with a background in textile arts and mural painting from the National School of Fine Arts and the National Academy of Arts. With more than ten years of experience as an art director in international advertising agencies, she primarily works with installations in urban environments, exploring their interaction with people through techniques such as assemblage and weaving.



QUE&R AS FOŁK

AUTHORS VALYA MARINOVA AND KAT TODOROVA

LOCATION

“Aleko Konstantinov” Community Center, Oborishte district, Sofia;
“Fabrika Avtonomiya” Social Center, Krasno Selo district, Sofia; “Magnit” Youth Space, Lozenets district, Sofia

WHEN

2024

FORMAT

participatory theatre, workshops,
socially engaged performance practices

INSTRUMENTS

participatory exercises, Theatre of the Oppressed, conducting anonymized interviews, script development, group discussions, theatre games, facilitated dialogue, process documentation

RELATED FIELDS

socially engaged theatre, LGBTQ+ activism, youth work, social change

KEYWORDS

social change, oral history, group processes, collective learning, safe space, public participation, social justice

“Queer as Folk” is a participatory theatre project and workshop in which participants explore scenarios of liberation and social inclusion through techniques from Augusto Boal’s “Theatre of the Oppressed.” The project was created in response to the increasing number of hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community in Sofia and aims to provide a safe and creative space for expression, discussion, and collective rethinking of challenging social situations.

The workshop is based on interactive exercises in which participants reenact situations of oppression, discrimination, or social conflict based on real experiences, experimenting with different forms of reaction and resistance. The method emphasizes shared experience, equal participation, and creative self-expression, transforming the theatrical process into a tool for learning and emancipation.

“Queer as Folk” demonstrates how theatre can activate social communities and transform public spaces — here, community centers, social spaces, and their audiences — into environments for collective thinking and action. The project explores the boundaries between personal experience and social impact, providing a platform in which participants become co-authors of both the stage material and the social discourse, while the theatrical stage itself becomes a tool for visibility, empathy, and change.



METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project uses techniques from the method “Theatre of the Oppressed,” described in Boal’s “Theatre of the Oppressed.” It combines theatre exercises, role-playing games, individual sharing, and group discussion. The process may also be documented through notes and video/photographic recordings, without disrupting the participants’ experience. Material for the enacted situations can emerge spontaneously from participants during the workshop or be developed beforehand through semi-structured anonymized interviews with people affected by specific forms of discrimination or oppression.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The project can be expanded through the inclusion of more participants, different neighborhoods, or public spaces, with attention to the specificities of the communities and their social contexts.

FREE INSTRUCTIONS

Begin with the technique of forum theatre. It is advisable for the role of the so-called “joker,” who facilitates the process, to be taken by someone with prior experience in group work involving sensitive and potentially traumatic topics. After warm-up exercises and theatre games, participants enter pre-prepared roles and perform short scenarios that pause at a moment of heightened tension. From there, multiple alternative behaviors and reactions are improvised in order to transform the dynamics of oppression. Anyone in the group can participate, test ideas, and share observations. The roles of actors and audience begin to blur, as does the barrier between stage and seating.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Choose a topic of social injustice that matters to you. Speak with people you know about related experiences and invite them to create theatre together around the topic. Write short scenarios in which this injustice can be felt. Find a space in a community center (community hall, school, youth center, etc.) and organize an event. Create a welcoming environment in which everyone can participate voluntarily, and maintain confidentiality regarding what is shared within the group. Use the theatrical process as a tool for empathy, visibility, and activism.



Valya Marinova is a facilitator and youth worker with experience in the non-governmental sector, working through non-formal education, art, group processes, and activism.

Kat Todorova holds a Bachelor's degree in Theatre Arts from New York University Abu Dhabi. Her previous projects include actor training at the Meisner Studio at NYU Tisch, USA.



JUICEGROOVE

AUTHOR KARAKASHYAN & ARTISTS

LOCATION

The intersection of Veslets Stand Tsar
Simeon St, Sofia

WHEN

2025

FORMAT

interactive dance performance

TOOLS

dance, live music, synesthetic
improvisation, interactive audience
choices, visual and costume selections,
collaboration between performers and
choreographer

RELATED FIELDS

performance in public space,
participatory art, multidisciplinary art,
urban culture

KEYWORDS

social interaction, collective experience

“Juicegroove” is an interactive dance performance for three dancers, directed by Kosta Karakashyan and created in collaboration with the performers of Karakashyan & Artists. In the performance, dance becomes a tool for creating new connections between audience, performers, and music, as spectators are given the opportunity to influence the performance in real time — through choices of music, mood, and costumes — while observing how the dancers adapt their movements accordingly. The project combines contemporary and commercial dance, creating a synesthetic experience in which sound, visual elements, and touch merge in unpredictable ways. By transforming an urban intersection into a site of interaction, “Juicegroove” turns public space into a laboratory for social and aesthetic experimentation.

“Juicegroove” activates viewers not merely as observers, but as co-authors of the experience. The project demonstrates how movement and collective participation can break down the traditional boundaries between audience and performer, creating a temporary social and emotional community within urban space. Through this interaction, the work encourages conscious presence and connection with both the city and the people within it, turning the performance into a form of contemporary urban social practice.

The transformation of urban space into a stage emphasizes the idea that public space already contains a potential for choreography — through the flow of people, sounds, and lights. The project does not “place” dance into the city; rather, it extracts dance from it. In this sense, it functions as a laboratory for social dynamics: exploring how a group of strangers can create a brief yet intense community through shared choice.



METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project uses improvisation, interactive audience choices, and synesthetic approaches combined with choreographic research into movement across different styles and forms of social interaction. The methodology emphasizes the spontaneous decisions of the performers, collective emotional experience, the audience's reaction when their choices alter the performance, and the influence of performative action on the environment in which it unfolds.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The performance can be adapted to different urban spaces, include more participants and spectators, and integrate digital tools for interactivity or visual effects in order to expand the social and emotional range of the experience. The format is suitable for a wide variety of urban contexts and can interact with and enrich their existing atmosphere.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Choose a public space — a street, square, or park — and develop a short interactive performance, either dance-based or theatrical. Experiment with methods of involving the audience in shaping the outcome of the performance. Observe participants' reactions, explain how they can influence the movement, music, or rhythm, and document how this transforms the relationship between performers and audience. Explore how movement and improvisation can connect the people around you in public space. Allow the audience to influence the performance in real time and observe how interaction changes the dynamics of the scene.



Karakashyan & Artists is a multidisciplinary company from Bulgaria led by director and choreographer Kosta Karakashyan. The company creates dance and immersive performances focused on social themes and movement. Their practice includes projects such as KITCHEN, “The Last Sunset”, and “Insert Coin / Player One”, realized in alternative spaces including kitchens, depots, hotels, and public environments.



UFO & ELEPHANT

AUHTORS IRINA STOYANOVA, ANDREA DRAGOV, AND HRISTO ZHELEV

LOCATION

Sofia city centre

WHEN

2024

FORMAT

dance walk / flash mob

TOOLS

movement, body, improvisation, mobile installation, live music, audience participation, site-responsive interaction

RELATED FIELDS

contemporary dance, urban studies, social choreography

KEYWORDS

collective body, urban play, accessible art, temporary communities, rethinking space

“UFO Elephant” is a dance walk and street performance that transforms everyday movement through the city into a collective bodily experience. The artists use the figure of the “elephant” as a fantastical, mobile creature moving through the center of Sofia, creating a temporary community of participants and passersby connected through movement, music, and imagination.

The walk moves through central streets and public spaces while encouraging spontaneous audience participation. Anyone can join by holding onto a balloon — a “tentacle” of the elephant — and moving it together with the group. In this way, ordinary walking is transformed into dance, and the city becomes a stage for shared, non-hierarchical, and radically open self-expression.

The project works with the idea of accessibility of both art and the body in public space, demonstrating that dance does not belong only on stages or in studios, but can happen anywhere — on the sidewalk, in the square, in movement itself. “UFO Elephant” creates temporary heterotopias within the city, where the rules of everyday behavior shift and give way to play, care, reciprocity, and collective joy. The project activates imagination as a tool for disrupting urban normality. The figure of the elephant — at once absurd and humorous — creates a temporary displacement in the logic of everyday life. This fantastical image acts as a catalyst: it allows participants to behave differently, to move in new ways, and to connect with strangers without predefined structures.



METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project combines walking, dance improvisation, live music, and active audience participation. Its method is based on social choreography — the exploration of how bodies move together in public space and how movement can generate community, attention, and care. The emphasis is on spontaneity, accessibility, and shared experience.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The project can be adapted to different cities, neighborhoods, and cultural contexts. It may include local musicians, dancers, or communities, as well as the development of different “elephants” — objects, costumes, or forms reflecting local themes and stories.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Gather a small group for a walk and choose a route through your neighborhood. Allow yourself to transform walking into dance by using an object (a balloon, rope, or fabric) that physically connects you. Move together through the city, listen to the sounds around you, and respond to the environment through liberated movement without predetermined choreography. Observe how people react and how your own perception of the city changes.





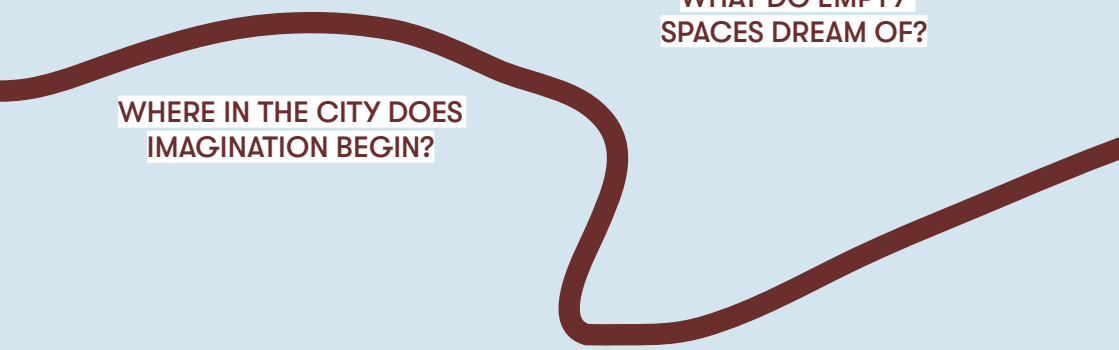
Irina Stoyanova is a multidisciplinary artist and performer born in Kazakhstan and based in Bulgaria. She graduated in Architecture from the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy (UACEG) in Sofia. She founded the “EXP ART LAB” Foundation and works under the pseudonym *irroktopuz* (“Octopus of Mistakes”). Her interdisciplinary practice combines performance, video, and installation through methods of experimental improvisation.

Andrea Dragov is a performer and artist working with the body, movement, and audience participation, with a focus on collective and shared forms of experience.

Hristo Zhelev is a musician and composer working with live music in the context of performance and movement, creating sonic environments for bodily and spatial exploration.

PROJECTS

IMAGINING NEIGHBOUR- HOODS

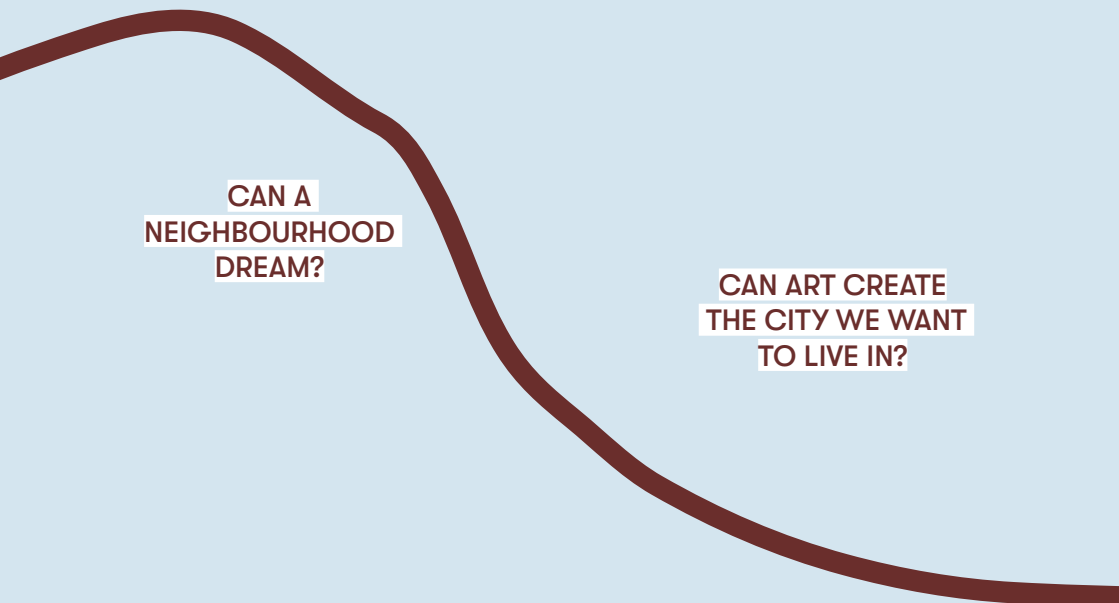


WHAT DO EMPTY
SPACES DREAM OF?

WHERE IN THE CITY DOES
IMAGINATION BEGIN?

HOW DOES LOVE
CHANGE THE WAY
WE SEE THE CITY?

D



CAN A
NEIGHBOURHOOD
DREAM?

CAN ART CREATE
THE CITY WE WANT
TO LIVE IN?



WHEN THERE ARE NO WORDS LEFT

AUTHOR SOFIA DIMOVA

LOCATION

75B "Tsar Simeon" St, Sofia

WHEN

2025

FORMAT

urban intervention, performance, installation

TOOLS

participatory intervention, work with text and visual messages, transformation of urban objects

RELATED FIELDS

urban culture, visual arts, socially engaged art, poetry, historical and political reflection

KEYWORDS

urban intervention, participatory performance, everyday life, meditative participation

“When There Are No Words Left” is a city intervention in which Sofia Dimova transforms unused commercial signs into carriers of messages related to historical events and contemporary political themes. The project reconfigures everyday street objects, allowing passersby to discover hidden layers of the urban environment and connect with the past through a visual and poetic language.

The intervention combines personal, historical, and political narratives, with each sign acting as a mediator between past and present. During the event, the audience is invited to observe and be inspired by the transformed signs, where silence and attentive listening to the environment become a means of reflection: “When there are no words left, silence will find you.”

The project also includes a meditative component, in which participants gather around one of the transformed signs for collective observation and meditation. Each participant receives a booklet with instructions and messages guiding them on how to connect with the environment and the history embedded in the signs. In this way, the practice creates a space for personal experience and shared attention, turning the urban object into an instrument for meditation and reflection.

On a broader level, the project addresses issues of public memory and the right to interpret history in urban space. It questions who has the authority to speak in public space and which voices remain invisible or silenced. Through a subtle intervention in otherwise functional objects, the work problematizes the relationship between economy, ideology, and visual culture. At the same time, it opens a space for collective sensitivity — a shared experience of silence as a form of resistance to informational noise and political polarization. The project imagines the city as a site of continuous rewriting, where every surface carries the potential for new meaning.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project uses participatory intervention and visual language, combining conceptual performance with the transformation of urban objects. Through work with text, poetic messages, and existing architectural and advertising elements, the practice encourages observation, meditation, and awareness of the urban environment.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The initiative can be expanded through additional urban objects, different neighborhoods, or digital platforms, allowing the audience to contribute messages and observations.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Observe, listen, read, and reflect on the hidden stories of ordinary urban objects. Seek out the messages already carried by the city, and add your own. Choose an urban object that is forgotten or unused and transform it into a visual carrier of text and poetry, opening space for new stories, meditation, and public participation.





Sofia Dimova is a multidisciplinary artist from Varna, Bulgaria. She graduated from Minerva Art Academy (Groningen, Netherlands) in 2019 with a degree in Fine Arts. In her practice, she combines different materials and techniques, creating connections between the personal, the fundamental, and the socio-political. Since 2023, she has been working with abandoned commercial signs as a medium for urban messages and social reflection.



STORIES FROM THE BOTTOM

AUTHOR INA DOBREVA

LOCATION

Stochna gara (Freight Station), Sofia

WHEN

2025 a.

FORMAT

performance, audio installation

TOOLS

archival work, visual installation,
interweaving narratives, blending
personal and collective memory

RELATED FIELDS

documentary art, visual storytelling,
social memory, interactive art

KEYWORDS

forgotten stories, patchwork, meditative
action, collective narrative, urban
practice

“Stories from the Bottom” explores the forgotten layers of personal and collective memory. The performance transforms a basement, a sewing machine, and found documents into a space where the past becomes a starting point for new narratives. Nearly 100 meters of fabric are continuously stitched by Ina Dobрева, and this act of repetition and weaving visualizes the “sewing together” of personal letters, poems, and documents found and forgotten over time.

The result is a patchwork of memories that gathers individual stories into a collective narrative. The action takes place in the basement of the artist’s residential building, where viewers observe the performance from the street through a window. The stitching is accompanied by a sound installation that narrates the stories, while found photographs, letters, and personal correspondence are displayed on the exterior wall of the building, allowing the audience to view and read them, creating a shared experience between the personal and the collective.

The performance is meditative and intimate: those present observe the process and engage with the idea of restoring memory and generating new meanings from what has been forgotten. The emphasis is on actions and gestures as carriers of history, where each thread and stitch becomes a symbol of lived experience and loss.

As a practice, the project functions as a form of site-specific intervention in the city — it engages both the physical space of an ordinary basement and the imagination of the audience. Through interaction with objects, space, and the act of stitching, participants become co-authors of the unfolding story, turning personal memories into part of a collective urban narrative.



METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project uses archived materials, found documents, and visual performance as tools for interweaving stories. The systematic repetition of stitches and physical work with fabric creates a ritual that transforms space and objects into active participants in the narrative.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The project can be adapted to different forgotten spaces or objects, using new archival materials and different techniques of performative weaving. An interactive element can be included, allowing the audience to contribute their own stories or objects.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Find a forgotten place, object, or document that carries a story. These can be old letters, documents, or objects that have otherwise been abandoned. Restore them through repetition, weaving, or visual action, creating a new form of collective narrative so that the past is reactivated through movement, text, or material.





Ina Dobreva is an actress and visual artist, graduated in Acting from NATFA (National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts) and specialized in Paris. After a period working at the Varna State Theatre “Stoyan Bachvarov,” she developed a practice in performance and installation with projects such as “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” “Alibi,” and “I Found These Letters,” exploring personal and social themes through material and archival objects.



VIEWS FROM & NOWHERE

AUTHORS ELENA CHERGILANOVA AND YVES-CHRISTIAN ANGELOV

LOCATION

Interventions in abandoned houses in the neighborhoods of Banishora, Krasno Selo, Hipodruma, Strelbishte, and Lozenets, and an exhibition in an empty shop at 11 “20-ti April” St, Sofia

WHEN

2024

FORMAT

interventions in urban space, exhibition, zine

TOOLS

archiving, photography, visual documentation, fieldwork

RELATED FIELDS

urbanism, visual anthropology, socially engaged art, urban memory, experimental art

KEYWORDS

abandoned buildings, socially engaged art, interdisciplinary media, urban wilderness, rethinking space

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

→ [zine](#) (pdf)

“Views from Nowhere” is a series of interventions in urban space that proposes new ways of thinking about abandoned buildings — not as dangerous, unnecessary, or problematic zones, but as living entities and places that offer a unique set of experiences and meanings. The project seeks the unnoticed — “views from nowhere” that reveal how absence can also be a form of presence. The abandoned building is treated as a living organism and a self-inhabited space — a state in which the place ceases to serve human needs and instead becomes animated through its own processes of decay, overgrowth, and gradual loss of purpose.

The placement of white curtain veils on the windows (a material usually used to create privacy and separation from the outside world, but here used in the opposite way) aims to draw attention to the building, return its presence into everyday perception, and turn the windows into passages for the viewer’s imagination and invitations for co-experience.

“Views from Nowhere” does not attempt to restore or “save” the buildings, but rather to testify to how a space continues to exist without being used; the presence of what no longer insists on being present. Because even the places we neglect continue to hold space for us.

The interventions were documented through a video installation shown in an empty shop at 11 “20-ti April” Street, along with a short printed publication.



METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project uses fieldwork, photographic documentation, artist books, and visual interventions in urban space to activate public awareness of abandoned places. Similar projects can be realized in other locations. Alternative forms of documentation can be developed, such as online platforms that are continuously updated, allowing the interventions to continue their life beyond their removal/destruction.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

Alongside the creation of specific interventions, accompanying events can also take place on site, such as walks, concerts, discussions, and more.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Find an abandoned building or place, search for beauty and meaning within it, consider how its presence can be emphasized, how it can be woven back into the surrounding urban life. Abandoned places exist everywhere. Searching for new ways to think about them is an opportunity to reintegrate them into the experience of urban space. Whether we develop a relationship with them or find ways to care for them, the fact of their existence remains unchanged. They will always be there, open to us, if we choose to engage.





Elena Chergilanova is a graphic designer and visual artist from Sofia, working primarily with photography, video, and artist books. Her practice focuses on space, place, and the transience of experience.

Yves-Christian Angelov is a lecturer and experimental artist from Sofia, founder of the noise music/field recording project “nqma nikoi” and part of the dadaist duo “Maluk Ruchei.” He works with concerts, performances, and interventions in urban space, and is interested in the relationship between art, society, and politics.



WE ARE THE STREET WE FORGOT

AUTHOR IVA IVANOVA

LOCATION

Mail kiosk 1233 at 112A “Opalchenska”
St., Banishora District, Sofia

WHEN

2025

FORMAT

participatory urban intervention /
collective experience

TOOLS

writing, reading aloud, temporary
inhabitation of informal spaces,
intermediary object (mailbox), silence,
sound

RELATED FIELDS

urbanism, immersive practices, visual
culture, urban memory, social research,
collective history

KEYWORDS

memory, nostalgia, intimacy,
public space, letter, absence, care,
imagination, informal spaces, post-
socialist city

“We Are the Street We Forgot” is a participatory urban intervention in which participants are invited to write letters to themselves, seated in front of the abandoned post office kiosk at 112A “Opalchenska” Street. The project, conceived as a “fantastical walk,” unfolds in a small, informal green space located along busy boulevards and observed by passersby on warm summer evenings. At the end of the gathering, the artist reads her own letter aloud, opening a shared space for collective reflection.

The project explores the boundary between the intimate and the public through the act of writing and sharing. It introduces the idea of utopian nostalgia — not as a return to the past, but as a re-engagement with absence. The letter becomes a means of encounter with oneself, but also a potential bridge to others. In a contemporary context where written letters appear archaic, this gesture restores communication with the past to the present, while simultaneously opening the possibility for symbolic survival.

The chosen site is significant. The boulevard, constructed during the socialist period, carries the logic of separation and rapid movement, without spaces for spontaneous stopping. Within this context, the abandoned post office kiosk functions as a symbolic object — a place of interrupted communication temporarily reactivated by the project. The large yellow mailbox, functioning as a fictional intermediary, creates an opportunity for the letters to become “sent,” even without an address.

The informal green space, not originally intended for staying or gathering, is transformed into a site of assembly. There, silence, writing, and the collective presence reshape an otherwise anonymous urban environment into a scene of vulnerability and imagination.

It is precisely through this delayed act that a temporarily collective “community” emerges — not through noise and movement, but through attention, slowing down, and shared sensitivity. The project demonstrates how, through minimal urban intervention, one can inhabit a new mode of being — a space of care, attention, and collective emotional awareness.

METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

Collective writing practice that opens up a space for participation. The use of existing urban public infrastructure and its transformation into a space for intimate sharing. The creation of a framework in which participants can be simultaneously alone and together.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The project can develop in different urban contexts — around post offices, bus stops, entrances, or other transitional spaces. It can be adapted through the collection of letters, their archiving, or their re-reading in different situations. Each new location adds another layer to the collective narrative.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Choose a place associated with communication or waiting. Invite people to sit down and write a letter. Do not impose strict instructions — let time and silence guide the process. Observe how the place changes through presence.





Iva Ivanova is a multidisciplinary artist working at the intersection of costume and drawing. Her practice is deeply connected to the exploration of personal stories and emotions as tools for creative expression. She works across theatre, film, and visual arts. In 2016 she graduated in scenography from the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna (AKBILD Wien) in the class of Anna Viebrock.



FIRST LOVE, THEN EVERYTHING & ELSE

AUTHOR SLAVENA PETKOVA

LOCATION

Targovski Dom, Sofia

WHEN

2024

FORMAT

Interactive installation and text

TOOLS

participatory methods, interviews, text reviews, community work, observation, archiving

RELATED FIELDS

urban anthropology, socially engaged art practice, documentary approaches, interactive media, cultural activation

KEYWORDS

participatory installation, interactive art, urban community, algorithmic activation, civic urbanism, informal urban economies

Slavena Petkova's project examines a centrally located yet socially fragmented urban interior as a microcosm of post-socialist transformation. Targovski Dom, built in 1926 for the Bar Association, combines historical layers predating socialism, later reformatted through institutional continuity and market liberalization.

Since the 1990s, the arcade has housed a range of small businesses operating side by side — a travel agency, yarn shop, vinyl record store, cafés — while the upper floors contain offices, private bailiffs, and other small businesses, some of which have already left the building. Although located in the very center of the city, the space remains neglected and paradoxically peripheral.

Shop owners recount conflicts involving debtors and bailiffs; stories circulate about incidents beneath the glass roof, and when leaks from poor-quality renovations appear, the tenants themselves place umbrellas to protect the café tables. Situated near large retail chains and expensive restaurants, the site feels like a parallel reality.

Petkova enters into dialogue with the owners and gradually realizes that they struggle to act collectively to improve their environment, while simultaneously suffering from a lack of visibility compared to the intense flows outside. She therefore creates an interactive installation in which the audience is invited to “like” and leave a short review of the arcade, triggering audio excerpts from the artist's conversations with owners and users of the space. Visitors can thus see and hear the history of the place only when the algorithm is functioning.

The intervention uses digital platforms as active urban actors. A “like” on Google becomes a performative mechanism influencing the functioning of the installation itself. In this way, the project demonstrates how urban value is increasingly measured through algorithmic indicators — ratings, reviews, visibility — rather than through historical or social significance.

The installation connects the everyday and “hidden” stories of the building's inhabitants with the viewers' digital actions, creating a relationship between physical place and networked reality. This raises questions about community, visibility, and the social value of urban spaces. The project insists that urban vitality requires not only material investment, but also symbolic care and the restoration of connections between people and place.



METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The project combines interviews, participatory methodology, work with digital reviews, and media installation in order to activate both the physical arcade space and online interaction with it. The goal is to reactivate the space itself.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

A similar practice could be applied to other urban spaces suffering from a lack of visibility or community, adapting the audiovisual content and activation algorithm to each context.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

Choose an urban space marked by visible conflict or neglect, identify its key issues and possible solutions, and connect them to an audience action that activates the site and makes it visible in the present moment.



Slavena Petkova is a multidisciplinary artist and “restructuralist” — a term she coined herself to describe her practice of reconstructing mental models through art. Her work questions established structures and proposes alternative existential frameworks, using humor, meta-commentary, and subversive juxtapositions as tools for opening unexpected perspectives.



ROOM AT THE END OF THE WORLD

AUTHOR VERONICA DESSOVA

LOCATION

European Trade Center, Mladost 1 District, Sofia

WHEN

2024

FORMAT

multimedia performance, tableau vivant, sensory installation

TOOLS

choreography, spatial installation, olfactory and visual media, performative dramaturgy

RELATED FIELDS

Scenography, visual anthropology, ecological art, media installations, urban environment

KEY WORDS

multimedia performance, everyday life versus the sublime, meditative participation, ecological art, rethinking space

“Room at the End of the World” is a multimedia performance and installation by Veronika Desova, curated by Aga Paulina Młynczak, exploring the relationship between humans, nature, and the urban environment. The space is filled with the scent of a forest and dense fog, blurring the audience’s perception and creating the feeling of an alternative, almost timeless realm.

Seven female protagonists perform ritualized movements in the style of tableau vivant, combining everyday “office” tasks with symbolic choreographic actions. This contrast between the “corporate” and the “sublime” creates a paradoxical effect in which nature, industrialization, and human activity intertwine, transforming everyday routines into a meditative dance of ritual and repetition.

The performance engages the audience’s senses — the fog, scents, and movement of the bodies immerse viewers in a space where observation becomes both a personal and collective experience. The project explores the concept of involuntary memory and the “Proustian effect” — sudden sensory experiences that unlock hidden memories and emotions. Through visual and spatial impulses, “Room at the End of the World” invites reflection on contemporary alienation, nature as a site of sensory experience, and the ways architecture and human bodies can merge into a shared spatial environment.

The project activates the urban environment as a participatory stage: the office becomes a space for observation and movement, where the audience moves among the performers and their ritualized actions. By incorporating everyday office tasks as choreographic elements, viewers experience and reinterpret the banal and familiar in a new context, creating a participatory connection between the body, architecture, and social life in the city.



METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

A combination of tableau vivant, choreographic actions, multisensory installations, and performative research into the everyday and the natural. The performance works through contrasts between the banal and the sublime, the visible and the sensory.

NOTES FOR FUTURE ITERATIONS

The work could be expanded through additional sensory elements, interactive audience participation, or alternative spaces capable of producing a similar “purgatorial” effect. The concept for future versions of the project includes the development of motorized corporate machines or sculptures with which the female protagonists “work.” The conceptual framework related to the representation of corporate life and monotonous rhythm will be further exaggerated through mechanical automata sculptures. These function as autonomous agents within the installation, complementing the performers’ gestures with their own repetitive, robotic movements. The presentation at BUNA and Nine Elephants festival explored themes of industrialization and urbanization, which led to the partial loss of individual identity in cities through the introduction of modernism and the International Style in the early 20th century. Aspects of this historical transformation could be explored in greater depth through the use of specific architectural environments in and around Sofia and beyond. There is also interest in how this work might resonate in contexts outside Bulgaria.

IF YOU WISH TO TRY

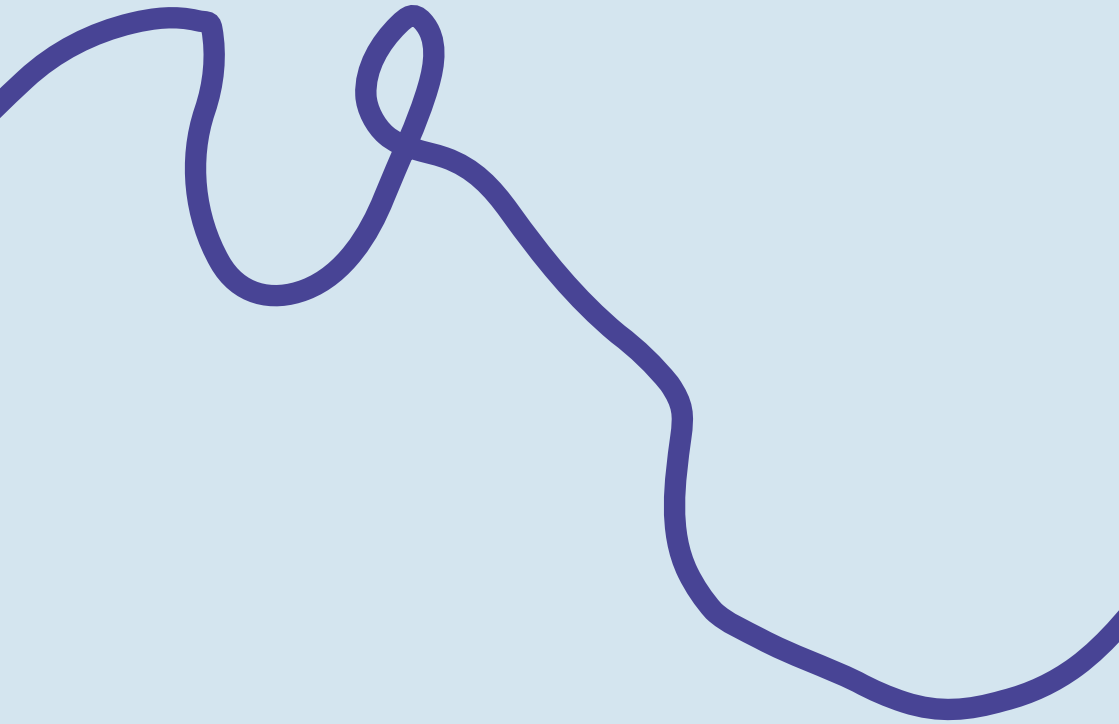
Choose a space and sensory elements capable of creating an alternative atmosphere, and use movement, choreography, and installation to place the everyday into a new context. The project also raises the question: How do we understand the meaning of human and machine productivity? What does it mean to be productive in our daily lives and work? The viewer is invited to question every movement, thought, and undertaking within the context of the postmodern techno-feudal reality in which we currently live.



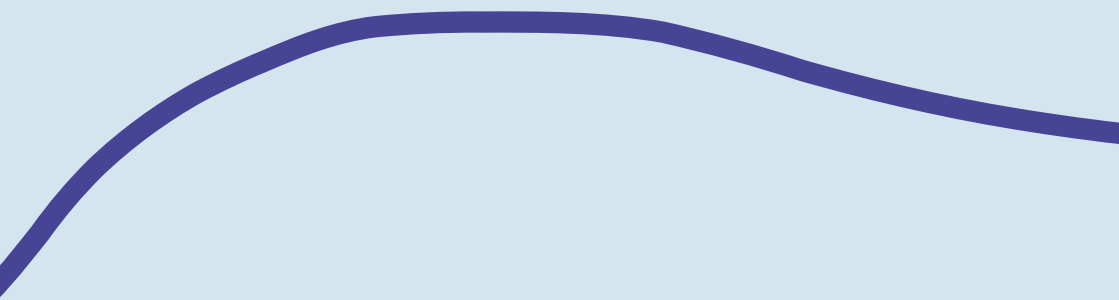
Veronika Desova is a multimedia artist and architect born in Varna and based in New York City. She explores the phenomenological relationship between body and space through architectural fragments, industrial design methodologies, photography, video, as well as scent and performance. In her practice, she rethinks familiar architectural elements by activating them through smell, sound, or movement. Systems of architectural decay and structures on the verge of collapse serve as starting points for investigating vulnerability and social trauma through an ambiguous architectural language influenced by modernism.

The performance is curated by **Aga Paulina Młyńczak**, representing 16NSt Curatorial Collective and Gallery, Glasgow. The 16NSt Collective aims to challenge gender and class inequalities within and beyond the contemporary art sector, as well as issues concerning the rights and labor opportunities of marginalized communities and the formation of emerging cultural narratives.

EXERCIS&S



E





INSTRUCTION SESSION

Instructions by Silvia Cherneva, Inspector of Playability of Public Spaces and member of the Association of Independently Playing Citizens of Working Age

AUTHOR SILVIA CHERNEVA

As part of Sofia Night Performance in 2025, Silvia Cherneva took on the role of a “playability inspector” and delivered a short lecture with a practical on-site component. In a neighbourhood with limited opportunities for enjoyable outdoor activity, her contribution raised the question of where and how we can be together in public space — without it being tied to consumption or a specific function, but instead through play, imagination, and attentiveness to place.

INSTRUCTION SESSION

Hello! My name is Silvia Cherneva, Inspector of Playability of Public Spaces. I am here due to the unprecedented interest in the activities of our inspectorate, and with the goal of familiarizing more of you — especially those interested in obtaining a license — with the details, practices, and regulations of our work.

To get a sense of the audience — are there people here with children? With dogs? Some of you may face similar challenges to ours. And are there others — without children or dogs — who remember recently playing just for the sake of it? We might speak with you later. For everyone else, I hope this lecture is exactly what you need; we will leave time for questions at the end.

The lecture will unfold in several stages: first, I will tell you a bit more about myself, about the inspectorate and the association; then we will summarize the characteristics that make a space playable; and finally, everyone will have the chance to take part in a practical evaluation of the remarkable space we are in right now.

What is my background? I am a member of the Association of Independently Playing Citizens of Working Age. Our practice is low-skilled, yet not particularly popular and largely anonymous. Sometimes it is confused with outdoor sports, but unlike those, our goal is not to lose weight, gain strength, or perform a set number of repetitions. There is some overlap with the parkour and freerun communities, except that we are not interested in virtuosic athletic feats, nor in creating Instagram content.

So, what exactly do we do? As I mentioned, our practice is non-functional — and this is where its potential lies. At its core is the question: can I use my body in an unusual way? As we enter adulthood, most of us face the challenge of constantly engaging in useful activities, and our bodies fall into a mode that serves these functions. Thus, we use them in a limited set of ways — walking, sitting... any others? (question to the audience).

The idea of playtime is to try out other things our bodies can do, but rarely get the chance to. For example: climbing, swinging, spinning until we feel dizzy, hiding somewhere. These are activities without any purpose other than to be interesting and fun in the present moment, to connect us with another person playing alongside us. A less obvious result is that sometimes, by placing our body in a new position, we discover a new perspective — both on the world around us and on the world within. What makes a place suitable for this kind of play? First of all, it needs to feel safe and secure. In my research, I find that in order to take risks, I need to feel safe. For example: no cars passing by. Also: some kind of backdrop or shelter. The shape of the space matters too. If it already has a function — like a sidewalk — it's best not to overlap with it, so we don't interfere with others, and they don't interfere with us.

Sensory conditions matter as well: how noisy is the space, how hot,



how cold, whether it's drafty or airy. Simply: how pleasant is it to stay there. Do we need special play equipment? Those with children and dogs might confirm that they can play anywhere. In fact, we all can play anywhere, and urban spaces already offer opportunities for this. Part of our activity is exercising the imagination — seeing familiar things in unfamiliar ways, linked to the possibilities they offer our bodies.

So here we are, at the threshold of the practical part of this lecture. You might ask: does the place we are in right now meet the minimum requirements?

We see that imagination is necessary. So I now suggest that we test the playability of this triangle, even though officially it is just a sidewalk and a parking lot. I did a preliminary survey, and the points for playability on my scale fell just short. That is why I brought this additional piece of equipment. You may treat it as part of the landscape and include it in your evaluation.

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

1

Identify elements of the place that correspond to the body and can offer interesting possibilities for movement.

2

Try out the movement you imagined, and observe how interesting and/or pleasant it feels. These are subjective categories, since “interesting” can sometimes include discomfort or physical challenge.

3

Take care of your own safety!

4

Based on your experience with each element, evaluate it on the following scale:

-3 p.:

-2 p.: I don't feel safe.

Something in the environment distracts

-1 p.: or annoys me.

It's uncomfortable to stay here longer —

0 p.: too noisy / hot / cold / etc.

1 p.: Nothing particularly interesting happened.

I found one initial movement, but nothing

2 p.: beyond it.

3 p.: I could spend at least 10 minutes here.

I could stay here all day.



Silvia Cherneva works in the field of dance, performance, and film, with a focus on everyday movement, play, and the politics of public space. In her practice, she creates interactive situations and installations, including “Critical Mass” and “Unstable Ground,” and explores possibilities for participation and play through projects and residencies such as Trilateral Exchange (2023–2024).

IMAGINARY SCRIPT FOR A PLACE

AUTHOR ZHANA IVANOVA

In her practice, Zhana Ivanova reconsiders models and structures from everyday life that we have long become accustomed to and accepted as given. Her projects employ strategies drawn from performance art in order to provoke situations in which interpersonal relationships and power dynamics remain in constant motion. Although the constructions in her work may appear formal and rule-based, they reveal the ambiguity embedded within those very rules.

“Imaginary Script for a Place” is a workshop that Zhana Ivanova conducted in 2023 at Swimming Pool. It included a series of exercises aimed at synchronizing collective imagination and creating temporary realities. These exercises are published here for the first time.

INTRODUCTION

The following exercises can be practiced when approaching a location with artistic intentions, but also for the added enjoyment of any place you may find yourself in, with some time on your hands.

The exercises can be done alone, or in company at the location of your choice — indoors or outdoors, full of people or completely deserted. Work on location as much as you can, but only if feels like this is the right thing to do.

The exercises are divided into 3 parts. You can practice on three consecutive days, or in whatever rhythm suits you best. You are invited to interpret, modify and adapt the content of the exercises in any way you see fit.

You can repeat an exercise as many times as you wish. Durations are an indication — try them out, see what works for you best and adjust if needed.

Have a notebook with you. During the exercises, take note of anything that unintentionally manifest to you in any way — a thought; a sound; a smell; a colour; a phrase.

Recommended time of the day for practice is mid-afternoon. Whenever I think of places, I always remember or imagine them at mid-afternoon, around 3 pm to be exact. Not sure why that is, maybe by then most places have had a chance to settle into some calm, quiet, pending state — predisposed for unfolding wonderful potentials with.

The warm up exercises are partially borrowed from artist Dora Garcia, and adapted for the purpose of this practice.

PART 1: NOW AND THEN

ORIENTATION

Duration: 10 minutes

Standing still or moving through it, consider the space you are in — look around, pay attention to its details, listen for the sounds that are present, smells, sensations. What are the limits of this place, who inhabits it, and how does your presence affect things.

WARM-UP 1

A place of significance, past

Duration: 10 minutes

1. Stand or sit in a way that you find comfortable. Close your eyes.
2. Think about and choose a place where you have been in the past and that made a special impression on you.
3. Place yourself mentally in that place, and begin a slow, imaginary walk around it. Describe the place as you remember it, as it was in the days you were there, ordering your memories according to this mental walk: you enter the space, you start walking, you look to your right, to your left, to your front, to your back, you continue walking, until you leave the space again.

FRAMING

Duration: 20 minutes

Stand in the middle of your chosen location. Close your eyes, open them and identify the frame of what you see. Repeat this several times. Choose one frame that appeals to you most. Describe what you see. You can do this aloud, in your mind or in writing, and with more than one frame. You might find that framing, like description, conjures things up into existence — things that are otherwise too small, too slow or too fast to be noticed.

VARIATION 1: Choose your frame and consider if anything is missing in it. If yes, name that thing 8 times, and feel it come momentarily into being. How does it affect your frame?

VARIATION 2: Choose your frame, and chose one detail in it. Look for (or imagine) more details beginning with the same letter, for example — bee, block, boulevard, banana, businessman. What kind of rhythm does this create, and how does it affect your frame?

CONTACT

Duration: 15 minutes

Choose a feature of the location you are in, approximately your size. Place your body or as much of it as possible upon the feature, in any way that you find appropriate. Do this slowly, register the shape of the feature, the way it makes contact with your body, see in what way it can support your shape and weight. Move as if you are made of soft, heavy, sticky liquid. Find what you consider a good balance in this exercise. Stop moving, stay for a while and release.

PART 2: NO LONGER, NOT YET**ORIENTATION**

Duration: 10 minutes

Стойки неподвижно или движейки се в прос-
Standing still or moving through it, consider the space you are in — look around, pay attention to its details, listen for the sounds that are present, smells, sensations. What are the limits of this place, who inhabits it, and how does your presence affect things.

WARM-UP 2A place of significance, present
Duration: 10 minutes

1. Stand or sit in a way that you find comfortable. Close your eyes.
2. Go back to the place you visited in the last warm up.
3. Repeat the itinerary you (mentally) did before. This time, try to imagine how it looks today, now, at the very moment you are describing it.

**LIMINAL
SPACE WRITING
PROMPTS**

Consider the notion of a liminal space:

“Liminal space is the time between what was and what is next. It is a place of transition, waiting and the unknown. Liminal space is where all transformation takes place if we learn to wait and let it shape us.”

LIMINALITY: a term used in anthropology to describe the ambiguity or disorientation we feel in a state of transition between one stage and the next.

PROMPT 1**Duration: 10 minutes**

In your imagination, form a space you would consider liminal. It can be an actual space you know, or a space you remember from a film, a novel, or a purely imagined space. The setting of a public swimming pool always comes to me first for some reason. It's best to go with any space that surfaces in your mind first.

Write down any associations, symbolisms, references, singular words that come out from the imagined setting.

PROMPT 2**Duration: 30 minutes**

Choose 1 or 2 fragments from what you wrote above, which you feel can potentially unfold into one of three situations.

- a situation of tension
- a situation of enchantment
- a situation of connection

Let the situation unfold in your imagination, and write it out in any form you want. Describe what is happening — it can be something very minimal and marginal, or it can be extravagant and spectacular.

Be specific: are there people, how many, who are they, what do they look like, how do they relate to each other, and others. Are there smells, sensations, feelings, thoughts. What are the feelings that come up. Just describe, do not find resolution.

PROMPT 3**Duration: 15 minutes**

Write again the text you just wrote, this time abstracting the language. Perhaps it becomes a list of nouns, a set of directions, a poem, a dialogue, can repeat one sentence that you like, can shift to the point of view of an inanimate entity — any form that you wish. You can also isolate one part, and abstract that, if it pushes to go in another direction — let it happen.

PART 3: HERE AND THERE

ORIENTATION

Duration: 10 minutes

Standing still or moving through it, consider the space you are in — look around, pay attention to its details, listen for the sounds that are present, smells, sensations. What are the limits of this place, who inhabits it, and how does your presence affect things.

WARM-UP 3

A place of significance, future

Duration: 10 minutes

1. Stand or sit in a way that you find comfortable. Close your eyes.
2. Go back to the place you visited mentally in the last warm up.
3. Repeat the itinerary you (mentally) did. This time, try to imagine how it looks in the future. How far in the future is up to you.

COLLECT, ARRANGE, RECOGNIZE, PLAY

Duration: minimum 180 minutes

On the basis of everything that came your way during the above exercises, collect and bring together pieces of material. These can be fragments that you are already working with already, a piece of text from a book, a film scene, a quote, a piece of music, a recipe, a shopping list, a sequence of movements, sounds. You can also collect materials from the location you are working with — anything that feels charged. Begin to organise the materials. Alternate between making intuitive choices, as well as applying familiar to you structuring and editing procedures. Modify and use sequencing methodologies that come out of your own practice and approach. Recognize the compositional principles and requirements that emerge out of the material itself.

SOME EXAMPLES OF REORGANISING METHODOLOGIES

- Make a drawing of the liminal space you worked with earlier. It can be all over the page, or in the corner, it can contain words, etc. Consider this drawing a map, use it to create choreography at your location of choice.
- Apply notions of cinematic close up to live performative material, and assess how that logic changes the material
- Take 6 fragments and arrange them in the right order.
- Change all your text to future tense.
- Re-write some of the texts you wrote from the perspective of an inanimate object, for example a building.
- Re-write some text from the perspective of a child.

Finally, assemble a sequence of material that you can repeat. Run it once. Reorganise the sequence from the perspective of your location of choice. Run it again. Note what changes. Repeat it once more, from your perspective again. Note what changes. Keep doing this until you achieve a good balance.

Zhana Ivanova is a visual and performance artist born in Ruse and based in Amsterdam. She graduated from DasArts and was a resident at the Rijksakademie, with international presentations at institutions such as Centre Pompidou, Kunsthalle Basel, and the Stedelijk Museum, alongside teaching positions at DasArts and ARTEZ (BEAR).

WHAT WOULD THE ELEPHANT ASK US?

Brief methodological tips for interviews in
Artistic projects

AUTHORS KONSTANTIN GEORGIEV AND MARTIN TOMOV

Beyond its object of study — the human being in their sociocultural totality — anthropology has also been shaped around the discipline’s specific methods. Decades before Bronisław Malinowski systematized the idea of participant observation in the 1920s, his colleagues had already begun immersing themselves in the worlds of unfamiliar communities and cultures, actively participating in their everyday lives and engaging in continuous conversation. With each note, with each observation, they moved closer to local understandings of the world — whether concerning language, religion, economy, or more broadly, what it means to be human.

In recent years, many anthropologists have sought to change the ways in which the discipline produces knowledge. The field strives to become more collaborative and more accessible in its language, yet at its core we continue to believe in conversation as a fundamental method. In particular, the truth of the social world and subjective experience is located somewhere in between. This remains the space where different ways of living in the world and different analytical frameworks meet.

Perhaps this is why many “research” processes in art resemble those in anthropology. For George Marcus, the similarities between many strands of performance and conceptual art on the one hand, and anthropology on the other, stem from their shared roots in modernism (Marcus 2010, 269). Explicit dialogues between them are relatively rare, but anthropology and the arts have been in constant conversation over the past century.

As anthropologists who sometimes collaborate with artists — or who ourselves make art — we offer a text in two parts. The first provides a small fragment of a narrative in which anthropologists and artists together search for, or even construct, truths about the world. The second presents a brief guide to what in anthropology is often called the “in-depth interview.”

PART 1

BACKGROUND: ANTHROPOLOGY, JAZZ, SURREALISM

The connections between anthropology and art are not a new phenomenon. Zora Neale Hurston, a key figure of the Harlem Renaissance and one of the most significant American writers of the 20th century, was among the first students of Franz Boas, the founding figure of the discipline and the creator of the first department of anthropology in the United States. The interviews Hurston collected in the American South form the basis of many of the stories and novels she later wrote in New York. Her book *Barracoon*, first published in 2018 — almost 60 years after the author’s death — is entirely based on a series of in-depth interviews with Cudjo Lewis (Oluale Kossola), the last Black man to have been enslaved through the transatlantic slave trade.

At the same time that Hurston was working in the United States, European surrealists, ethnologists, and anthropologists were also collaborating. “Around 1905, Picasso acquired a West African mask. It is beautiful, constructed entirely of planes and cylinders. He discovered Cubism.” This is written by James Clifford (Clifford 1988, 147), an anthropologist and historian of science, who authored several texts tracing the relationship between anthropology and surrealism in the years before the Second World War. During this period, surrealist collages unfolded on the walls of museums such as the Trocadéro, where *avant-garde* modernism was displayed alongside ethnographic artefacts from various parts of Africa and Oceania, and in the pages of journals such as *Documents*, where surrealists and ethnographers commented on an extraordinarily wide range of topics, including Western culture, jazz, archaeology, eyes, industrial slaughterhouses, and the fetishisation of toes. The editor-in-chief of *Documents*, Georges Bataille, was equally influential both through his surrealist writing and his academic analyses.

After the Second World War, anthropology became “more serious” and at least superficially distanced itself from its ties to art. However, some continued to work in both fields, often using pseudonyms for their artistic writing. At its core, however, anthropology has transformed into a collaborative discipline that seeks not merely to produce narratives about others, but to collaborate with the people it studies, treating their truths with respect and care. It is necessary to strive toward an integrative approach to conducting interviews and to follow the practical guidelines below regarding interviews and cultural research, even if only within the context of art.

PART 2

If, like the radical minds of the 1930s, you believe that art should appropriate some of anthropology's methods, we have selected five tips especially for you.

THE OBVIOUS

At the core of anthropological methods lies the seemingly simple yet demanding effort not to take either the other person or our own structures of thought as fully self-evident. One of the classical maxims in the social sciences is that they make the unfamiliar familiar and the familiar unfamiliar. Anthropology seeks to understand the Other without exoticising it, and to understand the familiar without treating it as natural or universal.

In this sense, there are cases in which an interview may reveal more about our own cultural, economic, or social biases than about those of others. That is why it is important, even before the interview begins, to consider which aspects of respondents and their cultural practices we take for granted, and how these categories of ours may slip into our questions or analysis. Interviews also have space for contradictions and critical reflection, both toward ourselves and toward respondents.

For example, if we enter an interview with the pre-existing idea that the person in front of us is primarily a victim, a rebel, or a bearer of a "typical" culture, there is a risk that we will only hear what reinforces that role and miss everything that complicates it. If we have already decided that the person is a victim, we may end up asking a leading question ("What is it like to be a victim of this type of violence?"), which already directs the interpretation in a specific direction. A better question might be "How did this affect you at the time?" or "What changed for you afterwards?"

POSITIONING

The uniqueness of cultural research, compared to other sciences, lies in the fact that the research instrument is the researcher themselves. In this sense, the interviewer is never merely a neutral observer. In-depth interview researchers are not simply data collectors, but active participants in the production of meaning. Our language, behaviour, profession, age, gender, and the ways in which we respond or remain silent all influence what is said and what remains unspoken. The truth about the world, as Renato Rosaldo reminds us (Rosaldo, 1989), belongs neither to the anthropologist nor to their interlocutors, but is always somewhere in between — in the encounter between researcher and researched.

Before preparing our interview guide, it is necessary to reflect on the relations we enter into with our respondents, on who we are, and how

we present ourselves. For example, when Catherine J. Cramer studies American voters of the Republican Party in Wisconsin, she demonstrates that she does not enter the research as a neutral presence, but as someone who is already read through social markers. The words she uses, her sentence structure, even the car she drives or the clothes she wears position her, in the eyes of respondents, as part of an academic, urban elite toward which they may feel distance.

For this reason, the researcher strives not to correct their interlocutors, but to listen carefully to how they themselves construct meaning around politics, while constantly keeping open the question of how her own position affects trust, access, and interpretation of the themes (Cramer, 2016).

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

In the social sciences, interviews can be understood along a spectrum ranging from structured to open and informal. They can also be divided according to the number of participants into individual or group interviews. In a structured interview, the questions are prepared in advance and asked in the same form and order each time. This format is closer to survey logic and is useful when seeking comparability across many participants, as it allows for more direct comparison between responses.

In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer works with a list of themes and guiding questions but may change their order or phrasing and ask additional questions depending on what emerges in the conversation. According to Alan Bryman, semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable for qualitative research because they allow for a more open process and richer, more detailed responses.

In an unstructured interview, the framework becomes even more flexible: there is a general topic, but the conversation follows the logic and direction of the interlocutor themselves (Bryman, 2016).

In addition, interviews may also take the form of group interviews or focus groups. In these cases, the interest lies not only in what each individual thinks, but also in how people agree, argue, interrupt one another, or construct shared opinions in the presence of others.

PREPARING TOPICS AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Preparing an anthropological interview does not usually mean writing a rigid questionnaire to be followed mechanically from beginning to end, but rather developing a flexible list of themes, key questions, and possible follow-up prompts. Questions should function as points of orientation rather than as a script. Joseph Hermanowicz argues that a good interview follows the structure of a good encounter or conversation, as it does not aim for mechanical order but instead seeks to deeply understand the interlocutor. He advises beginning with broader questions that gently enter the topic, then gradually moving into more detailed exploration, and finally ensuring a more positive closure to the interview through questions that encourage constructive or affirmative reflections from the respondent.

Methods such as silence, active listening, continuous follow-up questions, and persistence without aggression are essential to a good interview. For example, if a respondent says, “We had an argument and my boyfriend threw the cat at me,” a weaker response would be to ask, “Does this happen often?”, because the word “often” already introduces a vague judgment. A more useful question would be “Has this happened before?” or “How many times has this happened?”, since these seek specificity rather than imposing the interviewer’s own measure or interpretation.

At the same time, it is important to remember that every interview is unique in itself, and its structure may shift depending on our position, the topic, and the purpose of the conversation.

ANONYMITY, ANALYSIS, AND SELECTION OF RESPONDENTS

Beyond conducting the interview itself, the researcher also has several other important responsibilities. These include obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity, analysing the material, and selecting respondents.

Informed consent means that the person being interviewed should know in advance what the interview is for, how it will be used, whether it will be recorded, and whether parts of their narrative may be quoted, paraphrased, or included in a broader project. During the informed consent process, it is important to remember that consent may be withdrawn at any time, including immediately before publication or presentation of the material. If one of our interlocutors asks us not to use an already recorded interview or other collected data, we are obliged to respect this request, especially when working with vulnerable groups or individuals. For this reason, it is important to exchange contact information with respondents and, if such a commitment has been made, to show them the final version of the work before it is published or presented publicly.

Anonymity is not exhausted by simply changing a person's name, since someone may still be identifiable through their profession, age, place of residence, family history, institution, or a particular event. Therefore, even during transcription and citation, it is important to assess which details are genuinely necessary for the meaning of the analysis and which merely increase the respondent's vulnerability. For example, even if we change a respondent's name, they may remain identifiable if we describe them as "a 45-year-old teacher from a small town who left her job after a public conflict at the local school." In this case, it is precisely the combination of profession, place, and specific event that makes anonymity fragile.

Anonymisation is often considered the "gold standard" of the discipline, but it is not always mandatory, especially if respondents explicitly wish to appear with their real names and identities. Some contemporary authors argue that the use of real names (with the explicit consent of interviewees) can become a valuable tool for building trust and accountability between anthropologists and their interlocutors, or for properly acknowledging the source of an idea. If our text or artwork builds upon the ideas of the people we spoke with, why not cite them by name in the same way we would cite an academic colleague or fellow artist (McGranahan, 2021; Yonucu & Parker, 2024)?

The analysis of interviews, in turn, is not simply a matter of selecting powerful quotes, but a methodological process often carried out through what is known as coding. Coding is the first step in analysis, in which short conceptual labels are assigned to different parts of the material so that these labels can later be compared, regrouped, and connected into broader categories, recurring patterns, and themes depending on the theoretical perspective of the researcher (Saldana, 2013). Coding is not merely labelling, but a way of moving from an individual quotation to a broader idea, and then back again to all the places in the material where this idea appears. Analysis therefore does not stop at isolated codes, but continues through their grouping, processing, and interrelation into a clearer understanding of the material, as well as through their theoretical interpretation.

The selection of respondents also requires prior planning based on the themes of the research. Sometimes it is important to seek a diversity of positions and perspectives, while in other cases it may be more useful to work with a more narrowly selected group of people who are directly connected to the topic. Across all forms and configurations of interviews, the responsibility remains the same: not to turn other people's words into easy material for one's own project, but to work carefully with those who have trusted us, and to ensure that we have understood correctly everything they wished to communicate.



DOS

DON'TS



<p>State at the beginning what the interview is about, whether it is being recorded, and how the material will be used.</p>	<p>Do not begin the conversation without informing the interlocutor and obtaining their consent.</p>
<p>Explain clearly that anyone can withdraw their consent at any point during the research process.</p>	<p>Do not act as if informed consent is given once and for all.</p>
<p>Prepare the interview in a way that creates a safe environment for conversation.</p>	<p>Do not structure the interview in a way that could harm respondents.</p>
<p>Before beginning the interview, reflect on your own social position and your relationship to the respondents.</p>	<p>Do not assume that your own categories, language, and moral judgments are natural or universal.</p>
<p>Treat what is being shared as trust that has been given to you.</p>	<p>Do not use other people's words merely as material for your own project, without care for the person behind them.</p>
<p>Remain aware of, and allow space for, contradictions both in yourself and in others.</p>	<p>Do not search only for what confirms your pre-existing hypothesis.</p>
<p>Use silence, active listening, and allow the respondent to finish their narrative.</p>	<p>Do not conduct the interview like an interrogation.</p>
<p>Use a flexible list of themes, focusing on the dynamics of the conversation.</p>	<p>Do not follow a list of questions mechanically.</p>
<p>Use clarifying questions such as "What exactly happened?", "How many times did this happen?", or "Who was there?".</p>	<p>Avoid vague qualitative terms such as "often" or "normal," which remain unclear.</p>

**DOS**

When respondents use qualitative descriptors such as “normal,” “good,” or “beautiful,” pay attention and ask them what they mean by these terms.

Use nodding, “mhm,” “yes,” “I see,” to show that you are following the conversation.

Check recording equipment before the interview and, if possible, use a second device as backup. Bring something to write with to note key points or things to return to later.

Leave a short pause after an important answer. Sometimes the most significant insights come after silence, or at the very end of the interview when the “formal” part is over.

After the interview, code and group the material into themes and recurring patterns.

End the interview carefully, allowing respondents space to move toward something more positive or reflective.

DON'TS

Do not overlook or ignore the definitions respondents use.

Do not sit with a blank expression or stare at your question list while the person is speaking.

Do not go into an interview without properly prepared equipment.

Do not rush immediately to the next question.

Do not only extract “strong quotes” and present them as analysis.

Do not end abruptly without giving respondents the final word.

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Martin Tomov is an anthropologist and part of the Greenpeace Bulgaria team, with an interest in art and socially engaged practices. You can read more about him [here](#).

Konstantin Georgiev is an anthropologist with an interest in urban studies, political imagination, and violence. You can read more about him [here](#).



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A | 01 **Neither a City, nor a Garden**

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A | 02 **Inter-block Wanderings**

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A | 03 **Beyond “Istoriya Slavyanobolgarskaya”**

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A | 04 **Someone Once Here**

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B | 01 **Everyday Life and Flea Market**

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B | 02 **Museum No. 20**

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B | 03 **The Orchards of Mladost**

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B | 04 **The Red List of Sofia Threatened Space**

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B | 05 **The Shiny Sexy: Heterotopias in Studentski Grad**

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B | 06 **House for an Elephant, Airplane, Garden**

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B | 07 **Recipes for the Future**

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C | 01 **The Green Place Without a Name**

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C | 02 **Weaving Druzhiba**

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C | 03 **Queer as Folk**

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C | 04 **Juicegroove**

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C | 05 **UFO Elephant**

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D | 01 **When There Are No Words Left**

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D | 02 **Stories from the Bottom**

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D | 04 We Are the Street We Forgot

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D | 05 First Love, Then Everything Else

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D | 06 Room at the End of the World

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E | 02 Imaginary Script for a Place

The project was first presented as part of the public program “Constitutions” of the Center for Social Vision in 2022. With the financial support of the National Culture Fund.

BIOGRAPHIES

Viktoria Draganova is a curator and researcher, and the initiator of the art space Swimming Pool (since 2015), the platform Center for Social Vision (since 2021), and the Nine Elephants Festival (since 2024). Her practice focuses on interdisciplinary research and artistic formats that move beyond the framework of the “white cube,” activating public spaces and engaging local communities. As artistic director and curator of Nine Elephants, she develops the festival as a platform for decentralized and experimental approaches in urban environments. Holding a PhD in law and experience in international curatorial and educational programs, she works toward establishing art as a tool for social reflection and shared urban imagination. Viktoria is the founder of the Blue Cube Foundation, under whose umbrella these initiatives are realized, as well as of the Journal for Social Vision. She has published a number of works, including “With You” by Stefan Ivanov, S.O.F.T. (Gestures of Tenderness) by Christoph Szalay as well as the exhibition catalogues “The Possible Institution” and “New Ecologies”. She lives and works in Sofia.

Anna Ivanova is an illustrator and assistant coordinator at the Blue Cube Foundation. She completed her education in the United Kingdom, and her work explores the emotional architecture of post-socialist everyday life — how memory, identity, and daily routines shape intimate and urban spaces. She is co-founder of The Slavic Tale, where she explores Bulgarian identity through sculptural miniatures of socialist-era housing, and is part of Kolko.slavko — a platform reflecting on the city as a space of cultural memory. She lives and works in Sofia.

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COLOPHON

IMAGINING CITIES

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compiled from the experience of Nine Elephants
First edition, 2026

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